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An Experimentalist's Literary Inheritance: Faulkner's Literary Origins

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Faulkner will always have a place in modernist literature for his contribution to the stream-of-consciousness tradition. It is also because of his daring and ingenious innovations in this tradition that he earned the title of experimentalist, but what cannot be ignored is that he owed much to other literary traditions in his creation. Tracing his abundant literary origins, this paper examines his inheritance from American and European writers in terms of poetic elements like imagery, diction, technique, and form, as well as novelistic factors including the theme, setting, characterization, point of view, and linguistic style, thus proving that "literature can never be completely detached from tradition or innovated without foundation".

Keywords: Faulkner's literary inheritance, poetic inheritance, novelistic inheritance

Introduction

In the wake of the publication of Edouard Dujardin's *Les Lauriers Sont Coupes* in 1887, stream-of-consciousness novels came into emergence in a large number and went through its rising to great prosperity and falling into a decline in about half a century. From the numerous writers in this period who attempted this new form Faulkner stood out conspicuously by means of his two masterpieces *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). What needs to be pointed out is the inseparability of his formidable achievements from his apprenticeship with the other literary predecessors and contemporaries in or beyond this very tradition. His accomplishments in this art were based upon, as Richard P. Adams put it, "An enormous amount of reading, intelligently chosen from the best literature available in Western civilization" (Adams, 1985, p. 83).

Poetic Inheritance

The affinity of stream-of-consciousness fiction with poetry is detectable. Therefore, Faulkner's earlier working in poetry no doubt contributed to his later stream-of-consciousness creation. For 10 or more years before the spring of 1925 when he published an essay "Verse Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage", which summarized his development during this period, he kept to his tilling in poetry. Though ending as a "failed poet" (Minter, 1980, p. 59), his practice and particularly his serious reading in poetry did make a sound preparation for his successful rendering of inner life with poetic devices in his prose, such as rhythm, symbolist imagery, and poetic principles of structure.

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Shakespeare's Influence

Among those he read, Shakespeare had an obvious and pervasive influence on him. In addition to his borrowing from the "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" speech in *Macbeth* in the title of *The Sound and the Fury*, and the similarity between Quentin and Hamlet both of whom suffer from hesitation and contradictory feeling, he was also inspired by Shakespeare's perfect combination of interior monologue and poetry. Hamlet's monologue impresses one with its peculiar artistic effect, in which his interior conflict and tension are always rendered by lines with strong rhythms and stressed syllables. Similarly, in Quentin's interior monologue, the sharp variations of his consciousness are presented through the changes of the rhythm of the speech. The speech appears to be mild and steady when he is gloomy and heavy-hearted, and speeds up with a rapid succession of dislocated sentence fragments when he struggles in the interior strain and conflict.

Keats's Influence

The Keats's influence was suggested by Faulkner in an interview given in 1956 and published in *The Paris Review*: "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies" (Adams, 1985, p. 89). Keats's symbolist imagery of silent arrested motion was reechoed in Faulkner. Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* sees his brother Jewel struggling with Gillespie in the light of the burning barn "like two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare" (Faulkner, 1964, p. 211). Quentin Compson, hoping to escape the reality that disturbs him, submerges himself in "the secret shade" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 133) of the Charles River, where his pursuit of the impossible love and his illusion remains in a world "forever beyond the reach of time" (Minter, 1980, p. 68). Caddy Compson, Faulkner's favorite character, was also depicted as Keats's urn, which was always associated with love dreamed yet denied, felt yet deferred, and always epitomized beauty.

T. S. Eliot's Influence

Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness novels also owe much to the great modernist poet T. S. Eliot in imagery, diction, and even technique. Darl Bundren's rumination that "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant… in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls" (Faulkner, 1964, pp. 196-197) and Quentin's metaphor of men as "dolls stuffed with sawdust" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 174) bespeak the debt to "The Hollow Men". Quentin borrows Prufrock's hesitation and struggling between his desire and cowardliness, and also "Gerontion's" image of absorption into eternity: "gull…through space dragged" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 103), the Sybil's death wish and dead language: "Fui. Non sum" (Faulkner, 1995, p.173), and Phlebas's death by water can all find correspondences in Faulkner. In diction, Faulkner displayed a similar Eliotic flair, as we see in Addie Bundren's version of Eliot's "April is the cruellest month": "In the early spring it was worst. Sometimes I thought that I could not bear it, lying in bed at night, with the wild geese going north and their honking coming faint and high and wild…" (Faulkner, 1964, p. 162). And Quentin's imagination of himself and his sister Caddy "walled by the clean flame" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 116) echoes Guido da Montefeltro in the passage from Dante's *Inferno* used by Eliot as the epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Eliot's delineation of Prufrock's consciousness bears an analogy with Faulkner's dealing with time in his work.

Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness novels show a leaning to poetry in their form and structure too. The four juxtaposing sections of *The Sound and the Fury* with varying narrative rhythms are like four cantos of a long poem, each with a certain motif and relatively complete structure. Thus, it produces an effect similar to Eliot's

Four Quartets (1943). And *As I Lay Dying* bears an affinity with Chaucer's great poem "The Canterbury Tales" (1387-1400) in the narrative form and the overall arrangement. Each interior monologue of the 59 fragments of consciousness, with its own narrator, can be taken as a stanza of a long narrative poem.

Novelistic Inheritance

American Influences

Evidently, most readily identifiable influences upon Faulkner are indeed those of novelists. Among the American ones are Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, to name but a few.

Hawthorne's influence on Faulkner was pointed out by several critics. Two of them, Harold Donglas and Robert Daniel, have argued that "The substructure of Faulkner's… *As I Lay Dying* resembles *The Scarlet Letter* in ways that virtually establish a direct influence" (Adams, 1985, p. 117), since both involve the family conflict underneath the superficial plot. In theme, both writers rendered evil in the human heart and tried to explore the meaning of morals. The Jamesian psychological realism may have taken its cue from both, but Faulkner went further in depicting the inner life by the most truthful and straightforward way. In technique, the works of both authors are salient for their employment of interior monologues and their ambiguity illustrated by multiple viewpoints. In the "Conclusion" of *The Scarlet Letter*, people are heard to offer different views concerning the sign of the letter A on the dead minister's chest. The author's refusal to commit himself gives his work a richness which would otherwise have been impossible to achieve. In Faulkner, this is given fullest play in terms of varying or even contrasting accounts of different narrators. In characterization, we can find in both some specific parallels that are surprisingly close, such as the protagonists who suffer the most agonizing failures often generate the greatest tension, like Quentin Compson, Darl Bundren, and Roger Chillingworth; the naive characters with a sort of mystic instinct acting as a moral supervisor and protector of their mothers, like Benjy and Pearl; or the illegitimate children with symbolic names (Jewel and Pearl) and even the central figures of the passionate and imperious women, and so on.

The influence of Melville on Faulkner, though less noted than that of Hawthorne, was at least as easy to establish, partly because Faulkner spoke so highly of *Moby-Dick*. Connections have already been drawn between Cash Bundren and the carpenter on the whaling ship *Pequod*, between Benjy and Pip, the idiot in *Moby-Dick*, and between Quentin Compson, Darl Bundren and Melville's suspect bachelors. At a profounder level, Melville was probably the principal inspiration for Faulkner's persistent deployment of extreme forms of language, image, and action, his radical departures from traditional patterns of logical coherence and stylistic decorum. It was from Melville that Faulkner learned that the forms of fiction were not fixed but truly protean, capable of infinite evolution in coincidence with evolving creative needs.

The most important of all the American influences on Faulkner was evidently that of Mark Twain. Needless to say the correspondences between characters, more strikingly, Mark Twain's use of naive point of view, like Huck's, was often seen in Faulkner, too. The latter made use of such witnesses as Benjy Compson and Vardaman Bundren to look at various rigidities and inconsistencies of social behavior, to testify to the ironies the author wanted to plant in the reader's mind and to produce a peculiar aesthetic effect. The Mark Twain influence was strongly reinforced by Faulkner's following of his practice in the literary tradition of Southwest frontier humor, the technique of hyperbole, and the cosmic scene. These can be traced in the Bundrens' adventure of the funeral procession and other details like fixing Cash's broken leg with cement, Anse's miraculously getting a "duck-shaped" new wife, etc. Faulkner's skilful use of dialect and colloquialism was no doubt, one more successful

example of combining oral and literary techniques to produce a vigorous and colorful style after Mark Twain. It can be easily found in the black servants in *The Sound and the Fury* and the poor white in *As I Lay Dying*. In fact, it is by means of the idiom and language, which most accurately represent life that the effect of verisimilitude of consciousness is achieved.

