



Article

# In the Traces of Modernism: William Faulkner in Swedish Criticism 1932–1950

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**Abstract:** This article focusses the reception of William Faulkner in Sweden from the first introduction in 1932 until the Nobel Prize announcement in 1950. Through reviews, introductory articles, book chapters, forewords, and translations, the critical evaluation of Faulkner's particular brand of modernism is traced and analyzed. The analysis takes theoretical support from Hans Robert Jauss' notion of 'horizon of expectations', Gérard Genette's concept of 'paratext', and E.D. Hirsh's distinction between 'meaning' and 'significance'. To pinpoint the biographical and psychologizing tendency in Swedish criticism, Roland Barthes's notion of 'biographeme' is introduced. The analysis furthermore shows that the critical discussion of Faulkner's modernism could be ordered along an axis where the basic parameters are form and content, aesthetics and ideology, narrator and author, and writer and reader. The problematics adhering to these fundamental aspects are more or less relevant for the modernist novel in general. Thus, it could be argued that the reception of Faulkner in Sweden and Swedish Faulkner criticism epitomize and highlight the fundamental features pertaining to the notion of 'modernism', both with regard to its formal and content-based characteristics.

**Keywords:** William Faulkner; Swedish literary criticism; Nobel Prize; modernism; reception history; aesthetics and ideology; meaning and significance

## 1. Introduction, Aim, and Scope

William Faulkner is a distinctly American writer who is deeply rooted in the cultural milieu and historical tradition of the American South. He is also an international author and preeminent modernist writer, whose importance and influence puts him beside James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf in the renewal and development of the novel in the 20th century. His writings epitomize modernist narrative innovations in their handling of time, mode, and voice, and they embody the modernist tendency to strip away the illusions of reality. Indeed, as Daniel J. Singal has pointed out in a characterization of Faulkner's modernism: "the Modernist ethos insists on confronting the ugly, the sordid, and the terrible, for that is where the most important lessons are to be found. In stark contrast to Victorianism, Modernism—in its ideal form—eschews innocence and demands instead a full, candid apprehension of 'reality', no matter how painful that may be" (Singal 1997, p. 12). From an historical perspective, one could presume that Faulkner's modernist handling of both form and content posed a challenge to his early readers, and perhaps even proved to be an obstacle. If so, in what way, and how was it received?

The aim and scope of this article is to trace the reception of Faulkner's modernism in reviews, introductory articles, book chapters, forewords, and translations. In 1950, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, but when were his writings first introduced in Swedish criticism? How was Faulkner's brand of modernism initially interpreted and evaluated? What were the questions and problems that it raised for reviewers and critics? How did they formulate their answers, and with

what arguments? Consequently, this article takes the form of a piece of reception history, following the traces of Faulkner criticism in Swedish letters from the early 1930s until 1950.

Starting from the end with the award ceremony speech for the Nobel Prize in literature 1949—which was delivered with one year’s delay at the ceremony in 1950—the novelist and journalist Gustaf Hellström, a member of the Swedish Academy, characterized William Faulkner as “the great experimentalist among 20th century novelists. Scarcely two of his novels are similar technically. It seems as if by this continuous renewal he wanted to achieve the increased breadth which his limited world, both in geography and in subject matter, cannot give him” (Hellström 1950; Espmark 1986, p. 88). Hellström’s speech and characterization in 1950 of Faulkner as a groundbreaking modernist could be regarded as the final token of the institutionalization of Faulkner’s brand of literary modernism. It is also a culmination point of the Swedish reception history that started back in the early 1930s, when Faulkner’s writings were gradually being introduced into Swedish letters.

The years around 1930 marked a time of cultural change and literary renewal in Swedish letters that proved to be a turning point for modernism in Sweden. A new generation of modernist writers appeared; among these was the poet and critic Artur Lundkvist, who came to be the most persistent and influential Faulkner spokesman in the decades to follow. The writers of the Swedish modernist generation were all to various degrees inspired and influenced by international modernist writers and trends, which they also helped to introduce via translations and introductory articles. The new literary magazines played a particularly vital role in this process as platforms for the presentation, explanation, and defense of international modernist writers and their aesthetics. The journals *kontakt* (1931), *Fronten* (1931–32), *Spektrum* (1931–33), *BLM* (Bonnier’s Literary Magazine 1932–2004), and *Karavan* (1934–35) opened their pages to the international literary scene. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was introduced and translated by critic Erik Mesterton and author Karin Boye in *Spektrum* in 1932, the novelist Eyvind Johnson in 1931 published the first presentation of the French surrealist movement in *kontakt*, a movement that Lundkvist and seminal modernist poet Gunnar Ekelöf later introduced at length in *Karavan*. Johnson also wrote articles on André Gide and Marcel Proust in the newspaper *Ny Tid* (New Time) in 1927 and 1928. New developments in psychoanalysis heavily influenced the cultural debate at the time. Freud and Jung were used as reference points and analytical tools by avant-garde critics to capture new and complex ways of portraying man, such as for instance in the introduction of Faulkner to Swedish readers. Though the concept of ‘modernism’ as such was never discussed at any length, the cultural and literary milieu around the avant-garde was of course disposed to newness and change in various forms.

## 2. Through the 1930s: *Sanctuary* as Modernist Touchstone

In this dynamic time when international modernism first began to seep into Swedish letters, Artur Lundkvist in 1932 published the first Swedish article on William Faulkner in the magazine *BLM*. Lundkvist is no doubt the most important and influential Swedish Faulkner critic in the 1930s, returning to Faulkner in an array of highly appreciative articles in *BLM* (Lundkvist 1933, 1934, 1935, 1937, 1939a). Fragments of them were subsequently brought together in Lundkvist’s chapter on Faulkner in the essay collection *Ikarus’ flykt* (1939, *The Flight of Icarus*). Five pages long, his first Faulkner article in 1932 takes stock of Faulkner’s writings, presenting short interpretative paraphrases of the plots of his novels up to *Sanctuary* (1931) and the collection of short stories *These 13* (1931). Lundkvist emphasizes the highly experimental character of Faulkner’s writing, and describes his technique as filmic: “he chooses the points of view and angles of operation for his depictions like a director chooses his camera positions and brings his scenes together in a kind of montage. The result is a new compositional method.” (“han väljer utsikts- och operationspunkter för sina skildringar liksom en regissör väljer kamerainställningar, och han sammanför sina scener i ett slags montage. Resultatet blir en ny kompositionsmetod.”) (Lundkvist 1932). According to Lundkvist, Faulkner writes with a new kind of laconic objectivity that creates a distance between the narrator and his motif, and allows for a greater artistic freedom. *Sanctuary* is briefly characterized as “a cruel and perhaps also despairing

book" ("en grym bok, måhända också en förtvivlad"), composed almost like a detective novel. Realistic sharpness alternates with "deep probing, surrealist episodes without any breaks in the course of events" ("djuplodande surrealistiska avsnitt utan avbrott i förloppet"). That the word 'surrealism' crops up is a reflection of Lundkvist's own engagement with French surrealism at the time.

In his autobiography from 1966 Lundkvist reports that he regarded his introductory article on Faulkner in *BLM* in the autumn of 1932 as his "trump card" ("trumfkort"). At the time, he was also engaged in a translation of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, which, however, was rejected by the leading publishing house Bonniers (Lundkvist 1966, p. 89). Lundkvist's translation has never been published, and Faulkner's *Sanctuary* was not published until 1951 in a Swedish translation by Mårten Edlund. Lundkvist did however publish the first Swedish translation of a Faulkner text, namely the short story "En ros åt Emily" ("A Rose for Emily") in same issue of *BLM*. In his 1932 article, he furthermore praised the combination of "tragedy and grotesquerie" ("tragedi och grotesk") in *Sanctuary*, and noted that Faulkner's harsh and embittered criticism of life was also interspersed with more lyrical episodes. All of the painful scenes are in the critic's view rendered with great artistic urgency, and the story as a whole was conveyed with an extraordinary suggestive power. However, Lundkvist's enthusiasm was not shared by all of his critics. *Sanctuary* proved to be a tough brew for some Swedish critics in the early 1930s.

In a short review of *Sanctuary* in 1932 in the daily *Dagens Nyheter*, leading critic Sten Selander regarded it as the most repulsive novel in modern literature. The brutality of the story was further increased by the "cold objective style" ("den kallt sakliga stilen") (Selander 1932), which depicted even the most disgusting things as if they were completely natural. According to Selander, that the author never evaluated, commented on, or distanced himself from the reality that he represented was a crucial flaw: "The author never gets upset, never raises his voice, but keeps narrating in the same even, dispassionate tone of voice about a lynching or the grotesque actions at a gangster funeral." ("Författaren blir aldrig upprörd, höjer aldrig rösten, utan berättar bara i samma jämna, lidelsefria tonfall om en lynchning som om de groteska uppträderna vid en gangsterbegravning.") (Selander 1932). In spite of his basically negative evaluation, the critic also recognized that there is another side to this narrative technique. The dreamlike way of shifting focus from one glaring scene to another without any narrative transitions confuses the reader and forces him to guess and fill in the blanks. This has the effect of increasing the reader's feeling of being thrown into a horrible, mad chaos. In this sense, Faulkner's "artistic virtuosity" ("artistiskt virtuosnummer") surpassed most contemporary literature, Selander conceded.

