

## DICKENS AND FAULKNER: THE USES OF INFLUENCE

IN REPLY TO A QUESTION "What are some of your favourite books?" Faulkner once said "*Don Quixote*, some of Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, *Nigger of the Narcissus*, most of Dickens. . . ." Speaking of the modern young writer Faulkner said again,

His characters do not function, live, breathe, struggle, in that moil and seethe of simple humanity as did those of our predecessors who were the masters from whom we learned our craft: Dickens, Fielding, Thackeray, Conrad, Twain, Smollett, Hawthorne, Melville, James; their names are legion whose created characters were not just weaned but even spawned into a moil and seethe of simple human beings whose very existence was an affirmation of an incurable and indomitable optimism.<sup>1</sup>

and later, in reply to a question about the Snopeses, Faulkner answered,

. . . there's probably no tribe of Snopese in Mississippi or anywhere else outside of my own apocrypha. They were simply an invention of mine to tell a story of man in his struggle. That I was not trying to say, This is the sort of folks we raise in my part of Mississippi at all. That they were simply over-emphasized, burlesques if you like, which is what Mr. Dickens spent a lot of his time doing, for a valid to him and to me reason, which was to tell a story in an amusing, dramatic, tragic, or comical way.<sup>1</sup>

His answer to another question is also interesting and amusing, even if it is not obviously relevant here:

What is your opinion of Henry Miller?

Sorry, I don't know him. Should I? You must believe me, I do live in the country and I don't keep up with literary things, I ain't a literary man. So if I should know Henry Miller I'll find out about him.<sup>1</sup>

These are some of the references made to Dickens when Faulkner was at the University of Virginia. He said something similar when he was at Nagano in Japan. And, for "a non-literary man", Faulkner's persistent references to

Dickens, his placing Dickens at the head of his list of those whose reputation he would like to equal (a list that includes Homer and Tolstoy) and his seizing primarily on Dickens to illustrate some aspect of his own writing—these are all interesting pointers. But it is appropriate, before we illustrate the nature and extent of Faulkner's debt, to discover why the American should have found Dickens so attractive. One should probably mention first those qualities that perceptive readers, and especially Faulkner, have always found compelling: the fertility of imagination, the indomitable humour, the undercurrent of gloom, the force and energy of both the prose and the monumental characters, the irony, the satire, the ability to tell a good yarn. Most of these qualities are to some extent found in Faulkner's writing also. But, more important, the key to this apparently strange pairing lies in their two points of view—their common attitude, which is an unshakable humanism and an inviolable faith in man, so that the overpowering and cumulative effect of their work is one of affirmation. Faulkner was attracted to the writing of Dickens much as he was to the Old Testament, not only for its energy and variety, but because it is centred always on man, even to the extent that what there is of God in it takes on primitively human characteristics. Faulkner found in Dickens a rejection of political solutions, and a rejection of formal religious solutions to the human dilemma. He found these replaced by an intense and humane individualism that measures all value in human terms, that celebrates all opposition to tyranny, abstraction, and materialism and that moves naturally therefore to individual psychology as the root of the problem and the source of the solution. Dickens, and later Faulkner, convey the sense of a celebration of life, of the richness of life, so that even their most evil characters seem to be human, to have been fun to write about, to be an essential part of the human scene. These writers were able to identify with all aspects of humanity, partly at least because they saw that evil is always a distortion of good, that it is learned false abstractions or false images of the self that intervene between their possessor and his sympathy with his kind. This type of boundless compassion, this humane vision, is found in very few writers, but in English the obvious ones are Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding, Dickens, and Faulkner; and in these writers all the characteristics named above are to be found. It may be of interest also that the characters created by these five writers lend themselves peculiarly to psychological analysis—which suggests how intensely individual they are, and that yet in each case their characters approach the quality of the universal. These writers constitute an alternative "great tradition" to that of Leavis, a moral tradition in which Faulkner is

most accurately placed, so that, while other writers provide traceable influences on his style (Joyce and Twain, for instance, and Shakespeare and the classics are frequently found in Faulkner's writing) Dickens is the writer nearest to Faulkner's own imagination.

