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## WILLIAM FAULKNER'S “MAKING IT NEW” AND BEYOND

### **Abstract**

The paper will try to explore the contribution of William Faulkner to Modernism: his response to Ezra Pound's imperative “Make it New”. It will summarize some of Faulkner's most distinguished “modern innovations” in his mythological kingdom Yoknapatawpha – a cosmos of his own, which goes beyond the time he lived in and created them in. They will be illuminated from different critical perspectives with the idea to open a critical conversation on Steven Connor's “Modernism after Postmodernism”, and to be closed with Stephen Ross's “Modernism, Theory, and Responsible Reading.” A look backward at some English Department contributions to understanding the complex poetics of William Faulkner and Modernism will also be presented.

**Key words:** William Faulkner, Cleanth Brooks, Modernism, Responsible Reading, English Department

The dialectical principle of constant motion, akin to “Panta rei”, reminds us that it is imperative to scrutinize the present through the lenses of both the past and the future. William Faulkner encapsulates this concept as “life in motion,” emphasizing the significance of retrospection and foresight. Memories of Modernism, and later Toni Morrison's reinterpretations, her definition of *rememories*, extend beyond the boundaries of Modernism,

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compelling us to revisit, reexperience, and reassess what we may have missed or thought we had encountered. Faulkner, in his endeavor to convey his interpretation of Ezra Pound's "Making it New," seeks to narrate the tale of the American South and extends these contemplations beyond the American South, as expected.

Faulkner's perspective on time as a fluid entity, not confined to "was" or "will be," underscores the idea that time is the amalgamation of the collective intelligence of all individuals coexisting at a given moment. In essence, Faulkner's exploration aligns with Thomas McHaney's assertion that he fearlessly adopts a critical modernist viewpoint when approaching Southern culture (Vukčević 1997b: 47–54).

This perspective rejects the notion of an absolute past and underscores the existence of multiple reconstructed versions of history. Dwelling on the incorrect version severs our connection to the future. In other words, as McHaney says "Faulkner fearlessly took the more critical modernist perspective when it came to Southern culture, illustrating that there is no absolute past to dwell on in the present but many versions that are all reconstructed, that dwelling on the wrong one cuts off the future" (McHaney 2000: 198).

Faulkner's approach to "Making it New" is further exemplified by his realization that his native soil, no matter how modest, offers a wealth of material for storytelling. By transforming reality into the apocryphal, he liberates his creative potential to its fullest extent, crafting a cosmos of his own.

I discovered that my little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into the apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top. It opened up a gold mine of other people. (Faulkner in Blotner 1991: 192)

The legacy of Faulkner's "gold mine of people" has left a permanent mark on the scholars, many of whom have dedicated themselves to the examination of Modernism and Faulkner's role in defining it within the English Department of the University of Belgrade. Reflecting on our academic journey, we recognize the pioneering studies of Prof. E. Vida Marković, who, in the early 1970s, introduced us, her students then, to a new fictional and non-fictional world, narrative techniques, and artistic

experiments of exceptional power through her lectures and books on 20th-century English/American novels and the disintegration of personality in these works. We were exposed to the imperatives of "Making it NEW", which remained a focal point in our exploration of modernist literature. In our final year of English studies, Prof. Marković introduced us to the principles of New Criticism and close reading, providing a platform for Faulkner to be compared with other prominent figures of English Modernism, such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Additionally, Prof. Marković shared her conversation with Faulkner, conducted at his residence in Rowan Oak in 1961, offering insights into his creative process and literary philosophy. I very well remember his reply to a question on the role of myth in his work.

I write about people. I am interested in people, they are all around me... I write about them and their fates ... Every year I read *Don Quixote*, then the *Bible*, Dickens, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chekhov's short stories... I like myths because they are about people. ..I don't remember my books. I write them down and never read them again. They are no longer mine, others read them. (Faulkner in Marković 1990: 52)

Myths are about people, and their stories, rituals, their truths, and their language! Faulkner did awaken an interest in his mythological world in me, "the cosmos of his own," or as he would say, "a man's heart in conflict with himself and with others" that has never stopped intriguing me since. His "gold mine of people" kept opening up new questions and in time, it has shown me that a) myth has an important role in the organization of his narrative b) Faulkner uses classical and Christian mythology, but he does not neglect the mythology of his soil c) by specific narrative procedures he creates his language of poetic symbols (motifs) d) myth is often a frame in narrating e) it often characterizes his heroes, and therefore has a function in the organization of the material, either directly or prefigured and g) in all those roles myth functions as transformed in authentic literature and in many cases has vital importance in style (Vukčević 1997a: 296–309).