In 1933, Anders Österling argued along the same lines in an extensive review of *Light in August* in the leading conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* that briefly mentioned *Sanctuary*, *Soldier's Pay*, and the short story collection *These Thirteen*. He regarded Faulkner's worldview as a "frightening testimony of what one's taste should have to endure due to the unquestionable intensity of the narrative temperament" ("ett ytterst skrämmande vittnesbörd om vad smaken skall anses tåla på grund av den obestridliga intensiteten i själva berättartemperamentet") (Österling 1933). The critic found a stylistic indifference with regard to the events of the plot in *Light in August*. Faulkner's callousness and insensitivity were said to enable him to depict any scene without apparent disgust. Österling discussed Faulkner's narrative technique—the broken chronology, the complicated composition, and ingenious weaving together of motifs—and maintains that at the same time as Faulkner developed his narrative technique, he also increasingly focused on the violent and abhorrent. *Light in August* was said to be relatively bearable, whereas *Sanctuary* stood out as a "complete monstrosity of gruesome episodes" ("ett fullkomligt vidunder av ruskighet").

In 1932, the critic Henning Söderhjelm published a long review of *Sanctuary* in *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* in which he pointed to Faulkner's inclination for "the morbid as well as the obscure" ("det morbida liksom det dunkla") (Söderhjelm 1932). Among Faulkner's literary ancestors, the critic counted Poe, Baudelaire, and Dostoyevsky. He characterized Faulkner's method as "impressionistic" ("impressionistisk") in that individual scenes follow each other in a phantasmagoria. Faulkner calls

forth a series of atmospheres and does not hold back on the gruesome and repulsive in order to awaken the reader's fear and loathing. According to Söderhjelm, the extraordinary number of disgusting episodes is, strangely enough, not all together perceived as embarrassing, since they are subordinated to a "poetic necessity" ("poetiska nödvändighet") namely to show the hopelessness in human life when man is no better than he is. *Sanctuary* is thus carried by a "bitter melancholy" ("bitter melankoli"), a need to free oneself from the repulsive, thus giving the novel a "moral and poetic strength" ("moralisk och poetisk styrka"). There is in this novel a strong sensitivity "for all those human values that brutality, heartlessness, and cowardice trample in the dirt" ("för alla de mänskliga värden, som råhet, hjärtlöshet och feghet trampa i stoftet"). Söderhjelm concluded that *Sanctuary* is a very gruesome book indeed, but that it is "neither humanly nor poetically indifferent" ("varken mänskligt eller poetiskt ligkiltig"). Returning to Faulkner in an extensive article in the same newspaper in 1935, now reviewing *Doctor Martino and other Stories* (1934) and the novel *Pylon* (1935), Söderhjelm repeated that although it might be easy to object to Faulkner's narrative world with its strong inclination for "the macabre, the disgusting, the repulsive" ("det makabra, det vidriga, det ruskiga") (Söderhjelm 1935), he found Faulkner constantly fascinating and with a supreme artistic command of his material.

André Malraux's preface to the French translation of *Sanctuary* in 1933, which was also published separately in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* the same year, came to be an influential assessment of Faulkner in Swedish criticism as well. It was subsequently translated into Swedish by the leading modernist poet Gunnar Ekelöf and published in the avant-garde journal *Karavan* in 1935. Malraux famously argued that the brutality and violence that permeated the mood and drove the plot in *Sanctuary*, rendered it a "a detective-story atmosphere but without detectives" (Malraux 1952, p. 92) ("en roman i detektivmiljö men utan detektiver") (Malraux 1935, p. 95). It would however, according to Malraux, be pointless to read the novel simply according to the detective novel structure. It is, rather, the ethical implications of the plot that really mattered: "Taken by itself, the plot would be only a sort of chess game, an artistic failure. The plot is important in that it is the most efficient way of revealing an ethical or poetic fact in its greatest intensity." (Malraux 1952, p. 92) ("Hänvisad till sig själv skulle intrigen vara av samma art som schackspelet: konstnärligt intetsägande. Dess betydelse kommer av att den är det verksammaste medlet att med all dramatisk intensitet framställa ett etiskt eller poetiskt faktum.") (Malraux 1935, p. 95). Malraux related Faulkner to a fundamental "psychological state" ("ett psykologiskt tillstånd") which underlies all tragic art and which the writer becomes addicted to as if using a drug, a psychological need: "The tragic poet expresses what obsesses him, not to exorcize the obsession (the obsessive object will appear in his next work), but to change its nature: for, by expressing it with other elements, he makes the obsession enter the relative universe of things he has conceived and dominated. He does not defend himself against anguish by expressing it, but by expressing something else with it, by bringing it back into the universe. The deepest form of obsession, that of the artist, derives its strength from being both horror and the possibility of conceiving horror." (Malraux 1952, p. 94) ("Den tragiske diktaren uttrycker det varav han är besatt, inte för att befria sig från det (ty föremålet för hans besatthet återvänder i nästa arbete) men för att ändra dess karaktär, ty när han uttrycker det med andra element för han också in det i de tänkta och behärskade tingens relativa värld. Han försvarar sig inte mot ångesten genom att uttrycka den men genom att uttrycka någonting annat med den som medel, genom att återinföra den i verkligheten. Den djupaste besattheten, nämligen konstnärens, hämtar sin kraft ur den omständigheten att den på samma gång är skrällen som sådan och möjligheten att fatta denna skräck.") (Malraux 1935, p. 97f). From the psychological viewpoint of the writer's constant wrestling with this unstilled desire, his obsession with horror and violence, Malraux reached the conclusion: "*Sanctuary* is the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story." (Malraux 1952, p. 94) ("*Sanctuary* är den grekiska tragediens våldgästning hos detektivromanen.") (Malraux 1935, p. 98). Swedish criticism picked up on Malraux' analysis, in particular his notion of Faulkner as a tragic writer in need of expressing his and his characters' fated "obsession" ("besatthet") with violence and destruction.

The critic Knut Jaensson referred to Malraux's preface to *Sanctuary* in two extensive articles on Faulkner in 1935 in the daily *Social-Demokraten*. He interpreted Faulkner's narrative objectivity and unwillingness to step forward to explain and ensure himself of the reader's agreement as an expression of the author's moral pride. Jaensson detected a basic "unwillingness to negotiate" ("obenägenhet att förhandla") (Jaensson 1935a) in order to please the reader and make him or her agree. Naturally, Faulkner wants to be understood, but the critic underlined that this must not be realized through clarifications simply for the sake of it. He referred to Malraux's foreword to the French translation of *Sanctuary* and maintained that Faulkner first and foremost creates "scenes" and stands out as a "dramatist" ("scener"; "dramatiker") (Jaensson 1935a). Jaensson's main purpose is to explain and defend Faulkner's norm-breaking art and expose those readings that emerge as offended by his anti-traditional, modernist address. With regard to the morally distraught reactions by some Swedish critics, Jaensson claimed: "It often turns out that one was not upset on behalf of the work of art: the uneasiness one felt towards Faulkner's novels was of the same kind that one would have felt towards many of the classics—before they became classics. That is the peculiar thing with contemporaneity and distance." ("Men det visar sig ofta att det inte var å konstens vägar man var upprörd: det obehag man kände inför så många av klassikerna—innan de blev klassiker. Det är nu en gång det egendomliga med samtidigheten och avståndet.") (Jaensson 1935a). According to Jaensson's analysis, there are two basic misunderstandings in Swedish Faulkner-reception. If one for some reason worships brutality, one could imagine having a sympathizer in Faulkner. If one, on the other hand, shudders from or shuts one's eyes to human forces that are too strong and primordial to be turned into normal decency, one could imagine Faulkner to be a representative of cold cynicism, brutal indifference, or pure sadism. Each of them is equally false. The naïve and dull-witted lack the capacity to discover Faulkner's exquisite sense of moral nuances. In Faulkner's proud and artistically effective omission of explanations and expositions, they simply find evidence of his insensitivity and brutality, the critic contends in defense of Faulkner. The author is seemingly fascinated by "brutal environments and men of action, that is his 'romanticism', but it is complicated and lacks banality" ("brutala miljöer och handlingsmänniskor, det är hans 'romantik', men den är komplicerad och den saknar banalitet"), Jaensson (1935b) points out.

In Artur Lundkvist's seminal collection of essays on international modernism, *Ikarus' flykt* (1939, *The Flight of Icarus*), the impact of Malraux' foreword to *Sanctuary* is clearly in evidence. Lundkvist's chapter on Faulkner is a commentary on Faulkner's entire *œuvre* up until *The Unvanquished* (1938). For its time, it displays a remarkable insight into Faulkner's writings, where Lundkvist takes the role of loyal introducer. On a few introductory and concluding pages Lundkvist lays bare the general characteristics of Faulkner's aesthetics; in between, he presents a running commentary on each of the novels in chronological order. Lundkvist's critical style can best be described as an impressionistic paraphrase of the plot of the novels. His critical language does not shy away from similes and metaphors, and moves forward in an emotionally intense style. In a sense, Lundkvist re-presents the object-text whereby his critical presentation and interpretation are given literary quality. The long chapter on Faulkner, which is significantly entitled "Faulkner: The Defeated" ("Faulkner, den besegrade") returns to and varies a thematic complex of defeat, determinism, fate, and tragedy. Like Malraux, Lundkvist compares Faulkner to Edgar Allan Poe, an "engineer of horror" ("skräckens ingenjör") with his "obsessed fantasy and cold, calculating technique" ("fantasibesatthet och kallt beräknande teknik") (Lundkvist 1939b, p. 121). True to his inner inclinations and the obscure laws of his own being, Faulkner has, according to Lundkvist, created "a form of obsession, a medium of horror and tragedy" ("en besatthetens form, ett skräckens och tragediens medium") (Lundkvist 1939b, p. 121). Obviously inspired by Malraux, Lundkvist on several occasions anchored the determinism that he found in Faulkner's narrative in Greek tragedy. As in Malraux, *Sanctuary* reminded Lundkvist in its formal construction of "a detective novel, but the key to the development is less of a surface phenomenon than a psychological one" ("en detektivroman, men händelsenyckeln är mindre av yttre art än av psykologisk") (Lundkvist 1939b, p. 132).