The similarities between these two literary heavyweights have, of course, been noticed before. Leslie Fiedler, as long ago as 1950, when he was more tentative and less well known, wrote an article entitled "William Faulkner: An American Dickens" which deals mainly with the qualities of Faulkner's writing, and in which he makes the following comment:

It is this experiment with "point of view", a virtue made of a short-breathed necessity, that has concealed somewhat the essentially popular nature of Faulkner's work, and has suggested to his critics comparisons with Proust or Joyce or James, rather than Dickens, whom he so strikingly resembles. The inventor of Popeye and the creator of Quilp have a great deal in common besides an obsession with the grotesque, and especially they have a demonic richness of invention (typified by their equal skill at evoking names that are already myths before the characters are drawn) and a contempt for the platitude of everyday experience.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in the last paragraph of his book on Faulkner, Michael Millgate points to the need for further study by commenting on the broad similarities in the two writers.

But it is Dickens whom Faulkner most resembles, in the passionate humanity of his tragi-comic vision, in the range and vitality of his characterization and the profusion of his social notation, in the structural complexity of his novels and their broad symbolic patterns. It is also Dickens whom Faulkner most resembles in the sheer quantity and sustained quality of his achievement, and it is alongside Dickens, the greatest of the English novelists, that Faulkner must ultimately be ranked.<sup>3</sup>

Both Dickens and Faulkner produced a huge amount of fiction and both create in their canon the sense of a whole world peopled with rich and memorable characters. Both were interested in the drama, Dickens writing many plays and Faulkner writing one. One might point out the special relationship of both novelists to the film. Their novels have been well adapted to films; this is no accident, for the intense personal dramas of their characters are combined with a descriptive clarity so vivid as to be almost surrealistic. D. W. Griffiths, the father of the modern cinema, cited Dickens as the authority for

his many innovations. Faulkner wrote several screen scenarios and spent some time in Hollywood—which, incidentally, he loathed. Both writers were so prolific and sustained as to convey a sort of *comédie humaine* that derives from the impact of a whole canon. Both deal with societies that are structured vertically, and the poor of Dickens become the Negroes of Faulkner. The Negroes, like the Victorian poor, play the role of servants, physically dependent on their employers while frequently morally superior to them.

Both writers strongly indict the past. Dickens' cynical view of English history is paralleled by Faulkner's American mistrust of the past in general and his satiric view of the Southern past in particular. Dickens makes *his* attitudes clear in *A Child's History of England*, a profoundly underrated moral discourse, to which may be added *Pictures from Italy*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Faulkner's *Sartoris*, *The Unvanquished*, *Requiem for a Nun*, and even *Absalom, Absalom!* make this particular anti-romanticism perfectly clear. Because the past is a continual influence on the present, and because time is a continuum in which the future is at once infinitely determined yet continuously changed by decisions made in the present, a special moral burden is placed on the immediate, on the living consciousness that must be aware of the past and sensitive and responsible to the future. It is this central emphasis on the significance of every present act that attracted Jean-Paul Sartre to Faulkner's work and that raises the existential element in Dickens and Faulkner. This leads to the whole vexed question of free will and determinism in these writers, a question that is large enough to deserve separate discussion. And it is this question that forces Dickens and Faulkner to make such frequent use of children in their work—more perhaps than any other writers that come to mind. For children illustrate the freedom and flexibility that are so often lost with custom and with social role, and also the susceptibility to the past. They are dependent on adults whose attitudes, in the long run, they are helpless to resist, so that in a way they are used in the fiction as an act of wish fulfilment as they are made to resist the pressures of their environment. They serve especially well, therefore, as points of moral conflict (*i.e.*, to please an adult world they must deny their own innocence or freedom) and they are useful for illustrating the consequences of evil, the way in which evil is literally regenerated. They are also especially useful as innocent touchstones for the satiric examination of a grown-up world. The Dickens list of *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, *Pip*, *David Copperfield*, and *Little Nell* is paralleled by *Quentin*, *Jason*, *Caddy*, *Isaac McCaslin*, *Chick Mallison*, and *Vardaman* in Faulkner. This list does not include the dozens of less

well-known children scattered through the novels and short stories of both writers. The best example of a precisely similar use of the child hero is in *Great Expectations* and *Intruder in the Lust*, a comparison to be considered later.

