WILLIAM FAULKNER
ON MOBY-DICK: AN EARLY LETTER

In his later years, William Faulkner referred to *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* as possibly the greatest books in American literature\(^1\) and assigned Mark Twain and Melville the top positions among American novelists up to the end of the nineteenth century,\(^2\) whereas he seems to have had less regard for Hawthorne and Henry James whom he once called «not truly American writers»\(^3\). His final perception of the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* and its author stands in marked contrast to the low opinion he had of Mark Twain much earlier when he called him «a hack writer who would not have been considered fourth rate in Europe, who tricked out a few of the old proven 'sure fire' literary skeletons with sufficient local color to intrigue the superficial and the lazy»\(^4\). Faulkner wrote this at the age of twenty-three, but even in 1947, mentioning *Huckleberry Finn* in reply to the question whether 'The Great American Novel' had been written yet, he still had reservations about Mark Twain as an artist: «Twain has never really written a novel... His work is too loose. We'll assume that a novel has set rules. His is a mass of stuff—just a series of events»\(^5\).

---

5. R. M. Allen «Notes on William Faulkner» (mimeographed transcript of a classroom interview at the University of Mississippi, Spring 1947), p. 4. This is apparently a more accurate transcript of the session than the
Thus Faulkner's evaluation of Mark Twain underwent a
tremendous change in the course of his adult life until he
came to view him in the same way Hemingway had done
before him, calling him «the first truly American writer», 
from whom all later writers in America descended,7 and the
grandfather of the writers of his own generation.8

His opinion of Moby-Dick, however, seems to have been
persistently high from an early period. In a number of inter-
views during the fifties he named it as one of the books he
used to read again and again.9 In 1940 he told a visitor in
his Oxford home that he was reading Moby-Dick to his
daughter Jill, who was only a child then.9 The fullest and
finest remarks Faulkner ever publicly made on Moby-Dick
occur in a letter he wrote as early as 1927, at a time when
the Melville «revival» had barely begun. The letter was
published in the section «Books» of the Chicago Tribune,
July 6, 1927, p. 12, as part of a series called «Confession».
This series appeared over a number of years and was edited
by Miss Fanny Butcher who solicited answers from well-known
authors to the question what book they would like most to
have written.

Faulkner replied:10

version published by LAXON RASCOE as «An Interview with William Faulkner»
Western Review, XV, 370-304 (Summer, 1955).
7. Faulkner in the University, p. 281.
8. Faulkner in the University, p. 59; Faulkner at Nagoa, p. 42;
CYNTHIA GRENNIER, «The Art of Fiction: An Interview with William Faulk-
ner - September, 1955», Accent, XIV, 768 (Summer, 1956); JEAN STEIN,
«The Art of Fiction XII: Faulkner», Paris Review, XII (Spring, 1956),
reprinted in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed MALCOLM
COWLEY (New York, 1958), p. 136. In this latter interview the explicit
reference is to Melville, but one may safely assume that Moby-Dick is
what is meant.
9. DAK BRENNAN, «Journey South», University of Kansas City Re-
view, XXII, 3 (Autumn, 1955).
10. I owe my knowledge of this letter to the clippings from the
series «Confessions» which Mr. Herbert Klein of the Widener Library,
Harvard University, has collected. The letter is not listed in JAMP S. MBR,
WERTHER'S excellent book The Literary Career of William Faulkner (Princeton
University Library, 1967).
Dear Miss. Butcher:

It is a difficult question. I can name offhand several books which I should like to have written, if only for the privilege of rewriting parts of them. But I dare say there are any number of angels in heaven today [particularly recent American arrivals] who look down upon the world and muse with a little regret on how much neater they would have done the job than the Lord, in the fine heat of His creative fury, did.

I think that the book which I put down with the unqualified thought «I wish I had written that» is Moby Dick. The Greek-like simplicity of it: a man of forceful character driven by his sombre nature and his bleak heritage, bent on his own destruction and dragging his immediate world down with him with a despotic and utter disregard of them as individuals; the fine point to which the various natures caught [and passive as though with a foreknowledge of unalterable doom] in the fatality of his blind course are swept — a sort of Golgotha of the heart become immutable as bronze in the sonority of its plunging ruin; all timeless phase: the sea. And the symbol of their doom: a White Whale. There's a death for a man, now; none of your patient pasturage for little grazing beasts you can't even see with the naked eye. There's magic in the very word. A White Whale. White is a grand word, like a crash of massed trumpets; and leviathan himself has a kind of placid blundering majesty in his name. And then put them together!!! A death for Achilles, and the divine maidens of Patmos to mourn him, to harp white-handed sorrow on their golden hair.

And yet, when I remember Moll Flanders and all her teeming and rich fecundity like a market place where all that had survived up to that time must hide and pass; or when I recall When We Were Very Young, I can wish without any effort at all that I had thought of that before Mr. Milne did.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

It can only be conjectured when Faulkner first read Moby-Dick. At the time of his death he owned two copies of the book, both acquired after the publication of his letter. One was an
edition published by Random House in 1930, which apparently
was given to him by the publishing company and bears his autograph signature and the date « New York, 26 Oct 1931 ». The other was the 1930 Modern Library edition which Faulkner had among the books he kept in Charlottesville. Thus Faulkner’s library does not give a clue as to his first readings of Moby-Dick. However, in March, 1922, Mr. Phil Stone of Oxford Miss., Faulkner’s friend and literary mentor in this early period, ordered a copy of the novel from his bookseller.12 As Mr. Stone ordered many books for Faulkner to read, it is fairly safe to assume that this was one of them and consequently possible that at some date soon after March, 1922 Faulkner read Moby-Dick for the first time.

It should not be surprising that Faulkner also names Moll Flanders in his letter. The picaresque is of considerable importance in his own work, and he revealed an especial fondness for rogues when he named his favorite characters later in his life. On several occasions he showed the high regard he had for the English novel of the eighteenth century. And, finally, self-reliance, endurance, and independence such as Moll Flanders’ are likewise characteristics of many women in Faulkner’s works.

Again, Mr. Stone’s list of book orders provides an indication as to when Faulkner may first have read Defoe’s novel. The book was ordered in January, 1927. It therefore is very likely that Faulkner was still freshly impressed by his reading when he named Moll Flanders as the second book he would like to have written. His interest in the book seems to have continued throughout his life, a supposition borne out by the fact that he had two copies of it in his library, one bearing his signature and the date « Rowanoak, Dec. 1933 », the other, an edition published in 1950, kept in Charlottesville in his last period.

The mentioning of A.A. Milne’s When We Were Very Young in the third place is a little baffling. Of course, the book

had already proved to be an extraordinary success. First published in 1924, it was in its ninety-third printing in the United States by September 1927. To understand Faulkner’s predilection for the book, one must remember that throughout his life he enjoyed telling and reading stories to children. And among his unpublished writings there is the charming fairy-tale “The Wishing-Tree” which, written in the 1920’s for a little girl, like Milne’s children’s books shows some traces of the influence of Lewis Carroll. But even so it remains somewhat strange for the literary critic to find Moby-Dick and a book of children’s rhymes here cited in one breath, unless one simply takes it as one of Faulkner’s jokes which it may well be.

HANS BUNDERT