Returning for a moment to the introduction of this article and my general remarks, it should be emphasized that a basic feature of Faulkner's experimental novels is the identification of form with content. Content lies in the form. What is told is no doubt important, but most important is how it is told. If Faulkner's style seems complicated, it is because what he is trying to say is just as complicated. Strictly speaking, it is this inseparability and weaving together of form and content that much of Swedish Faulkner criticism circles around and tries to address. The reactions to *Sanctuary* are cases in point. The reviewers and critics use a critical language that is interspersed with generic comparisons—film, montage, camera positions, tragedy, drama, scenes—to capture the experimental form of the novel. Its content is often evaluated and sometimes rejected on moral and ethical grounds. A particular problem from the point of view of reception history is the critics' handling of "the author's" presence or absence in the novel. Objectivity, distance, and indifference are critical concepts that are used by Faulkner critics and reviewers in order to come to terms with what literary theory decades later referred to as the tradition of the "exit author" in the modern novel (Booth 1961, part III). From a moralizing standpoint, some reviewers (Selander, Österling, and Söderhjelm) criticized the lack of moral clarity from "the author" with regard to the violent, gruesome, and harsh world that his novels depict. On the other hand, a critic like Knut Jaensson detected a moral pride in Faulkner's objectivity and unwillingness to come forward and negotiate with the reader. As I will show, the issue of 'Faulkner's stance' vis-à-vis the narrated world becomes acute in the critical reception of *Light in August*.

### 3. Narrative Technique versus Ideology: The Reception of the Swedish Translation of *Light in August* (1944)

As we have seen, Faulkner first entered the Swedish cultural scene at the beginning of the 1930s, and his presence in Swedish letters gradually increased during the decade through introductory articles and essays. But it is not until the middle of the 1940s that one can speak of a breakthrough, when *Light in August* was the first novel translated into Swedish (by the poet Erik Lindegren), and was given considerable attention by critics and reviewers. Lindegren was engaged in translating *Light in August* already in 1937, although it was not published until 1944 (Lysell 1983, p. 37). The novel was highly praised as a modernist masterwork, but it was also criticized for what some critics perceived to be its ideological obscurity and lack of clarity in moral questions. It generated a heated debate about ideology and aesthetics in literature.

In his autobiography from 1966, Artur Lundkvist wrote that Erik Lindegren, an influential critic and seminal modernist poet during the 1940s, on his own initiative and out of pure pleasure, made a translation of Faulkner's *Light in August*, feeling a kinship with the desperate tone of the book. According to Lundkvist, Lindegren and himself at the time found common ground in passionate discussions of Faulkner's early masterpieces *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*<sup>1</sup> (Lundkvist 1966, p. 147).

When Erik Lindegren's translation of *Light in August* appeared in 1944, it was generally regarded as an important literary event by leading reviewers and critics. Two main aspects of Faulkner's art caught critics' attention: his narrative technique and the ideology of cruelty and violence that was perceived to permeate the entire novel. The assessment of this ideological aspect became a touchstone for many critics. It obviously left no one indifferent, and encouraged a heated ideological discussion among critics (Jansson 1998, pp. 110–24). The underlying questions seemed to be: what kind of worldview does this novel express, and how should it be evaluated?

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<sup>1</sup> In 1943, Lindegren published an article on *As I Lay Dying* naming "the grotesque" ("grotesken") as the characteristic feature of the novel. He situated *As I Lay Dying* in a long tradition with its roots in ancient folkloristic expressions comparing it to "an ecstatic hot ensemble, a medieval death dance" ("en extatisk hotensemble, en medeltida dödsdans") (Lindegren 1943, p. 580).

From the general point of view of reception theory, it could be argued that the nature of the norm-breaking and provocative aspects of *Light in August* were concretized via literary reviews and criticism. The literary text appeared as a challenge, provocation, and question to which the critical reaction provided an answer. The critical texts and reviews themselves are reader reactions and evaluative products of a certain historical context that is determined by its “horizon of expectations”, the criteria which readers use to judge literary texts in any given period. As Hans Robert Jauss emphasized, each age interprets and reinterprets literature in the light of its own knowledge and experience, its own cultural environment. The literary value and artistic character of a work are measured according to the “aesthetic distance”, the degree to which a work departs from the horizon of expectations of its readers (Jauss 1982, p. 25). A closer look at Swedish criticism enables us to take stock of this distance.

In the leading conservative daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, the critic Sten Selander, who previously had been highly critical of *Sanctuary* on moral grounds, considered *Light in August* a masterpiece with regard to its narrative technique, but claimed that the writer hid behind “an ice cold, unemotional formal objectivity” (“en iskall, känslolöst refererande objektivitet”) (Selander 1944). The reviewer finds no empathy from “Faulkner” for the degraded “negro” characters in the novel; instead, there is only contempt or an indifferent disgust. Faulkner’s novel is regarded by the critic as a falsification of reality in that it only portrays man’s animalistic side. Writing has ethical and social aspects, Selander argued, and should not be limited to its aesthetic domain, in which case it risks being reduced to an empty and meaningless, however brilliant, display of form. He urges that Faulkner’s worldview must not be taken as the last and unchallenged word on human life and existence, since “looking deeply, the difference between this worldview and the one dominating SS and Gestapo is non-existent” (“skillnaden mellan denna världssyn och den som behärskar SS och Gestapo är djupare sett ingen”).

The left-wing critic and academic Stig Ahlgren, who in *Afton-Tidningen* was very appreciative of the novel, also discussed the relationship between ideology and narrative technique. He emphasized the determinism that governs the fate of the protagonist Christmas. Faulkner has “frozen his indignation to ice” (“frusit sin indignation till is”) (Ahlgren 1944) and relates with an “absolute lack of compassion” (“absolut brist på medkänsla”) the kind but awkward and failed attempts to gain Christmas’s trust. Faulkner has staked out an absolutely straight path for Christmas, from his birth in agony to the murder that crowns his tragic life. Ahlgren emphasized that Faulkner’s explanation for this tragic destiny does not lie in any notion of “elementary racial separation” (“elementär rasklyvnad”) of the kind that permeates certain obscure theories to be found in the American South. Instead, he stressed the universality in this tragic destiny and sees it as an image of man on his unavoidable path to new defeats between the wars.

Like many other critics, the literary historian and left-wing critic Axel Strindberg in *Arbetet* praised Faulkner’s narrative technique and the complicated formal innovations that radically broke with a previous, chronologically straight and simple way of narrating. He characterized *Light in August* as “a scenic novel set in the present” (“en scenroman i presens”) (Strindberg 1944) as opposed to an older type of novel using the past tense and evenly sweeping over decades in its narrative flow. In order to elucidate and analyze the problem of good and evil, Faulkner uses the racial conflict, but the critic senses that Faulkner has got stuck somewhere in the argumentative chain of racial prejudices, perverse sexuality, and sadistic puritanism. Indeed, Faulkner does not react against the brutality, but still has a tendency to regard it as self-evident, Strindberg objects. He is not opposed to Faulkner’s dark and pessimistic world view as such, but claims that he is “emotionally unclear on a very vital issue: the question of violence” (“känslomässigt oklar i en mycket vital angelägenhet: i fråga om våldet”).

The theme of violence is again brought up by Anna Lenah Elgström, the only female critic to review the novel, in a review significantly enough entitled “Literary fascism?” (“Litterär fascism?”) in *Morgon-Tidningen*. Faulkner’s writing is said to represent man’s instinctual drive, the darker side of life. As Elgström saw it, the literary and ideological background to Faulkner’s novel is to be found in

the amoral aggressiveness that is characteristic of Italian futurism and subsequently incorporated into the political program of the fascist revolt. Another ideological strand that she reckoned with is the Nazi mystique of blood and race. The critic claimed that Faulkner seems to emphasize the aesthetic aspect of this ideological complex, and completely relieves his prose of emotions and affects and in a pale light renders the slightest nuances of visual reality in an absolutely new and fascinating way. Faulkner represents “the cold-hearted primitivism” (“den kallhjärtade primitivismen”) (Elgström 1944) within modern literature, showing a tendency to an aesthetic mechanism that treats the characters as marionettes. He has obviously gained a lot of followers and admirers among young Swedish writers, but there is, according to Elgström, a danger in following a literary trend characterized not only by an “aestheticizing primitivism, but also by a cult of instinct and death” (“estetiserande primitivism men också av drifts- och döds Kult”). In her moralistic message, the critic claimed that in a time ravaged by war, there are fundamental human values that must be safeguarded and defended. Faulkner is obviously not to be counted among its defenders.