Following the general points of comparison, we notice how widespread in the fiction of both writers is the use of prisons, convicts, the law, the courts, and lawyers. It is difficult to think of a Dickens novel where one or more of these subjects is not central. Even Mr. Pickwick is unable to stay out of court or out of gaol. In Faulkner no character is more ubiquitous than Gavin Stevens (his name is that of a medieval knight) who becomes more active and more loquacious as time goes on. *Wild Palms*, *The Mansion*, *Requiem*, and *Intruder* are very largely structured on prisons, crime, or trials. A recent critic has most convincingly shown that the whole form and language of *Absalom, Absalom!* is taken from law, and he makes the comparison to *Bleak House*.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this common preoccupation, it may be suggested, is three-fold. Both writers had personal experience of crime and the law, and a personal interest in them. Dickens worked in a law office and as a child saw his father in gaol. Faulkner was for a time a whiskey bootlegger in New Orleans, and his best friend and perhaps his mentor was a lawyer, Philip Stone. Secondly, both deal with the strata of society whose underprivileged members are bound to run foul of the law: the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the mad, the greedy—in other words, they are both specialists in dealing with the underprivileged or the abnormal. And this leads us to the third reason. The underprivileged and the abnormal are only that part of the social iceberg that shows. In other words, a society built on a caste system—be they the poor of a workhouse world or the Negroes of twentieth-century America—is sick, and these writers are essentially moralists dealing with social sickness. This sickness is exemplified in the various modes of behaviour which both these writers satirize through exemplary emotional cripples or madmen—Dombey, Chester, Skimpole, Dorrit, Pecksniff, and Podsnap, and Sutpen, Jason, Flem, Hines, Mink, Mr. Compson, and others. The court and the prison thus become symptomatic catalysts in the fiction which sees them as pathetic attempts to deal superficially with profound diseases. Through society's attempt to deal with its own ills the writer can explore what he sees as underlying causes. Edmund Wilson, in 1939, began the vogue of finding the morbid Dickens, driven unwittingly by his identification with the criminal mind. The truth is that, however deeply rooted was his fascination with crime and the law, Dickens knew well enough what use to make of it in his fiction. Much

insight is to be gained by seeing what use Faulkner later made of the same material.

The work of both Dickens and Faulkner is readily characterized as Gothic. That is, both writers depend heavily on the subjects of horror, nightmare, and mystery. The dark secrets of *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* are paralleled in *Absalom* and *Intruder* and *The Hamlet*. The murder of Nancy and the flight of Sikes are repeated in the murder of Houston and the flight of Mink Snopes, even to the use in each of the tell-tale dog. One also remembers the murder in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which takes place in the woods and is in some ways even more reminiscent of the murder of Houston. Places like the Clennam house of *Little Dorrit* and Satis House in *Great Expectations* are paralleled in Rosa Coldfield's house and Sutpen Place and Emily Grierson's house in "A Rose for Emily". The pile of ashes and rubbish belonging to the golden dustman of *Our Mutual Friend* is more precisely paralleled in the salted mine of the old Frenchman's Place in *The Hamlet*. Bodies appear and disappear. People dig up graves, in both the *Tale of Two Cities* and *Intruder in the Dust*. Secrets of illegitimacy in Dickens are turned into secrets of miscegenation in Faulkner. The atmosphere of the river, the mud, the weir, and the marshes of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*, of *Edwin Drood*, and of *Our Mutual Friend* finds its parallel in the swamps and woods and rivers of *Mosquitoes*, *Wild Palms*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *The Hamlet*. There are, furthermore, many examples of Gothic characterization in both writers. Miss Havisham, Fagin, Tulkinghorn, and many characters in *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying* are typical. Miss Wade of *Little Dorrit* and Joanna Burden of *Light in August* are both typically "possessed" women, crippled by their backgrounds. Grotesques like Quilp (*The Old Curiosity Shop*) and Hugh (*Barnaby Rudge*) have their counterparts in Popeye and Grimm.

