Noel Polk, editor of William Faulkner
An interview to Sueli Cavendish

This prestigious scholar, editor and critic from the United States has kindly agreed to speak on his work with William Faulkner to the Brazilian Public. Polk is the author of many in-depth studies on Faulkner – “Children of the Dark House”, “Reading Faulkner’s The Sound and The Fury”, “Intertextuality in Faulkner”, “New Essays on The Sound and The Fury”, among others; and the editor of the corrected editions of all of Faulkner’s novels for Random House, Library of America and Vintage International. He was the editor of The Southern Quarterly for around 30 years and more recently (2004), as he joined the Department of English at Mississippi State University, he became editor of the important journal The Mississippi Quarterly. Dr. Polk has also been lecturing at universities around the world, as in Japain, France and Soviet Union.

1. You have dedicated most of your life to working with Faulkner, either as principal editor of critical editions of his novels, or as a literary critic. Is it time for an assessment of this lifelong experience? What has Faulkner done to you as an American and a Mississippian artist? What have you done to Faulkner as a scholar?
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Although Faulkner is by now of course considered as considerably more than “American” and “Mississippian,” he is still firmly grounded in American and Mississippi “realities,” whatever anybody means by that term. Though he’s clearly not always “representational” in his presentation of that reality—that is, he doesn’t always try to reproduce his own external world with mimetic exactitude—that external reality undergirds his fictional realities. That said, I can say that however he gets to America and Mississippi, and the world for that matter, he describes life in these two intertwined locales with a profoundly political, economic, social, cultural, and historical exactitude that has served me better in understanding the world I live in than have many of the overtly political and economic commentators I have tried to read. That is, without preaching, his novels have taught me much about how power operates in class, race, and gender structures, dramatizing these relations in ways that have helped me understand our history—why we are the way we are. Further, he’s a kind of role model for me, as a Mississippian, in that it’s possible to trace a development in his own understanding of race and gender, in particular, that forced him, for example, in the fifties to abandon his high modernist disdain for current realities in favor of “art” and the ‘artist” as something set apart from those realities and to go to work in the public arena to address the nation’s and the South’s need to do something about our dreadful racial problems. He taught himself from his own work, I think, and so taught me how to teach myself from them.
2. Do you acknowledge that in the work of an editor, having to decide on what the authorial's intention was in many cases, or where the comma goes, there is always already a large amount of interpretation? What guides your hand in the choices you make, considering you are dealing with a writer whose interpretability is either none or close to infinity?

Well, once in a meeting of Faulknerians at which we were asked to suggest topics for discussion at future meetings, I suggested “Faulkner’s Punctuation.” Stunned silence from the audience: you could have heard a pin drop for a few anxious moments, until somebody coughed, somebody else suggested another topic, and everybody was able to move safely past the outrageous suggestion! As an editor, of course, I have had to pay LOTS of attention to Faulkner’s punctuation—should I add a period to the end of that sentence, or did Faulkner leave a full-stop off of it deliberately? I’ve thus had to entertain on a line-by-line basis in all of the novels the implications of Faulkner’s punctuation, especially when it’s problematic or perhaps an error of typing. Richard Godden and I, in an essay, called “Reading the Ledgers” demonstrated just how important punctuation is in *Go Down, Moses*, how much a part of the language itself Faulkner made it,
and how intimately it is related to his words. There are a few of us who care, but the question where his commas go is still a huge field yet to be plowed!

3. Could you in some large strokes present us an appraisal of Faulkner’s criticism along the years? What were important turning points or decisive developments in critical approaches to his work since New Criticism? What differences do you see between American responses toward Faulkner as compared to European? Did criticism read by him while still alive affect his work in any measure?