Per Olov Zennström reviewed the novel in the communist daily newspaper *Ny Dag*. In opposition both to ardent admirers of a literary style that is supposed to reveal the truth about the world and those that are equally fascinated and appalled by Faulkner’s worldview, Zennström found it necessary with a “sociological anchoring” (“sociologisk förankring”) (Zennström 1944) of Faulkner’s writing. Zennström rejected what he perceived to be Faulkner’s pessimistic worldview. The novel plays out against a largely “deformed image of social reality” (“vanställda bild av den sociala verkligheten”). It bears witness to a “parasitic, hostile attitude to life and development” (“en parasitär, livsoduglig och utvecklingsfientlig åskådning”). As with other reviewers, he held Faulkner accountable for the disquieting mentality the literary characters are said to represent. According to Zennström’s ideology critique, literary value can be judged with regard to its hypothetical consequences, that which he sees as its objective effects. Valuable literature conveys an edifying influence on the reader, which Faulkner’s novel falls short of doing. Consequently, it is the Marxist demand for intentionality that underlies the critic’s argument.

Jöran Mjöberg is a reviewer who in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten* (Mjöberg 1944) explicitly took issue with those who criticized Faulkner’s alleged tendency towards violence and cruelty and drew parallels to the mentality of contemporary oppressors and their inclination toward violence. Indeed, this is an absurd argument, since Faulkner constantly demonstrates the evil consequences of man’s actions. It is “the artistic shape and form, not the tendency for good or evil that should determine the assessment of a writer” (“det är den konstnärliga gestaltningen, inte tendensen till gott eller ont som måste avgöra omdömet om en diktare”), Mjöberg argued.

The editor of *Göteborgs Morgonpost*, the conservative critic Sanfrid Neander-Nilsson, argued that since Joe Christmas’ split consciousness derives from “a drop of negro blood” (“en droppe negerblod”) (Neander-Nilsson 1944) running in his veins, and since this causes his tragic destiny, Faulkner displays a thinking equivalent to the racial theories of the Nazi regime, even though he himself is unaware of it. *Light in August* is seen as an example of cold and heartless “hardboiled modern literature” (“den hårdkokta moderna litteraturen”), governed by a biblical and slave-driven moral puritanism.

The modernist poet and critic Karl Vennberg played a decisive role in the introduction of international modernism, in particular Franz Kafka, in Sweden during the 1940s. In the magazine *Vi*, he claimed that the core of Faulkner’s novel lay in a fatalism that was reminiscent of the destiny-ridden ancient tragedies. The characters in Faulkner are obsessed with either good or evil as inexplicable and impersonal drives. It would be, he argued, a simplification to regard Christmas’s crime as simply socially determined and with race or environment as conclusive explanations. Instead, Christmas himself seeks severity and punishment and is a criminal who “lives exclusively in his guilt, and for that reason fears compassion like a death threat” (“som inte lever annat än i sin skuld och därför fruktar medlidandet som ett dödshot”), and therefore, his crime simply becomes “a symptom, guilt’s defiant searching out of its punishment” (“ett symptom, ett skuldens trotsiga uppsökande av sitt



straff") (Vennberg 1944, p. 14). Vennberg argued that Christmas's experience of life's tragic dualism is so absolute that it requires a purely metaphysical explanation.

The comparison with Greek tragedy also crops up in Gunnar Ekelöf's review of the translation in the magazine *BLM*. As we have seen, Ekelöf was an ardent reader of Faulkner, and had played an important role in the history of Faulkner reception with the translation in 1935 of André Malraux's foreword to the French translation of *Sanctuary* in the magazine *Karavan*.

Ekelöf in 1944 remarked that Faulkner obviously has the power to arouse indignation and deep anxiety. In the Swedish debate about *Light in August*, many critics tried to discredit Faulkner's greatness as a writer, Ekelöf observed, and he conceded that it is not always easy to get a clear grip of the characters and their function in the course of events. He relied on Malraux's comparison with the classic Greek tragedy and claimed that Faulkner, without explicitly saying so, sometimes speaks in the name of the choir, and sometimes in the name of the characters. This in turn forced the reader to question his or her own reaction to the characters and their actions, since Faulkner's narrative method leaves the reader free to either grin at or agonize over the violence and atrocities. Ekelöf claimed that this indeed is a more formidable challenge than if the writer had drawn out the consequences and indicated for the reader the 'proper' reaction. Faulkner's strength is his "tragic objectivity—in the classical sense" ("hans tragiska objektivitet—i antik mening"). He never steps forward as "the writer (i.e., the explicator)" ("som författaren (dvs. förklararen)") (Ekelöf 1944, p. 909), but rather stages a tragedy.

Ekelöf's reasoning stands out as remarkably clear-sighted for its time when it comes to the crucial question of the writer's authority and presence in the text. It actually anticipated the problem of impersonal narration and its implicit effect on the reader. The shifting point of view and the uncertainty about the author's authority led Ekelöf to raise the question of the narrative voice and its potential status. Problems like these were later to form the nucleus within the so-called exit author tradition in modern narratology. What Ekelöf perceived as Faulkner's objective narrative raised the questions: who speaks, and where is 'the author' within this spectrum of different voices in the novel? It is according to him the narrative uncertainty in itself that is the basic characteristic of Faulkner's novel. Moreover, Ekelöf from this standpoint criticized the prevalent misinterpretations of the novel by other reviewers. If 'the author' is held responsible for celebrating violence and heralding a contemptuous ideology, it is nothing less than a gross simplification. Since Faulkner does not come forth as author explaining to the reader how to relate to the 'objective' narrative, the reader is presented with particular difficulties. Ekelöf maintained that the challenges are the shifting perspectives and the importance that the reader assigns to them when interpreting the contents of the narrative. The basic problem underlying Ekelöf's argument concerns the lack of authorial authority and a final guarantor of meaning.

To summarize, the ideological and moralizing readings of *Light in August* focus on the racial problem and the inclination for violence and death permeating the course of action. Some reviewers interpret the text as implicitly representing a racial biology reminiscent of Nazi ideology. Others emphasize that Faulkner's sophisticated narrative technique leaves it to the readers to find the moral and ideological implications of the story and in the process to scrutinize their own moral positions and worldviews. Critics like Mjöberg, Vennberg, and Ekelöf do not demand that 'the author' should come forth, give directions, and take a stand in the moral question of good and evil. It should also be noted that although all of the critics discussed Faulkner's innovative technique to a lesser or greater extent, none of them actually termed it 'modernist' or 'modernism'.

#### 4. Critical 'Misreadings', Meaning, and Significance

To further elucidate the hermeneutical problems and misconceptions in the critical debate 1944, I find support in some observations by the Faulkner commentator François Pitavy on the novel itself. Faulkner leaves Joe Christmas's origins in doubt, which means that the racial problem becomes an internal one. The novel is deliberately unclear on a central issue with relevance for the critical discussion among Swedish reviewers and critics: Christmas's origin. He does not know who he is, but

claims he is not a “nigger”, and is then told: “You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you wont never know [ . . . ].” (Faulkner [1932] 1978, p. 288) (“Du är värre. Du vet inte vad du är. Och du får aldrig veta det. Du får leva och dö utan att veta det.”) (Faulkner 1944, p. 294). It is this uncertainty that drives Joe into his violent search for an identity and subsequent isolation. Therefore, Pitavy argued, his tragic destiny becomes a perfect illustration of the devastating effects of racism in man’s consciousness, since he in fact is black only in his own mind, and he comes to believe this because it is what others believe of him (Pitavy 1973, p. 95). Although Christmas never really knows whether or not he has “negro blood”, as soon as Brown declares that he has, nobody in Jefferson doubts it, not even Hightower at first. Once they believe it, he becomes a “negro” in their eyes, and they consequently treat him as such. The community needs a scapegoat, and that this should be a “negro” is reassuring: the ritual punishment purges the white community after the threat to its integrity and confirms the code for and by which it lives (Pitavy 1973, p. 94). Thus, in showing how the anguish torturing Christmas is above all the poisoning of his consciousness caused by the idea that other people have of him, Faulkner exposes the very essence of racism in a radical way, and without any sentimentality or idealism. In this way, Faulkner effectively demonstrates that the biological traits are secondary and literally superficial (Pitavy 1973, p. 95). This is where several Swedish critics go wrong in their assessment of Faulkner’s so-called heartlessness, his ice-cold indifference, and his lack of emotion.

I would furthermore suggest that the critical misconceptions of the moral and ideological aspects of the novel could be clarified with regard to the distinction between meaning and significance. The reviewers present critical interpretations of the literary text that are concretizations of their readings in the specific historical situation in which the readers, reviewers, and critics find themselves.

E.D. Hirsch used the term “meaning” for the verbal meaning of the text, and “significance” for the textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another era or time, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values. According to Hirsch, “significance” is meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself (Hirsch 1976, p. 2f). When we are dealing with the interpretations, moralizing and ideological value judgments in Swedish criticism, they should be seen as hermeneutical applications of the text’s “significance”. Hirsch further clarified that “meaning” is “meaning-for-an-interpreter”, and this could equal the author’s original meaning, or it could be anachronistic. According to Hirsch, meaning in this sense comprises constructions where authorial will is partly or totally disregarded. He maintained that the important feature of meaning as distinct from significance is that meaning is the determinate representation for an interpreter. An interpreted text is always taken to represent something, but the something can always be related to something else. Thus, significance is “meaning-as-related-to-something-else”. Consequently, Hirsch regarded meaning as a principle of stability in an interpretation, while significance comprises a principle of change. Therefore, he continued, meaning-for-an-interpreter can stay the same, although the meaningfulness or significance of that meaning can change with the changing contexts in which that meaning is applied (Hirsch 1976, p. 79f). He argued that the hermeneutical debate over original and anachronistic meaning fails to distinguish between meaning and significance in that two different concepts are given the same name (Hirsch 1976, p. 85).