In 1985 the research journey led me to a fortuitous meeting with Cleanth Brooks, a prominent critic of Faulkner's works and a key figure in the New Criticism movement. In our engaging conversation, Prof. Brooks shed light on his interpretations of Faulkner's poetics. At one moment he posed a rhetorical question:

Would it be possible to interpret Faulkner or Shakespeare without putting them in specific historical frameworks? To be able to interpret a certain genre, we must know its many-sided components (language, history, geography...). So, for example, previous criticism has not understood William Faulkner's attitude towards history. They interpreted him as a decadent historian because of Quentin's suicide. Child suicides are still happening today in the USA which does not mean that the USA should be declared decadent. From a sociological point of view, indeed, Quentin's family cannot function normally, but there are still other such families, and their children do not commit suicide. I see Quentin as a person whom Faulkner uses against something else, which reflects his greatness – to use his material to express universal themes, the deeper ones. ... Shakespeare expressed it a long time ago by asking us to look for indirectness by directness as well as Emily Dickinson – “to tell the truth, but tell it slant”. (Brooks 1997: 17–20)

Obviously not! To comprehend a genre fully, we must consider its multifaceted components, encompassing language, history, geography, and more. Prof. Brooks emphasized the need to examine Faulkner's attitude toward history beyond simplistic interpretations. He considered Faulkner's characters, such as Quentin, not as indicators of societal decadence but as instruments to convey universal themes. Faulkner, like Shakespeare and Emily Dickinson, utilized indirectness within directness to express profound truths. It was obviously Faulkner who made Cleanth Brooks widen his New Critic perspective of the interpretation of the text, which, as we know, insists solely on the text. Shakespeare was again mentioned as a reference to Faulkner by another Faulknerian scholar, Prof. Thomas McHaney, whom I met five years later. He simply said: “Faulkner means for America what Shakespeare means for England” (Vukčević 1997b: 52).

The exploration of Faulkner's version of Pound's “Making It New” and related topics has remained a persistent focus within our English Department. Our doctoral students, including Dragana Obradović, Svetlana Minić, Marko Radulović, and Milica Milovanović, have dedicated their theses to unveiling the enigmatic worlds of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha through the lens of contemporary theoretical perspectives. Their research aims to bridge the gap between New Criticism and the present, offering fresh insights into Faulkner's poetics and the broader landscape of Modernism.

That bridging is connected with Faulkner's dealing with complex questions which inspired some debates on the periodization of literature. Some argue against viewing Postmodernism as a chronological continuation of Modernism, defining it as a "deepened" form of the latter. This divergence in perspectives has led to discussions on what lies "beyond" Postmodernism. Scholars have identified certain postmodern characteristics in Faulkner's works, including elements of paranoia, intertextuality, unreliable narrators, and peculiar irony in works like *Absalom, Absalom!* The ongoing discourse seeks to reconcile these opposing views and trace the evolution of modernist thought in the contemporary academic landscape.

Faulkner's artistic journey has witnessed transformative phases, especially after his initial international recognition. His novel *The Sound and the Fury* is celebrated for its innovative exploration of stream of consciousness techniques. The narrative construction in this novel is mosaic-like, with distinct stories converging, overlapping, and explicating each other. Faulkner defies conventional plot structures and explores new avenues for storytelling, transcending linear chronology and embracing lyrical closure and indeterminacy. This novel shares commonalities with seminal modernist texts, such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, Eliot's *Waste Land*, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Each of these works rejuvenated the modernist movement, exploring themes of subjectivity, stream of consciousness, interior experiences, and memory. Faulkner, in his own unique way, made the "NEW" by exploring the inner worlds and voices of a diverse cast of characters, highlighting the distinctiveness of each character's consciousness. This new recognition underscores the inherent differences in human consciousness, challenging conventional appearances and behaviors.