European Influences

Worthy of note is European influences which Faulkner himself attached great importance to. In an interview given in 1953, he said, "I was influenced by Flaubert and by Balzac, whose way of writing everything bluntly with the stub of his pen I admired very much" (Adams, 1985, p. 109). The broad similarities between Balzac's *Comedie humaine* and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction have long been recognized, and the "continuity… like a blood-stream" (Adams, 1985, p. 108). Faulkner found between Balzac's pages was realized in himself too. Faulkner esteemed Flaubert "A stylist who… had enough talent to write about people too" (Gwynn & Blotner, 1959, p. 56), and was in control of every aspect of his work, but what Faulkner was inspired by was much more a matter of Flaubert's dealing with spatial form than of his style or anything else.

According to Richard P. Adams, in Faulkner's work, "The influence of Conrad is the strongest and pervasive" (Adams, 1985, p. 101). The direct influences are detectable in the correspondences between the Caddy-Benjy relationship in *The Sound and the Fury* and the Winnie-Stevie relationship in *The Secret Agent*, or those between Quentin Compson and Martin Decoud, the self-doubting intellectual who commits suicide in *Nostromo*. Conrad's preferred setting of a town or settlement or trading post on a river in the midst of a jungle or wilderness was often repeated in Faulkner's scenes in conjunction with spring or stream flowing among trees near habitation. In both authors, the setting is associated with sexual passion which leads to gestures of impotence. Conrad's more substantial importance—in addition to his moral attitudes toward life similar to those of Faulkner—is at the most fundamental levels of technical conception. His impressionistic method, skilful use of breaks in time-sequence, and his complete dependence on one or even more narrators in such work as *Lord Jim* and *Chance* constitute the full anticipation of Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness techniques and particularly in *The Sound and the Fury*.

As regards the more modern influences, we have to mention Proust and James Joyce, though Faulkner did not regard them as his masters like those we discussed above. Yet, Faulkner was indeed in common with Proust in using Bergson's *la duree* and in obsessive preoccupations with time, with memory, and with change. When we read the fragrance of the madeleine dipped in tea which evokes Marcel's memory of his childhood at Combray, the odor of honeysuckle which, for Quentin, is mixed up with his recollection of Caddy's affairs comes into our mind.

There is also strong internal evidence indicating that Faulkner acquired some of his stream-of-consciousness techniques from Joyce's work and *Ulysses* in particular. Both authors used themselves, their families, and their hometowns for the construction of their fables. Therefore, we can see Stephen Dedalus in Quentin, and Ireland under English rule in Quentin's South. One more obvious analogy between Joyce and Faulkner is in their handling of time, both used the juxtaposition of past and present within the limited chronological time. Joyce's employment of symbolism, metaphor, and mythological model can easily be found in Faulkner, especially in his *As I Lay Dying*. Many more specific parallels can be pointed out, such as their playing on the verb "to be", their use of clocks in similar ways, the reference to "the beast with two backs" from *Othello* used in both *Ulysses* and Quentin's recalling Caddy's pregnancy, and so on.

Conclusion

Faulkner is well recognized for his plurality and profundity, not only in the multiplicity of techniques he employed to portray the complex inner world, but also in the variety of traditions, he inherited in his writing. His affinities are remarkable with the poets like Shakespeare, Keats, T. S. Eliot, with the American novelists like Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, and more importantly, with the European novelists like Conrad, Proust, and James Joyce, among many others. Furthermore, the particular importance for Faulkner of the other masters—Cervantes, Dickens, Tolstoi, and Dostoevsky—is not explored here, though they deserve further research. Maybe what is assured is that Faulkner's literary background is too large and too various to be described by any simple statement, but he assimilated his sources and went beyond them. It is by combining what he absorbed from the splendid Western literature with his own tireless experimentation on artistic form and technique that Faulkner succeeded in constructing an open and pluralistic world in his stream-of-consciousness novels. He seems to have proved that "the innovation of literature and art means bringing forth the new through the old" (Zhang, 2017, p. 12).

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