So far as we know, Faulkner never read any scholarly criticism of his work, and he claimed never to read reviews, though there is some evidence that he did, especially in the early years. In any case, there’s not any evidence that I know of that anybody else’s opinion of his work mattered to him very much, at least as far as his actual writing was concerned: he may have had some concern about sales, though, especially in lean years when he was having to go to Hollywood to pay his bills! It’s almost impossible to summarize usefully the history of Faulkner criticism, since it’s so complex. Lots of the early critics were mostly concerned with his use of Oxford and north Mississippi history and the history of his own family and with its “southernness.” A lot of the criticism was very reductive, finding over and over again that the works were about the “decline of the Old South” and the encroachment of the modern world on those traditional values: much of this sort of criticism was advanced by Southern apologists who made of Faulkner a sort of posterboy for their own political agendas. European critics, especially the French, of course had different ideas, translating him in the thirties and thinking about his work in a wider context than American critics generally had, though to be sure the Brit Michael Millgate and the Southerner Cleanth Brooks did a good deal to shake Americans out
of their obsession with the American South. The French in the vanguard theoretical criticism, beginning in the late 60s, early 70s, began to open Faulkner up to all sorts of other readings; to see him as something other than a rustic genius who might have really been a good writer had he had more education, more founding in European traditions of art, philosophy, and literature. European critics, saw that in fact his works were imbued with that European tradition and began to discuss his works accordingly. Very soon, of course, American critics came on board, and works like *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* became something like gateways into the critical discourse; new theories felt obligated to stop by to pay their respects and to make itself viable by showing how it could illuminate Faulkner.

Faulkner’s home in Oxford, Mississippi

4. You have written an article with the title of “Man in the Middle: Faulkner and the Southern White Moderate” (*Children of the Dark House*. Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1996). Has the advent of Culture Studies in the critical scenario made it necessary to explain some of Faulkner’s public statements about the racial issue or politics in general? Was Faulkner’s
artistic treatment of blacks in his books considered not appropriate to the partisans of this new critical trend?

I’m not sure that “culture studies” made it necessary to explain Faulkner’s public statements about race; he spent a good deal of time doing that himself at the time he made them. He was in a curious position politically, “in the middle,” because on the one hand, he did more than 99.99% of white moderates in Mississippi did to speak out against racial injustice, or at least because of his Nobel Prize and his notoriety he was much more visible than the others who were working for racial justice; in Mississippi, he was outrageously liberal. On the other hand, what Mississippi considered liberal wasn’t nearly enough for liberals in other parts of the country, and some critics still criticize him for not doing more. He infuriated blacks when he advised them to Go Slow, now that they had the advantage—an advantage they didn’t necessarily see, what with the admitted murderers of Emmitt Till going free. It’s easy to understand their frustration with Faulkner on this score. He was in some ways in an impossible situation; he was a person of his own time and place and some of those attitudes emerged in his pronouncements on race; even so, as I say, he spoke out courageously in a time when speaking out on racial matters might was very dangerous.
5. Speaking of “The Sound and the Fury”, Joseph W. Reed Jr. calls our attention to the fact that the four sections of the book cannot be added to make a whole. My contention is that instead of a whole, what Faulkner pursued was to establish a series, which would go on to infinity. This brings much difficulty for readers used to identify with one of the characters and adopt their point of view. This sort of identification is denied the reader in almost all sections. If this is so how could the book have turned into a big success year after year?

I agree with you rather than with Reed. Malcolm Cowley also thought that Faulkner was better in the short burst than in the novel, precisely because of the fragmented nature of The Sound and the Fury, and precisely for the reasons that Reed, and others, have suggested. But that novel is the quintessential American High Modernist text and as such it brings to bear on narrative precisely the psychological, social, and political—and narrative—fragmentation that characterizes High Modernism. He was not trying to create a complete whole world, as, say, Dickens and Thackeray
did, a narrative in which a single, trustworthy narrator described the world and the characters in it. He was not interested in that large picture of the world, but in the smaller more immediate experience of the world by characters of a wide variety of social backgrounds, brains, and perceptiveness: hence the extraordinary number of narrators in his novels, hence the seeming confusion and disorder of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

6. Why do you think Faulkner just couldn’t leave that book alone for many years, as he did with the others? Why so many of his own speeches intrude in our understanding of the novel, as if he was trying to shape the reception to his book? There are the two introductions, many interviews, and we have the genealogical appendix, which he curiously wanted printed first, in the very beginning of the second edition. He called it “a piece without implications”, as an explanation to the fact that it presented no insight on the book itself. The editor did not comply with his request. But I don’t see many people bewildered by his curious attitudes. How to explain it?