The novel's exploration of memory is central, with the Compson brothers' recollections centered around their sister, Caddy Compson, a haunting (absence) presence in many of Faulkner's works. Faulkner's experiments in language and narrative reveal an attempt to give voice to the voiceless. Quentin's narrative, for instance, teeters on the edge of disintegration as he grapples with language's limitations in conveying his complex thoughts. Jason, on the other hand, introduces a sense of distance, culminating in the final section of the novel, where the closed circle of interior monologue is disrupted. The narrative transitions into a world characterized by concrete descriptions, firm outlines, and exact rhythms.

Faulkner's lack of alignment with a specific school of thought or critical position has not hindered his cultivation of essential principles in his writing. On the contrary, it enabled him to become an even more distinguished writer: he shows in order to tell, he is speaking from an inner point of view. These principles include a focus on the artifice within all literary forms to distinguish art from life, unwavering fidelity to character, a devotion to the American cultural landscape that he keeps negotiating with, an emphasis on the vitality of language, and the assertion that art must offer a positive statement against anarchy and chaos.

In order to respond to his artistic needs Faulkner uses a pluralistic approach to his themes and techniques. The interpretation of them is supported by the contemporary pluralization of modernisms which raises intriguing possibilities for the study of William Faulkner's poetics. This path leads me to a possible conclusion, as explored in the critical conversation on Modernism, theory, and Responsible reading, that unearths the interplay between Modernism and contemporary theory. It encourages me to explore emerging themes such as the Anthropocene, decolonization, the posthuman, and eco-theory. Responsible reading, as an ethical practice, engages with literature constructively, fostering a mode of interpretation that underlies ongoing debates about strength and weakness, paranoia and reparation, and critique and effect. Applied to Faulkner's poetics, responsible reading highlights his innovative narrative experiments, akin to jazz musicians playing their instruments. These experiments expose gaps in traditional narratological models, prompting a fresh understanding of storytelling.

A sign of reconciliation between different tendencies can be traced in Steven Connor's text "Epilogue: Modernism after Postmodernism" in *The Cambridge History of Modernism* in which he points out that studies on Modernism have multiplied and diversified lately.

[T]here has been a conspicuous renewal of modernist studies which has led much more from within literary studies than other areas. [...] Both modernism and postmodernism were characterized by their irresistible if also some syncopate, radiation across arts and disciplines. This made the idea of modern literature unthinkable without the idea of modern art or modern music and characterizations of literary postmodernism similarly deprived of their force and intelligibility from what could be described as analogical rather than genealogical definition. (Connor 2022: 821)

Consequently, the various brands of “new modernisms” developed over the last two decades with a focus in literary studies. Steven Connor recognizes the other characteristic of these “new” modernisms (2022: 821) as the need to diversify and stabilize in the largely academic study of literature. In his quite “new” text Steven Connor raises the crucial question: „How has the modernist effort to ‘make it new’ called for Ezra Pound itself been renovated by what is increasingly called “new modernism” (2022: 822). Can we raise a rhetorical question and say that this “new” itself could be understood now more in relation to the theoretical and critical approaches than to the literary texts?

Connor believes that it is even more accurate to say that Modernism has been upgraded by being pluralized. The challenge is not to come up with a new definition of modernism as such, but to distinguish a new mode or accent of modernism, whether that be “digital modernism,” “queer modernism,” “ethnic modernism,” “granular modernism,” “mongrel modernism,” “nostalgic modernism,” “vulgar modernism,” “vernacular modernism,” “transatlantic modernism,” “jazz modernism,” “cold modernism,” “mystic modernism,” “militant modernism,” “paranoid modernism,” “bacteriological,” or “modernism at sea,” “Geo-modernisms,” “transnational modernism,” “multimedia mod.” The result is pluralization of modernism into “modernisms” (2022: 823). The more that modernism multiplies, Connor points out,

the more implausible it seems that there could ever have been a modernism for or in itself, as opposed to the many modernisms that are currently teeming in the womb of time, ready to fulfil the different functions required of them. The more it continues to unfold in our ways of happening upon it, the less it may seem that modernism can be said in any simple sense to have happened. (2022: 823)

Modernism is no longer something existing only in the past to which we are compelled to make out a relation, says Connor, it is the product of that relation itself. Connor concludes that “it remains to be seen whether this need will itself come to be understood as an outcome of the era in 20th-century cultural history we call ‘modernism’” (2022: 832).