The whole technique of characterization in Dickens and Faulkner is sufficiently complicated and interesting to deserve a separate study. Suffice it to say here that both writers manage to convey the universal in the particular. Dickens has been accused of caricature, that is, presumably, of creating figures so wholly individual as to be not recognizably human. He has also been described as creating "humours", that is, presumably, of producing figures with traits so universal and simplified as to be not individually whole. The truth is that Dickens and Faulkner manage to convey a "type" of behaviour in an intensely convincing individual portrait, probably by the sheer force of their imagination: for instance, the frigid woman (Mrs. Clennam and Emily



Grierson) or man (Dombey and Sutpen); the decayed-genteel woman (Mrs. Pocket and Mrs. Compson); the stern, cold father-figure (Murdstone and McEachern), and so on. To the children mentioned above should be added the idiots of both writers, particularly Barnaby and Benjy, whose names are strangely alike.

When we turn to the subject of names these comments on characterization are borne out. As Mr. Fiedler mentions, a name suggests a whole outlook even before one knows the character. Both writers hark back to the eighteenth century and earlier in their use of names for a symbolic, imagistic, onomatopoeic, or satiric purpose. Bounlerby, Stryver, Brass, Smallweed, Sharp, Jingle, Headstone, Murdstone, and Gradgrind are all well known. Faulkner continues this tradition with Grimm, Hightower, Coldfield, Burden, Fathers, Snopes, and among the Snopeses there are I.O., Wallstreet, and Montgomery Ward Snopes. Dickens uses names of biblical, historical, or mythological significance: Estella, Rachel, Riah, Hannibal, Jeremiah, Chester (after Lord Chesterfield), Venus, and Ebenezer. Faulkner, too, depends heavily on the same sources: Joseph Christmas, Quentin, Jason, Benjamin, Joanna, Caroline, Isaac, and Narcissa. Both gain by this not only a realm of precise allusion, but a much more general associative response. Before leaving the subject of names one might as well mention Faulkner's Compson and its source in Compeyson, the evil jilter of *Great Expectations*. We find a Redlaw and a Gowan in both Dickens and Faulkner, and even the dog Lion of *The Bear* got his name from a dangerous dog called Lion in *Little Dorrit*.

Both writers are deeply rooted in a locale. Dickens' use of his beloved London and Kent and the towns and inns of England have given rise to a whole Library of books with such titles as *The Inns of Pickwick*, *Dickens in London*, *Rambles in Dickensland*, and so on. Faulkner is unusual in American letters in his attachment to and use of actual places familiar to him—New Orleans, Oxford, Jackson, and the whole locale of rural Mississippi around Oxford. Few other writers give as strong a sense of place in their writings: the Inns of Court in London and the town square at Oxford, Miss., are present to all the senses when one reads this fiction.

Let us turn to some of Faulkner's precise borrowings. In *Great Expectations* Pip is engaged in a struggle which has two principal elements: the desire for integration into society and the need for personal integration, or integrity. In both of these elements a convict deeply involves himself with the effect of demonstrating to Pip that his personal freedom and contentment depend on his recognition and acceptance of his kinship with evil and