Referring to Hirsch in this modest context is not meant to open up a wide-ranging discussion of hermeneutics in general, but rather to elucidate the hermeneutical aspects of the Swedish interpretations of Faulkner. Interpretative debates often result in disagreements over the proper emphasis of an interpretation, Hirsch declared. Whether it is better to explain the original meaning or to try and bring out some aspect of the significance of that meaning is a question for the interpreter himself or for present-day readers (Hirsch 1976, p. 88). For ethical reasons, Hirsch argued that unless there is a powerful overriding value in disregarding an author’s intention—original meaning—the professional interpreter should not disregard it (Hirsch 1976, p. 90). In ethical terms then, he concluded that original meaning is the “best” meaning (Hirsch 1976, p. 92).

I find Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance directly applicable to the interpretative activities among Swedish reviewers in 1944. Thus, when some critics suggested that *Light in August* is an expression of a racial biology reminiscent of or equivalent to the Nazi ideology, that is from a hermeneutical point of view to be regarded as an interpretation of the text's significance, i.e., the text is related to something other than its original context, in this case a hideous ideology and value system brought to the fore by historical circumstances at the time of the Swedish reception. This application of the text's significance is furthermore directly opposed to the text's verbal meaning, since the text in itself, as we noted, does not represent an ideology that is supportive of racial biology; rather it deconstructs the horrible effects of it. In fact, since the novel in itself is deliberately unclear on a central issue—Joe Christmas's origins—it could be argued that the novel invalidates such an interpretation and refutes its critics. But in principle, it is of course a perfectly legitimate and self-evident activity of literary reviewers at any given point in time to present interpretations of the *significance* of literary works within a current historical context, even though these interpretations do not have to coincide with the text's verbal *meaning*. This hermeneutical distinction also of course relates to the incontrovertible historical fact that Faulkner's novel, which originally appeared in 1932, predates the outbreak of WWII by seven years. The assertions of some Swedish critics in 1944 that the novel recalls a Nazi-esque ideology is obviously inaccurate from a strictly chronological point of view. The distinction between meaning and significance elucidates the hermeneutical implications inherent in this chronological and historical anomaly.

## 5. The Foreword as Paratext

*Light in August* was translated by Erik Lindegren in 1944. However, the preface was not written by him, but rather by Anders Österling, a poet and critic from an older generation, who had already written about Faulkner in 1933. Österling was not averse to modernist literature and gradually came to accept and appreciate modernist literature and promote some of its most prominent international representatives. At the time of writing the preface for the translation of Faulkner's novel, he was a well-known and respected poet and critic of a moderately traditional standing, and also the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, the institution that was to award Faulkner the Nobel Prize for literature six years later.

Österling's short preface, which is two and a half pages long, is curiously indecisive in its appreciation of Faulkner. In this, it echoes Österling's sentiments and indeed some of his wordings from his Faulkner article in 1933. The preface writer begins by noticing that Faulkner is the most discussed American writer at the present time. He found the first impression of Faulkner's circle of motifs undoubtedly "repulsive" ("frånstötande") (Österling 1944, p. 5), and the reader is wise to arm himself with a great deal of courage to be able to confront this side of American mentality. In a short biographical sketch Österling, like many other critics, passed on the biographical myth that Faulkner crashed his airplane and suffered a foot injury while on military service in World War I. The war trauma damaged him psychologically and led to a kind of "cold observing indifference" and "cruel callousness" ("kallt observerande likgiltighet"; "grym förhärdelse") (Österling 1944, p. 5) regarding terror and death. Therefore, Faulkner was said to be able to depict any scene whatsoever without being revolted by its gruesomeness. Österling related some of the main events of the novel's "story" ("berättelsen") and claimed that Faulkner works with a complicated "plot" ("komposition") (Österling 1944, p. 6). He uses a fragmented chronology and works backward in time from Christmas's murder of Joanna Burden, which is presented early in the novelistic plot, to Christmas's manic state of mind before the murder and then further into his past. Österling did not have recourse to theoretical concepts such as 'story' and 'plot', but to characterize Faulkner's narrative technique, he distinguished between two narrative levels that could in fact be labelled with these terms. He then presented a psychological interpretation of Joe Christmas's character that Faulkner is said to portray with brilliant intuition. Christmas personifies the "depravity" and "degeneration" ("urartning"; "degeneration") (Österling 1944, p. 6) of the southern environment with which Faulkner has a love-hate relationship.

When Joanna Burden takes pity on Christmas, it only increases his desperation, which, in Österling's interpretation, leads to his murdering her "to avoid crying over himself" ("slippa gråta över sig själv") (Österling 1944, p. 6). Without being able to "think or feel" ("tänka eller känna"), Christmas develops an increased vitality that seems to have fascinated Faulkner, the critic presumed. Using a figurative wording, he described Christmas's sneaking movements "like a feline from the jungle" ("som ett kattdjur från djungeln") (Österling 1944, p. 6), and sees in him man as predator deprived of all humane characteristics. Like many other Faulkner commentators, Österling pointed to the author's reluctance to intervene and explained: "The narrator does not draw any conclusions and does not present any philosophy; his only principle seems to be to avoid sentimentality at all costs." ("Berättaren drager inga slutsatser och lägger inte fram någon filosofi; hans enda princip synes vara den att för allt i världen undvika sentimentalitet.") (Österling 1944, p. 6f). His final judgement is split. Österling found a remarkable narrative technique and a narrative temperament of unquestionable intensity, but also a rather gruesome worldview. Thus, he maintained his reservations.

The preface to the second Swedish translation of a Faulkner novel—*De obesegrade* (1948, *The Unvanquished*)—was signed by Thorsten Jonsson, and the translation was by Håkan Norlén. The year he wrote the preface, Jonsson was appointed to the post of head of the cultural section of *Dagens Nyheter*. During World War II, he had been stationed in New York as the journal's American correspondent. He was something of a connoisseur of modern American prose, and in his book *Six amerikaner* (1942, *Six Americans*), he devoted a whole chapter to Faulkner. Therefore, Jonsson's knowledge of American culture and literature makes him a natural choice as preface writer to the translation of Faulkner's novel, not leastwise since he personally had met and interviewed Faulkner at his farm outside Oxford, Mississippi, for an extensive article in *Dagens Nyheter* in 1946. Jonsson's article gives a picture of the surroundings and milieu, characterizes Faulkner's demeanour, reports his—mostly critical—opinions of his American colleagues and his—occasionally self-critical—views of his own works. Jonsson deplored that Faulkner as a "difficult" ("svår") writer obviously could not afford to live from his writing: he received no federal grants, and in order to keep his farm going and be able to pay his employees, he had to resort to manuscript work in Hollywood. Jonsson found it deplorable that "one of the country's best prose writers and one of its most sensitive artistic consciences should be forced to waste himself on suchlike" ("en av landets bästa prosaister och ett av dess ömtåligaste konstnärliga samveten ska tvingas kasta bort sig på dylikt") (Jonsson 1946).

Jonsson's preface to *De obesegrade* is four and a half pages long, which is roughly the usual length of a preface of this kind. The preface writer began by observing that Faulkner was one of the best storytellers in contemporary literature, and also one of the most distinctive. In this lies the motivation for his preface: even the most conscientious reader might benefit from some explanatory remarks. Jonsson went on to place *The Unvanquished* in Faulkner's oeuvre. He was a writer who was deeply immersed in the history and traditions of the American South, with its grim and tragic memories from the civil war. Faulkner was said to be obsessed with these memories of a carefree and patriarchal past that is both attractive and dark. The slave system imprinted on him a sense of tragic guilt, and the defeat in the civil war, with its horrible bloodshed and complete impoverishment of the southern states, was for Faulkner a focal point in the insoluble conflict of a society that was unwilling to give up its appalling slave system for reasons of material benefits. Faulkner and the society that he depicted was since then borne down under a sense of inevitable defeat. From this general background, Jonsson tried to make Faulkner relevant for another place and time: post-war Europe. In a hermeneutical application, he argued that the European experience of a defeat caused by insoluble political conflicts is parallel to Faulkner's experience of the fate of the American South, even though there are other considerable cultural differences. The preface writer continued to emphasize that *The Unvanquished* treated the American civil war more directly than Faulkner's previous novels. Here, Faulkner is said to indulge in storytelling for its own sake. The biographical approach is present in that the critic related some of the characters in the novel to Faulkner himself and his family members. More importantly, with regard to Faulkner's narrative method, the preface writer explained that everything that Faulkner relates

“is found within himself like a vision” (“finns inom honom själv som en vision”) (Jonsson 1948a, p. 7). Faulkner does not add anything, and goes directly into his dream world, presenting its content with a richness of detail that practically overwhelms and disorients the reader. Here, as always, Faulkner’s writing carries a remarkable suggestive power in its rendering of the violent and grotesque actions to which the characters are subjected. What distinguishes *The Unvanquished* from Faulkner’s other novels, Jonsson explained, is that Faulkner is unusually accommodating towards his reader, partly through the adventure plot pertaining to a certain type of war story, and partly through his abundant use of drastic comedy. There is an element of *Huckleberry Finn* in Faulkner’s novel, Jonsson contended. He predicted that this quality of the novel might attract his new readers to further engagement with his earlier work.