He wrote two versions of an introduction to The Sound and the Fury for what was planned, in the early 1930s as a special edition of the Benjy section that was to be printed in three different colors. He came back to it in 1946 when Malcolm Cowley commissioned him to write a sort of explanatory introduction to the portion of section 4 that he, Cowley, was going to reprint in The Portable Faulkner, an explanation that morphed into “Appendix: Compson”. He didn’t go back to read TSATF, though, so there are some minor differences between the Compson Appendix and the novel, that Cowley corrected. But he wrote the Appendix during a time when he was severely distressed about his career; he hadn’t published a book since 1942, a long time for him, was prisoner of a really bad contract
in Hollywood, and he was deeply embedded in work on *A Fable*, which took him 10 years to write, much longer than any of his other novels. I think that he simply thought that the Appendix might help rescue *The Sound and the Fury*—and his career—from oblivion; he proposed that it be published as an introduction, then changed his mind and proposed it as an appendix, to any new edition of *The Sound and the Fury*. I think the Appendix is a wonderful piece of writing, and it served the purpose of getting him back to the prose he was accustomed to rather than the rather more brittle prose that he was using in *A Fable*. As editor of the new editions of *The Sound and the Fury*, I chose to see his “desire” to connect the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* as a sort of aberration, a late reading of *The Sound and the Fury*, and chose not to include it in the New Corrected Text in 1981. *The Sound and the Fury* that begins with the Appendix is simply a different novel than the one that begins with the Benjy section. Clearly, though, he loved what he learned about his own artistic powers while writing *The Sound and the Fury*; he signed one copy to a friend: “I wrote my guts into this one.”

7. What do you think Faulkner was hinting at when he said that *The Sound and the Fury* was his most splendid failure? Much has been written on the nature of this failure, except for philosophical, aesthetic explanations. Yet he makes it clear that it was the failure to fully apprehend a vision, a picture his mind had created. He was probably addressing the failure of the intellect to grasp a symbol. We just don’t see enough of aesthetic criticism grounded in philosophical ideas in canonical criticism. Could you comment on this?

I think he was being very modest. I think that he was perfectly aware of what he had done in *The Sound and the Fury*. But he was always inclined to measure himself by his next novel, whatever it happened to be—never
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looked backward, never re-read any of his works, so far as we have any evidence of it, not even when he wrote sequels—Requiem for a Nun and The Town and The Mansion. He always wanted to do better than he had done: that’s how he revolutionized the novel in the 20th century: he never repeated himself. At some point, almost certainly after he wrote The Sound and the Fury, he knew that he was no longer competing with Hemingway and Joyce and Fitzgerald, but with Faulkner.

8. The Brazilian public is not much aware of Faulkner’s formation years. His attempts to be a poet, his translations of French symbolists, his very special involvement with Mallarmé. You have written a very important piece on the subject, could you enlighten us about the matter?

Far from being the untutored rustic that people thought him to be for many years, Faulkner, thanks largely to his friend Phil Stone, read widely in European literature, was enamored of the French Symbolistes and other fin de siècle artists like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. He took French courses at the University of Mississippi and translated several poems by Mallarmé and Verlaine, and wrote reams of poetry derivative of them and T. S. Eliot, another of his favorites. He published two volumes of poetry, but later gave up writing it, claiming that poetry was the highest form of literature because it required so much compression, and he failed at it: the short story was next for the same reason, and he failed at that too (though he of course didn’t!): the novel was next, his own medium.

9. What’s the significance of “A Fable”, Faulkner’s last book, to his work as a whole? It is indeed a very difficult book. Why would he choose to set it so far away from Yoknapatawpha County? What is your vision of the book?
I may be alone in the world in thinking that *A Fable* is one of the great books of the 20th century; maybe another half dozen or so think it is an important book, maybe another half dozen think it’s certainly worth reading and thinking about, and most of the rest, even of serious *Faulknerians*, believe it is somewhere between an abomination and a serious novel by a Faulkner bloviated by the Nobel Prize who wanted to write a philosophical novel—a “novel of ideas”—that he was not intellectual enough to write. It’s certainly not *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*, of course, and that is, in my judgment, by design, a deliberate movement away from the sweeping sentences and rhetoric of that “Faulknerian” style toward something perhaps a bit more prosaic, if you will, that he uses to describe the cold, impersonal, highly structured bureaucratic world of class hierarchies, the cold, impersonal, highly structured bureaucratic world of political structures that causes wars, uses wars to keep those class hierarchies in place. I think it’s a profound analysis and description of the Cold War world. It *is* a novel of ideas, and, I think, a damned good one, and very much worth the effort it takes to read it.