humanity. His personal integrity and his social humanity are not only inter-related but also mutually determinant. *Intruder in the Dust* places a boy, Chick Mallison, in precisely the same position. Chick has a name which is embryonic and prophetic, as has Pip. The way they are now will indicate not only how they will be but what everyone might be. Chick like Pip encounters a man who turns his world upside down. The details are similar enough to be obvious parallels. For Pip the world and especially its landmark, the Church, are turned topsy-turvy: "When the church came to itself—for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet— . . ." <sup>5</sup> For Chick too the familiar is inverted: "when all of a sudden the known familiar sunny winter earth was upside down. . . ." <sup>6</sup> In both cases, as a result of these encounters, the boys both become deeply and unwillingly obligated to men who are social outcasts, though Faulkner makes overt from the start what Dickens leaves latent for a long time. Magwitch is outcast as a convict when Pip meets him. Beauchamp is outcast as a Negro and becomes a prisoner later. Both men demand help in crises from boys who are faced with a conflict between natural instincts of fair play and humanity and their cultural codes and obligations. It is a dilemma most perfectly archetypalized in *Huckleberry Finn*. In addition to these similarities both novels contain old women whose names are virtually the same, Havisham in Dickens and Habersham in Faulkner. But here the similarity ends for Miss Habersham is fully engaged in life and plays an active role in assisting Chick, while Miss Havisham is removed, frozen, and self-incarcerated in her house. The image of the jilted Miss Havisham and the idea of outraged pride at the root of that image fascinated Faulkner and he used it in the picture of Rosa Coldfield, also jilted, more or less, and outraged, and also self-incarcerated for half a lifetime, and also associated incidentally with a rotting mansion. This leads us to more names and parallels. For while Faulkner kept a name and displaced a character, he also shifted names to titles. "A Rose for Emily" is also about a deserted woman who, not knowing how to love, murders the deserting lover and keeps the body for years in her bedroom. Thus, a story with overtones of *Satis House*, and with Rose in its title is reminiscent of Rosa Coldfield's story. One also remembers Dickens' Rosa Dartle, another neurotic, frustrated and consequently dangerous woman.

But to get back to situations, there are some further clear borrowings. Both Dickens and Faulkner were particularly severe on various aspects of orthodox Christianity, especially Calvinistic puritanism. Arthur Clennam reflects with great sadness on his background and its joy-killing gloom. Mrs.



Clennam has, like Miss Havisham, inflicted upon herself a house-ridden doom, and is condemned to a wheelchair, by either hysterical or pretended paralysis. Because of her betrayal and being unable to punish the world, she punishes herself and relies heavily on a self-righteous religious bigotry for justification. The name Clennam is actually a vocal compression of clean-name and refers to one of the central themes of the novel. *Light in August*, with its Hines and McEachern and its troubled and dislocated hero, is Faulkner's treatment of the same subject. Both Arthur Clennam and Joe Christmas are adopted by Puritans who are fragmented and vengeful people. Both heroes are tormented by questions of their own identity. *Little Dorrit* further suggests two other novels of Faulkner. *Absalom, Absalom!* has as its centre miscegenation and incest and sexual betrayal to parallel the adultery of *Little Dorrit*; it has the sacrifice of children for the abstract values of name, position and family (in this sense Sutpen is like both Mrs. Clennam and Mr. Dorrit) and it has the destruction of the actual house, the residence, to accompany the destruction of the family house and the past, just as the Clennam house collapses at the end. Sutpen also resembles Mr. Dombey of *Dombey and Son* and thus reveals the common elements between different Dickens novels as well as those between Faulkner and Dickens. Dombey, like Sutpen, dreams of founding a dynasty, and is likewise frustrated. Both are cold, proud, and entirely impersonal; both treat people like commodities and have no concept of human nature—an ignorance largely responsible for their downfall. Dombey and Sutpen have naturally no time for daughters, both are ruthless and, losing one son, must seek another by marriage. Both fail. Both witness the collapse of "house" and dreams.

One more extraordinary parallel should be noticed. In *The Sound and the Fury* Quentin Compson tears the hands off his watch and later the same day drowns himself. In between he visits a watchmaker to get his watch repaired. The events of his death day are minutely recorded. To find the source of much of this we must turn to *Edwin Drood* where we find that Edwin has a watch, obviously of major significance in the novel, that he visits a watchmaker on the fateful day of his disappearance and that he disappears by a weir and is supposed drowned. The hands of the cathedral clock are torn off during a storm that accompanies his disappearance. By way of final comment on this parallel the title of the relevant *Drood* chapter is "When shall these three meet again," a title from Macbeth as is *The Sound and the Fury* itself.