Connor’s conclusion leads to a central question: what can the consequences of the new perspectives on Modernism tell us in the contemporary encounter with Faulkner and his works? As is known,

perspectives on Faulkner's understanding of Pound's "making it New" started changing, especially after his first international recognitions. His *The Sound and Fury* was seen as a remarkably mature and restrained experiment with the possibilities of "stream of consciousness" techniques. Whether under Phill Stone's influence or not, Faulkner saw himself at the beginning of his career as primarily a poet (*The Marble Faun*, 1919) though with potentialities of a graphic artist. Criticism recognized his general debt to English pastoral and lyric verse, from Shakespeare to Swinburne. It was the same year that Faulkner wrote and "published" a highly formal play in one act called *Marionettes*, whose chief importance lies in its combination of text with related illustrations and its overall stylization of language, action, and line. Something New on his way of wandering through the paths of Modernism! Postmodernism?

Faulkner's search for fictional truth was fraught with challenges. His most significant novels contain mysteries that inspire endless retellings, rebelling against traditional narrative forms. The myth of Yoknapatawpha County, "a cosmos of my own," transforms Faulkner's Mississippi home into a mappable, rich in time. This world acknowledges an inherited context, where characters act and understand within a historical framework. Faulkner's texts resist forgetting the past, dwelling in reminiscence as if living and writing were all reiteration.

Contemporary responses to William Faulkner's poetics, as we pointed out, come from many critics belonging to different schools of criticism. Among many, I would like to single out one more representative of responsible reading. This is Daniel Aureliano Newman, who in his text "Beyond the Search Image: Reading as (Re)Search" says that "Faulkner played narrative the way jazz musicians played their instruments, creating not just new music but new musicology to boot" (2022: 99). Another, Masami Sugimori (*Weak Theory, Literary Criticism*), problematizes his encounter with Faulkner at Nagano (*Faulkner at Nagano*) pointing out the different cultural contexts they come from. He describes their first encounter as the one with "failed communication with judgementally reductive interpretations" (2022: 140). Responsible reading in the embrace of responsible communicating! Things changed with Faulkner's "awareness of most listeners' limited knowledge not only of the English language but also his works" (Sugimori 2022: 141). It was not easy for them to overcome the difficulty of reading his works, which meant both disappointment and relief for Faulkner. He illustrates this with one of the student's memories at that time:



This combination of our naiveness and his honesty, of our innocence, and his sincerity, made the Seminar dialogue quite interesting and revealing. If we had been American professors in the early years of Faulkner's studies, we would have been far more cautious and timid in throwing such innocent questions at him. We would have been more prying and sharp to get inside him, which would have made Faulkner nervous, closed, and sarcastic. (Sugimori 2022: 141)

It is still not easy to overcome the difficulty of reading Faulkner's works; neither is the art of listening to his works. I am going to close up this very introduction on William Faulkner and Modernism with Sonita Sarker's conclusion in her "Writing from Somewhere, Reading from Anywhere: New Criticism and (Neo)liberal Globalization". She simply expresses a perspective on looking for BEYOND: "After the *sturm und drang* generated by New Criticism, I imagine sitting cross-legged on the grass with my e/book in my lap, anywhere past critique and post-critique, somewhere in the world, and responsible reading beginning again with listening carefully" (Sarker 2022: 204). Just the way Faulkner asked from his readers a long time ago: reading by listening carefully to the sounds and furies of his characters! The sounds and furies of his and our time! Simultaneously! Therefore, Beyond is at least partially a Return to its origins – which is in accordance with Faulkner and his understanding of myth, time, and cyclicity.

In conclusion, our exploration of William Faulkner's "Making it New" by a realm of modernisms unveils a rich tapestry of perspectives and possibilities. Faulkner's enduring relevance and the ever-evolving landscape of literary theory invite us to explore deeper the interplay between art, history, language, and consciousness. As we navigate these uncharted territories, we are guided by Faulkner's example of persistent curiosity and fearless experimentation, resonating with the "NEW" and the "BEYOND."

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