10. Do you think Faulkner has been recognized in America in all his complexity? Has his art had due recognition?

Hardly any writer is more lionized and less read, except in high schools and universities. There’s still a stumbling sense among “general” readers that he’s too difficult and obscure; an equally stumbling sense among even intellectuals that he’s mostly interested in Southern stuff and that he held backward myopic views about race and gender.

11. Where is *Faulkner* most Shakespearean? Where is he most Dostoyevskian? Where is he most Conradian? How much of the American literary tradition has he incorporated in his work?
Answers to these questions are not so easy to separate out. He is most Shakespearean in his inventiveness with language, his comedy, and his sense of how comedy and tragedy are so intimately related. Most Dostoyevskian? perhaps in his capacity to get at the heart of human suffering—the heart of the need and the desire that causes people to do what appear to be irrational things. Most Conradi an? I'm not sure I can answer this one, since I don't know Conrad very well: I've been saving Conrad for my retirement! How much of the American literary tradition? I suspect we don't know the answer to this yet, though the criticism has noted indebtedness and references to and/or borrowings from a wide range of American authors—including *Melville, Hawthorne, Irving, James, Hemingway, and Anderson*. I suspect that the answer to this question may rest with future scholars. But just as some friends have maintained that the entire 19th century is in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, I think pretty near everything of the first half of the 20th century is somewhere in *Faulkner*.

12. What do you say to someone interest in reading *Faulkner*, where should he/she start? As to criticism, what is absolutely necessary to read if one is doing academic work on *Faulkner*?

I think the answer to the first question might differ for an American audience than for a Brazilian audience, since most of your readers, I suspect, would be reading Faulkner in translation, and so you would be in a better position to know how good/difficult the translations of Faulkner are. In the USA, I always answer the question about where to start reading *Faulkner* by talking about how to read *Faulkner*: the most important thing to remember in reading Faulkner is that you must give up hoping to understand everything the first time through: things happen on page 3 that even the best readers can’t possibly understand until page 30 or 300. If you are confused by the first few pages of *The Sound and the Fury*, go with...
that—Faulkner wants you to be confused, so that you can actually experience the world as Benjy Compson, the narrator, experiences it, as a confused and not clearly coordinated series of memories. For the same reason, Faulkner does not explain anything to you, no more than Benjy does, since Benjy has no sense that he is talking to anybody but himself, if he is talking at all. So: read anything, but read with faith that he knows what he is doing; with faith that you, the reader, are not stupid but that Faulkner is trying to reinvent the novel, to reinvent the way we understand and perceive experience, in order to make it fresh, to make us experience the world new. Readers beginning to study Faulkner might well read a couple of early books, by Cleanth Brooks and Michael Millgate and later books: John Irwin’s Freudian study, and John T. Matthews’s first book especially. Modesty forbids my naming others one might profitably read!

13. How does history fit in Faulkner’s novels?

This could require several books to answer. Faulkner is certainly interested in history as one of several factors that operate on his characters. But he, I have argued for years, was less interested in history than his characters are: he is more interested in the destabilized present moment, whether that moment occurred in the 19th or 20th century. In Requiem for a Nun (1951), Gavin Stevens famously says to Temple Drake: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” a statement that nearly everybody has taken to have Faulkner’s endorsement. But in fact, as Millgate suggested many years ago, it is among Requiem’s themes precisely to test that statement. Stevens means that we can never overcome the past, that we can never change. But he makes the statement to Temple, who is making every effort to change from the woman who believes she caused so much grief in Sanctuary. I don’t think Faulkner endorsed the statement, but that Stevens does, as do all people who want to use the past as a political tool.