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of Dickens' novels that would show how he precedes Faulkner in his use of counterpoint, the detective story,

the use of mutual reflectors and the experiment with point of view; nor can it be shown here how even the language of Dickens was an influence on Faulkner, though this is clearly demonstrable. I would like to end by pointing again to what seems of real significance and may be emphasized again in conclusion: abstractions, codes, hypocrisy, every form of falsehood, formal religion, and merely economic values are anathema to both Dickens and Faulkner. It is interesting that both wrote their own humanized or de-spiritualized versions of the New Testament, Dickens' *The Life of Our Lord* and Faulkner's *A Fable*. Both place people at the centre of their universe and make human values supreme and the human being the touchstone of all behaviour and belief. Both have lists of characters who occupy central positions in their fiction because their humanity is outraged, their human dignity violated. Oliver, Nell, Paul Dombey and his sister, Little Dorrit, and Riah are some in Dickens. Temple Drake, Caddy, Benjy, Lucas, and Joe Christmas are a few of those from Faulkner. Both writers speak of the heart: Faulkner says that for the writer there is "no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed. . . ." <sup>7</sup> Faulkner also says, "to work, to believe always in man, that man will prevail, that there's no suffering, no anguish that man is not suitable to changing if he wants to . . ." <sup>8</sup> and he goes on: "I would say, and I hope, the only school I belong to, that I want to belong to, is the humanist school." <sup>9</sup> Dickens writes that "without strong affection and humanity of heart . . . happiness can never be attained." <sup>9</sup>

It should be clear that there is no wish to engage in comparison-hunting for fun and profit. What is wanted is mutual illumination by juxtaposition, for influence is only interesting when its uses are clear. The foregoing commentary has attempted to show that Faulkner drew heavily on Dickens because he was part of a central humanist literary tradition, and that he found in Dickens the supreme fictional achievement in English of a consistent and compassionate exploration of human suffering, a systematic exposition and condemnation of human folly, and a thorough celebration of human virtue. The term "vision" is used to describe the point of view of these writers in order to suggest its coherence, its scope, and its profundity. Faulkner wrote: "I'm inclined to think that all of man's work has such a definite relationship that he doesn't in mid-career change his stride, or his purpose." <sup>9</sup> The present writer has tried to show elsewhere that this is true of Faulkner's own fiction, and he believes that this is equally true of the fiction of Dickens. Both writers are part of a tradition of fictional moral discourse, embodied in a social vision

—a vision different from say, Blake's, in not being strictly allegorical or systematically metaphorical or a poetic celebration of the imagination, and a vision that is different again from Spenser's and Milton's in not depending on a divinely ordered cosmos. Rather, theirs is a vision that sees man alone, and therefore sees that morality and psychology are essentially related—a very modern outlook, however old its roots. To see that the work of Dickens and Faulkner is related may enable us to see more clearly both the significance of their separate affirmations and the central humanist tradition of the English novel of which they are part.

## NOTE

1. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*. (Charlottesville, Va., The University of Virginia Press, 1959), 2-3, 282.
2. *Commentary*, X (1950), 385.
3. *The Achievement of William Faulkner*. (London, Constable, 1966), 292.
4. Marvin K. Singleton, "Personae at Law and in Equity: the Unity of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Papers on Language and Literature*, III, no. 4 (1967).
5. Charles Dickens. *Great Expectations*. (London, Oxford University Press), 1953, 2.
6. William Faulkner. *Intruder in the Dust*. (New York, Random House), 1948, 5.
7. Speech at Stockholm on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize.
8. Robert A. Jelliffe, ed., *Faulkner at Nagasaki*. (Tokyo, Kenkyusha Ltd.), 1956, 18, 95, 46.