Österling and Jonsson thus contributed two forewords to the Faulkner reception. As a text type that is principally different from, for example, reviews and book chapters, it deserves further attention. That being the case, what type of text, then, is the preface, and how does it function? According to Gérard Genette, a preface is constituted by paratextuality, liminal devices, and conventions that mediate the book to the reader. Paratexts surround, extend, and present the text and ensure its presence in the world, as well as its reception and consumption in the form of a book (Genette 1997, p. 1). The basic function of the paratext in all of its forms is, Genette declared, its auxiliary nature. It is an instance of mediation. Its sole purpose of existence is its dedication to the service of something other than itself, which is the text. The paratext as such is always subservient to its text (Genette 1997, p. 12).

A further noteworthy fact in our case is that the preface writers Österling and Jonsson were not identical to the Swedish translators of the Faulkner novels. However, they are prominent authors and critics whose names carried considerable cultural weight in Swedish literary circles at that time. In Genette’s typology of prefaces, we are in these cases dealing with the allographic preface, which is characterized by a separation between the sender of the text—the author—and the sender of the preface, i.e., the preface writer (Genette 1997, p. 263). The addressee is of course the potential reader of the novel in question. One important consideration is the temporal factor, since although allographic prefaces may of course be published along with first editions, the allographic prefaces for the Swedish translations are all published later than the original texts (Genette 1997, p. 264). The basic but somewhat problematic condition for the writers of prefaces is that they offer commentaries on texts that are as yet unfamiliar to the readers (Genette 1997, p. 237). This condition is likely to predispose and circumscribe the preface in certain ways, for example when it comes to revealing the details of the plot in order to not spoil the reader’s experience. On the other hand, this basic preface condition also comprises expectations as to what could be included in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the novel. For example, the laying out of the novel’s most important themes and motifs, a characterization of the narrative technique, a placing of the novel in the author’s entire *oeuvre*. From this point of view, Österling’s preface to *Ljus i augusti* with its indecisiveness and objection to Faulkner’s gruesome worldview—he literally recommended that the potential reader steel himself against the mentality in question—stands out as something of an anomaly. With regard to the preface as mediator between text and reader, Österling’s strong repudiation of Faulkner’s worldview as “repulsive” (“frånstötande”), could of course, for just that reason, have the effect of attracting readers to the book. Jonsson’s preface to *De obesegrade* appears as more conventional in tone as well as content. In our context, Genette’s remark about André Malraux’s preface to the French translation of Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* is particularly relevant. In the French “literary stock market”, according to Genette, Faulkner’s intellectual price for some time owed a great deal to Malraux’s well-known phrase about “the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story” (Genette 1997, p. 270). As I have shown, the same could be said about Faulkner’s stock on the Swedish literary market in the 1930s and 1940s, where literary critics and reviewers often found critical support in Malraux’s preface, and indeed, the very translation of it bears witness to its importance in the Swedish context.



## 6. Faulkner's 'War Wound' as Biographeme and Critical Cliché

The dichotomy and interrelationship of life and art, biography and critical interpretation, is ubiquitous in Faulkner's fictional writing and in the critical writings about his life and work. The Faulkner scholar James G. Watson elucidated the biographical and fictional intricacies with the concepts "self-presentation" and "performance": "Self-presentation and performance are manifested in Faulkner's life in his regularly putting himself forward in the guises and disguises of a moment—gentleman dandy, soldier, and farmer are familiar ones—as well as his art, where these and other personae are separate but interlocking elements of fictional representation. *Self-presentation* in fiction is a narrative strategy that capitalizes upon the experience of the man and author, including, of course, the performative experience; *performance* is a heightened mode of written expression, a means by which the self and all other selves, situations, and events of a book can be represented. If self-presentation is a *record* of a life and time, performance is the *act* of its recording." (Watson 2000, p. 5). Watson's useful distinctions are here brought to the fore with regard to Faulkner's famous and infamous 'war wound', which is a self-presentation that he staged with great conscientiousness the years after World War I.

Panthea Reid laid out the basic biographical background to Faulkner's alleged 'war wound' (Reid 1998, pp. 597–615). He volunteered for flight training, but was rejected by the Army's Air Corps due to his height: he was just over five feet tall, and thus too short. Finally, due to lower standards of education and physique, Faulkner was accepted in the Canadian branch of the Royal Air Force and trained in Toronto from mid-summer 1918. When the armistice arrived on 11 November, he was one week short of completing ground school. When Faulkner arrived home, according to Reid, probably without ever having flown and most certainly not piloted a plane, he was wearing a second lieutenant's uniform with "wings" indicating he had completed pilot training and a cap signifying overseas service. Furthermore, he leaned on a cane and was walking with a limp. Subsequently, the limp was transformed into a skull wound. Faulkner assumed the role of military hero, and even had himself photographed wearing different combinations of his military garb (Watson 2000, pp. 18–37). Faulkner claimed to have crashed in France and indeed presented himself and lived as a war hero. His act was of course, Reid argued, a way to cover up his sense of failure and loss from disgrace to heroism: a thematic cluster that was eventually to be transformed in his fiction.

With regard to the Swedish reception history, one is struck by the recurring references to Faulkner's participation in WWI, the war wound that he is said to have suffered, and the formative importance that it is deemed to have had on his life and writing. This biographical circumstance (pseudo-biographical) obviously had an extraordinary suggestive force and explanatory power in Swedish criticism where it was constantly repeated and gradually reached the status of a stock reference. I propose to treat this circumstance as a *biographeme* in Roland Barthes's sense. Barthes imagined how the life of a writer could be reduced "to a few details, to a few tastes, to a few inflections, let us say: 'biographemes', whose distinction and nobility could travel outside any destiny and come to touch [ . . . ] some future body" (Barthes [1971] 1976, p. 9). The biographeme could be understood as the minimal unit of biographical discourse (Gallop 2011, p. 44ff). It is these biographical details and inflections, this biographeme, that like a magnet catches the critics' attention. The biographeme is reiterated again and again in the critical material from 1932 to 1950, as we have already noted, and is interpreted in the same psychologizing way: Faulkner's war trauma is a basic cause for his particular outlook on life and the narrative temperament that is expressed in his novels. My aim is here to underline how this biographeme is consolidated when it is furthered in two different Swedish book chapters on Faulkner at the beginning of the 1940s and furthermore to point to one of its American sources.

Already in *Ikarus' flykt* (1939, The Flight of Icarus) in his Faulkner chapter, Lundkvist highlighted Faulkner's alleged participation in WWI: "He was present at the Western front; he is supposed to have crashed with his plane a couple of times. And he returned as a defeated man [ . . . ]." ("Han var med vid västfronten; och han lär ha störtat med sin maskin ett par gånger. Och han återvände som en slagen man [ . . . ].") (Lundkvist 1939b, p. 116). Two years later, Lundkvist published a book-length

introduction of modern American literature—*Diktare och avslöjare i Amerikas moderna litteratur* (1942, Writers and debunkers in modern American literature)—which also contained a short chapter on Faulkner where Lundkvist presented Faulkner as a major modern American novelist for the Swedish readership. With regard to its contents, the rather short Faulkner chapter in this book did not add significantly new insights compared to the much longer chapter on Faulkner in *Ikarus' flykt* two years earlier. However, it should be noted that Lundkvist updates his presentation, adding descriptive paragraphs on *The Wild Palms* (1939) and *The Hamlet* (1940). On the whole, this chapter is a touched up and more easily accessible presentation of Faulkner's writing than the previous one, which was obviously aimed at a wider readership, since it was published by "Kooperativa förbundets bokförlag" (The Publishing House of the Cooperative Association). This readership was now again informed about Faulkner's participation in WWI, where he crashed and "suffered a hip injury" ("ådrog sig en höftskada") (Lundkvist 1942, p. 160) that deeply affected Faulkner and turned his existence into a "physical and psychological struggle against the pain" ("fysiskt och psykiskt en kamp mot smärtan") (Lundkvist 1942, p. 160). Lundkvist in other words detected a trauma that was channeled into Faulkner's writing, or 'sublimated' to apply a psychological term that Lundkvist did not use, but with which he undoubtedly was familiar.

Lundkvist furthermore dwelled on Faulkner's southern cultural heritage and his radical renewal of this tradition in his writing. He particularly praised his accomplished style and narrative technique with its displacements and inversions. Faulkner's literary universe is characterized as a strangely closed world, whose laws are dictated by a deterministic pattern. It was as if his characters were sleepwalking on their paths towards defeat, crime, and annihilation. Faulkner's characters are said to show "the puritan in rebellion against himself" ("puritanen i uppror mot sig själv") (Lundkvist 1942, p. 162), devastated by irreconcilable conflicts between desire and denial, the world and the ideal. However, it should be observed that Lundkvist's highly appreciative characterization of Faulkner's writing ends with a cautionary note. The danger is that Faulkner's inclination for the tragic leads to "an exaggerated melodramatic romanticism and an all too mechanical determinism" ("en överdriven melodramatisk romantik och en alltför mekanisk determinism") (Lundkvist 1942, p. 170). On occasion, he has a tendency to end up in isolated fantasy worlds that are artificial and without anchorage in reality. However, Lundkvist predicted that Faulkner in his continuous renewal would even more successfully amalgamate fantasy and reality, realism and symbolism, the tragic and the comic.

The same year as Lundkvist published his book on modern American writing, the critic Thorsten Jonsson released his book *Sex amerikaner* (1942, Six Americans), which contained one chapter on William Faulkner. Jonsson had begun reading Faulkner with great enthusiasm as early as 1937 (Erixon 1994, p. 37f) and was, as we previously noted, somewhat of an authority on modern American prose writing, having translated Hemingway and Steinbeck into Swedish. Indeed, Jonsson's own prose writing displayed influences by the American 'hardboiled' style. In *Sex amerikaner*, Jonsson to a large extent paraphrased the intrigues and thematic contents of Faulkner's major novels until *The Wild Palms* (1939). In a short epilogue to this chapter, he passed on the comparison between Faulkner and Poe and Dostoyevsky that André Malraux had introduced in his preface to *Sanctuary* (1933), which was translated into Swedish in 1935. Like Lundkvist, Jonsson reiterated the myth of Faulkner's traumatic experiences from his participation in WWI where he suffered a "complicated hip injury" "en besvärlig höftskada" (Jonsson 1942, pp. 42, 76), which was a physical torment that had followed him and was perceived in his writing, in "its peculiarly hard strung rhythm" ("den egendomligt anspända rytmen"). Jonsson thus treated Faulkner's war wound as a physical and emotional trauma that was sublimated through his creative activity into literature. This is an interpretation that Jonsson shared with the American scholar Joseph Warren Beach, to whom he referred.

In *American Fiction 1920–1940* (1941), Beach began his highly appreciative chapter on Faulkner's style and narrative technique, entitled "Virtuoso", with a reference to the *biographeme* in question. There is a certain quality that goes through all of Faulkner's writing that is hard to pin down exactly: "There is a kind of cold ferocity about all his writing, a strained intensity, which makes one think of

the painful state of nerves, the actual physical pain, which (according to an early sketch of Sherwood Anderson's) he used to carry with him without intermission as heritage of his flying in the First World War. It is as if whatever he does, whatever appearance he makes in the world of men, he must grit his teeth and dominate by [a] force of will pain which must otherwise make him soft, and that the personal suffering to which he will not bow was always filtering through into his general statements about human nature, giving to them a tone of suppressed rage." (Beach 1941, p. 147). On a psychological level, Beach regarded Faulkner's war experience as having caused a specific attitude and outlook on life. Furthermore, the physical and mental trauma was sublimated during the creative process and returned in Faulkner's writing as a certain outlook on human life: a "tone" or narrative temperament.

Beach, Lundkvist, and Jonsson all handled the Faulknerian *biographeme* in the same way, and they ascribed considerable weight to it. It became an empirical foundation for a biographical and psychologizing reading of Faulkner's fiction. The biographical (and pseudo-biographical) circumstance was used as an interpretative tool that was given considerable explanatory value. The constant repetition of it during the 1930s and 1940s gradually turned it into a critical cliché.

### 7. Towards the End of the 1940s: *Intruder in the Dust* and "the Negro Question"

By the end of the 1940s, the pre-Nobel Prize reception reached its peak. Between 1948–1950, four Faulkner novels were translated into Swedish and duly reviewed in the press: *De obesegrade* (*The Unvanquished*) by Håkan Norlén in 1948; *Medan jag låg och dog* (*As I Lay Dying*) by Mårten Edlund in 1948; *De vilda palmerna* (*The Wild Palms*) by Mårten Edlund in 1949; and *Inkräktare i stoftet* (*Intruder in the Dust*) by Thomas Warburton in 1950. Among Swedish Faulkner translators, Mårten Edlund was the most diligent, in total translating four novels up until 1952, including *Det allraheligaste* (*Sanctuary*) in 1951 and *Själamässa för en nunna* (*Requiem for a Nun*) in 1952. In an interview from 1954 Edlund, who was a prolific translator in general, explained that Faulkner was his favourite writer to translate: "the most difficult, the most resistant and stimulating" ("den svåraste, mest motståndsrika och stimulerande"), and he continued: "To translate a book by him equals six months of nut cracking. Curse and joy. Three pages a day can be a full workload." ("Att översätta en bok av honom är lika med ett halvt års nötknäpparsvit. Förbannelse och glädje. Tre sidor om dagen kan då vara en maximal arbetsprestation.") (Liffner 2013, p. 28). Edlund's painstaking work was rewarded in the sense that his two Faulkner translations before 1950 were highly praised by the critics and considered to capture Faulkner's distinctive style in a congenial way (Söderhjelm 1948; Nordberg 1948; Dickson 1948; Jonsson 1948b; Wahlund 1948; Borglund 1949; Selander 1949; Lundkvist 1949b; Brunius 1949; Carlson 1949).

Generally, Faulkner's novels were received mostly favourably in the Swedish press before the 1950s, in some cases with great acclaim, and regarded as accomplished works of art by a writer that is held to be one of the great modern novelists (Carlson 1948, 1949; Heyman 1948; Söderhjelm 1948; Nordberg 1948; Dickson 1948; Jonsson 1948b; Wahlund 1948; Borglund 1949; Selander 1949; Lundkvist 1949b; Brunius 1949). The only novel that stands out from a reception point of view is *Intruder in the Dust*, which was for political and ideological reasons. The story of Faulkner's reception history in Sweden is not complete without taking note of these critical objections.

The American edition of *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948 caused some Swedish reviewers to raise objections. Thorsten Jonsson in *Dagens Nyheter*, who previously on several occasions had praised Faulkner as one of the leading modern writers, was highly critical of Faulkner's new novel, mainly for political and ideological reasons. He argued that Faulkner used the story as a pretext "for preaching in the negro question and his own part of the country in a way a Southern senator of mediocre talent easily could have accomplished" ("för predikningar om negerfrågan och sin landsända som en medelbegåvad Sydstatssenator med lätthet skulle kunna åstadkomma") (Jonsson 1948c). The complicated tension between the North and the South that gives life to Faulkner's previous novels and enabled him to regard the tragic and grotesque pattern inherent in the South and at the same time forced him to identify with it, had in the new novel been replaced by an uncomplicated identification with the Southern states. It was, Jonsson continued, even more astonishing that Faulkner had circumvented

his strong and artistically inner conflicts to seek safety in a simple political standpoint. The critic contended that there were traces of a great writer in this novel, but on the whole, *Intruder in the Dust* with its incredibly complicated sentence structures and its simplified political message was not worth the effort.

Faulkner's most ardent admirer and staunch supporter in Swedish criticism, who did more than anyone to introduce and promote his writings during the first two decades of Faulkner reception, was Artur Lundkvist. In *Stockholms-Tidningen*, he noted that the American reception of *Intruder in the Dust* had been mixed. The novel cannot, he conceded, be regarded as one of Faulkner's most important, but it should not be considered a failure. Technically, Faulkner was said to pursue the rhetorical Southern tradition. His discourse was "highly written, consummately written" ("i högsta grad skriven, utstuderat skriven") (Lundkvist 1949a), but at the same time, it had a peculiar oral and improvised character: a stream of words flowing forth without any pauses or punctuation, filling the pages and with the odd break for a short dialogue. Lundkvist regarded this as the form that Faulkner had been heading towards for a long time. He admitted that it makes it more difficult, and at first might seem more eccentric than organic, but presumed that Faulkner here had found his real and true form. However, Lundkvist showed his scepticism to the political and ideological message in the novel. In doing this, he simplistically treated the lawyer Gavin Stevens with his long orations as the writer's "spokesperson" ("språkrör") and not as a fictive construct. Incidentally, Faulkner himself explained in an interview with Malcolm Cowley at the time that Stevens "was not speaking for the author, but for the best type of liberal Southerners; that is how they feel about the Negroes" (Polk 1978, p. 131). It is in Faulkner's suggested internal southern solution to "the negro question" ("negerfrågan") that Lundkvist detected traces of "southern fascism" ("sydstatsfascism") and also a certain naiveté with regard to its practical consequences. On the other hand, from a purely psychological point of view, Faulkner was presumed to be "on the right track" ("på rätt spår"). With regard to the central character in the novel, the formidable African American Lucas Beauchamp, Lundkvist noted "his dignity's ritual slowness" and considered him a "completely inscrutable person, surprisingly alive amidst all stylization" ("sin värdighets rituella långsamhet"; "en alldeles outgrundlig person, förvånande levande mitt i sin stilisering"). However, the critic did not enter into Beauchamp's decisive role and function in exposing the racial discourse permeating the minds of men and social life in the city of Jefferson.

Sten Selander, who was involved in the Swedish Faulkner reception from its early years in the beginning of the 1930s, in *Svenska Dagbladet* maintained that Faulkner was one of the most accomplished and purposeful writers in modern literature. His remarkable ability to capture the irrational and half-conscious that moves under the surface of the human psyche had not diminished in *Intruder in the Dust* in comparison with his previous novels. Like Lundkvist, Selander also briefly touched upon Lucas Beauchamp and underlined that Faulkner did not idealize: Beauchamp "is no Onkel Tom", and in all his eccentricity, he stood out as an "impressive figure" surrounded by a sort of "harsh comedy" ("imposant figur"; "bister komik"). However, Selander assumed that many Faulkner admirers would be disappointed by the new novel's combination of detective story and Sunday school preaching. As other critics, Selander took issue with the political aspect of the novel. It went without saying that Faulkner harboured no racial prejudices, according to the critic, but he found Faulkner's dealing with "the negro question" ("negerfrågan") (Selander 1949) less convincing. Faulkner's thesis that it was going to solve itself as long as it was left to the Southerners themselves to take care of it was hardly convincing: there were as yet no signs that this should be a workable way forward, according to the reviewer. However, the essential theme of the novel is the individual against the masses, and this is where Selander found a trace of the Sunday school story. Justice does not triumph quite so easily, he claimed. Nonetheless, what was beautifully strange and deeply interesting was Faulkner's demonstration that man—often driven by cowardice, egoism and animalistic desires—sometimes, in fact, can act in a decent way.



When the Swedish translation of *Intruder in the Dust* by Thomas Warburton appeared in 1950, Faulkner's proposed solution to "the negro question" ("negerfrågan") was once again dismissed in the press. In *Stockholms-Tidningen*, the young pro-modernist critic Bengt Holmqvist in no uncertain terms criticized the reasoning and the ideology behind it as "reactionary drivel" ("reaktionärt svammel") (Holmqvist 1950a), a modernised version of century-old, outdated sociological thinking. Faulkner touched upon the idea of some sort of "'true', 'higher' freedom" ("sann', 'högre' frihet"), and he reasoned, Holmqvist claimed, almost as if he were among the theorists from the era of the slavery. He found Faulkner the thinker, "the self-righteous Southern master" ("den egenrättfärdige sydstatspatronen"), deplorable, but Faulkner the author liberating. The critic was remarkably split in his appreciation of the novel. The young Chick Mallison's development as a human being, his relationship to his uncle Gavin Stevens, and his attainment of personal and social maturity was "a wonder of psychological close-ups, with highly effective double exposures and swift shifts in perspective" ("ett underverk av psykologisk närbildsteknik, med högeffektiva dubbelbelysningar och snabbt insatta perspektivglidningar"). The critic contended that Faulkner "the author" was everything "the thinker" ("diktaren"; "tänkaren") was not: humane, open-minded, and clear-sighted. In his portrayals of human nature, Holmqvist regarded Faulkner as one of the truly great innovators in modern literature. Likewise, he held his literary style and narrative technique in the highest esteem.

On the race issue, Faulkner believed, as Noel Polk underlined, that change was inevitable and that it was in everybody's interest, blacks and whites, North and South, if white Southerners themselves effected that change and learned to live with the new social and political conditions. Gavin Stevens' problem in the novel is that he, unlike Faulkner himself, and even if he is unaware of it, is tied to the status quo. Furthermore, he is so absorbed in the abstraction of justice that he misses the concrete and is prone to talking instead of acting (Polk 1978, p. 140f). None of the Swedish critics of *Intruder in the Dust* really address the crucial circumstance that it is the final reconciliation of Stevens' idealism with Chick Mallison's realism, his actions and moral vision, that will enable society to develop in a desirable direction.

## 8. 1950: The Culmination Point

When Faulkner's Nobel Prize was announced in 1950, it hardly came as a surprise, and was generally regarded as a well-motivated confirmation of the exceptional artistic achievements of one of the greatest novelists in modern times. Artur Lundkvist, Bengt Holmqvist, and Sten Selander all published long articles in the daily press celebrating Faulkner's achievement. Their articles sketched the outlines of Faulkner's life, his roots in the American South and his fictional Yoknapatawpha county, characterized his major novels, his dominating, often dismal themes, not shying away from the grotesque and macabre, his penetrating psychology, his distinctive style, and his innovative narrative technique. Interestingly, in *Svenska Dagbladet*, the conservative Selander, although critical of what he regarded as commercial concessions in the short story collection *Knight's Gambit* and the gruesome worldview and appalling story in *Sanctuary*—he detected a "touch of sadism" ("ett stänk av sadism") (Selander 1950) in Faulkner's own personality—conceded and indeed emphasized that Faulkner has no competitors among his professional colleagues in America and very few in the rest of the world. His books are partly unpleasant, but it is "as Eliot says, the unpleasantness of great poetry" ("som Eliot säger, den stora litteraturens obehaglighet"). Like many other critics before him, Selander also referred to Faulkner's alleged participation in WWI, his plane crash and his "injured foot" ("en skadad fot"), causing a trauma which deeply affected his life and supposedly his writing. The story was told again by the pro-modernist critic Bengt Holmqvist in his celebration of Faulkner's writings in *Stockholms-Tidningen*, where he also touched upon Faulkner's relationship to the reader. Faulkner "never works with allegory, but hands over the application of his visions to the reader. His art triumphs by its own efforts in letting the universal break through the particular." ("Faulkner arbetar aldrig allegoriskt, han överlämnar helt tillämpningen av sina syner åt läsaren. Det är hans konst triumf att den av egen kraft låter allmängiltigheten bryta igenom det speciella.") (Holmqvist 1950b).



Holmqvist declared that the prize has been awarded “not only to one of the most central literary figures between the wars but to America’s most interesting writer at the present moment” (“inte bara en av mellankrigslitteraturens centralfigurer utan också Amerikas intressantaste författare i detta nu”). In *Dagens Nyheter*, Artur Lundkvist saw the Faulkner prize as a victory for the younger generation of critics, not leastwise in Europe, where he for a long time had many enthusiastic spokesmen. His American reception is said to have been more unresponsive. Lundkvist made a point of Faulkner’s ideological attitude. In a certain sense, he was “a reactionary” (“en reaktionär”) (Lundkvist 1950), Lundkvist maintained, although in such a radical way that the concept became ambiguous. Faulkner was a spokesman for uncomfortable, dissentient traditions, the superseded, vanquished, and silenced. He brought to life the dead past of the American South and showed an unbroken connection to the defeated past. Lundkvist read this as Faulkner’s protest against a too-fast technical–industrial development that triumphed over valuable social structures as well as human nature in “a wave of superficial money worship and far too quantitative values” (“en våg av förflackande penningdyrkan och alltför kvantitativa värderingar”). He deemed Faulkner an exceptionally worthy recipient of the Nobel Prize, “a novelist with very few equals in our time” (“en romandiktare utan många jämbördiga i vår tid”).

In this brief reception history, it might be fitting to give the final word to Anders Österling, but not as a reviewer in the daily press but rather in his official capacity on the Nobel Committee. In his formal report for the Swedish Academy in 1950, Österling referred, in all honesty, to his previous doubts regarding the deeply depressive themes for which Faulkner showed a predilection. In this sense, Faulkner’s lack of consolation and to some extent positive life view hardly met the requirements that were implicit in the notion of ‘the ideal’ for the prize. However, Österling was prepared to put this standard aside due to Faulkner’s distinctive and strong artistic integrity. He concluded: “Faulkner is a master on his ground, the morbid and exuberant Southern environment he has grown up in and that keeps him enthralled. His standing in the literary world is now so established, that a distinction upon him doubtlessly would be greeted with approval both in America and Europe.” (“Faulkner är en mästare på sin mark, den morbida och yppiga sydstatsmiljö som han vuxit upp i och som håller honom trollbunden. Hans ställning i den litterära världen är nu så kvalificerad, att en utmärkelse till honom skulle hälsas med bifall både i Amerika och Europa.”) (Österling 1950, p. 422). Judging from the limited Swedish perspective, we have at our disposal in this article evidence that he was proven right.

## 9. Coda

The reception history we have been following is grounded in literary reviews, book chapters, introductory articles, and forewords. The common denominator for this body of work is ‘criticism’, which according to one definition is “the analysis and judgement of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work” (Pearsall 1988, p. 435) Its etymological root is the Greek verb *krinein*, meaning “to separate, decide, judge” (Klein 1966, p. 375). The function of criticism is thus to select and judge, either to praise or dismiss, to take extreme standpoints. Literary criticism in its various forms situates a work; it ranks it and compares it to other works. To criticize is to appreciate the value of a work of art, to be engaged in an act of evaluation. An effect of this historically conditioned critical activity is that certain books or authorships over time are preserved in the collective literary consciousness and eventually are included in that continuously changing entity: the literary canon.

The criticism that we have studied is performed according to various sets of values and norms, some of which are implicit, and some of which are made explicit. The critical criteria of course varies from one critic/reviewer to another, and, as has been made clear, not all of these criteria function equally well; some are obviously more relevant and suitable than others. Qualitative judgements regarding ‘novelty’, ‘originality’, and ‘complexity’ have been profuse, and they adhere to the formal aspects of Faulkner’s work. Whereas terms such as ‘sordid’, ‘repulsive’, and ‘macabre’ are judgements that are used with relevance for the contents or the worldview. Between these opposites, we have come

across an array of critical judgements resulting from the critics' wrestling with Faulkner's prose and its particular challenges. The evaluations could roughly be ordered along an axis where the parameters are form and content, aesthetics and ideology, narrator and author, writer and reader. The problematics adhering to these basic parameters are of course more or less relevant for the modernist novel in general. From the limited context of Swedish Faulkner reception, it could thus be argued that Swedish criticism epitomizes and highlights the fundamental features pertaining to the notion of 'modernism', both with regard to its formal and content-based aspects.

Faulkner's Swedish reception history has not been without friction, to put it mildly. However divergent the critics and their judgments may have been, it has been obvious that Faulkner left no one indifferent. From the point of view of attracting literary attention and having an impact, it might in principle be preferable to have a negative review than no review. Silence is probably the worst fate for a writer, any writer. Faulkner has from the early 1930s stirred up emotions among critics and reviewers. Throughout his time, he was considered controversial and continuously discussed, from the first controversies in the early 1930s up until the Nobel Prize in 1950, which was the final institutionalization of Faulkner as a groundbreaking modernist writer.

In a survey of the history of the Nobel Prize in literature, Kjell Espmark entitled the period from 1946 onwards "The Pioneers", which was said to reflect a radical new policy at the Academy in comparison to the previous more populist period. Here, Faulkner falls into line with his immediate predecessors Herman Hesse, André Gide, and T.S. Eliot (Allén and Espmark 2006, pp. 30–33). By 1950, Faulkner had been raised to a modernist classic. His writings had been selected, judged, ranked, and compared to others—which in essence is also an act of 'criticism'.

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