

James G. Watson

WILLIAM FAULKNER: LETTERS AND FICTIONS

Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989. Pp. 214. \$9.95

Reviewed by Evans Harrington

Though this book about William Faulkner's letters and fictions is obviously not for a general audience, it holds more interest for those who know Faulkner's work than many such readers might think. James G. Watson, author of a previous book and many articles on Faulkner, is thoroughly knowledgeable about Faulkner's work, and he demonstrates in *Letters and Fictions* an impressive knowledge of related fields of learning, notably modern literary theory, the tradition of letters in fiction, and, most important, the discipline of philological inquiry.

From his early manhood Faulkner wrote a large number of letters to family, friends, agents, editors, newspapers and magazines, and even to a few literary scholars and strangers who represented groups he wanted to address. He also collated a number of books, most of which were clearly designed as elaborate love letters to women he was emotionally drawn to. As the same time he was writing and, pretty soon, publishing novels and short stories. Watson examines these "two canons," concentrating mostly on the letters, which are less familiar to Faulkner readers than the fictions.

After apprising his readers of the nature of Faulkner's letters, Watson then examines how Faulkner's letter-writing contributed to his fiction. As a young man, for instance, Faulkner's poetry and letters reflected his difficulty in defining and accepting himself in reality. Letters and poems helped him to gain perspective on the problem.

But Watson argues, in perhaps the most impressive section of the book, that in his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, Faulkner handled with startlingly effective parody autobiographical details from his own life. Cadet Julian Lowe in that book writes a series of barely literate, self-deluded letters about returning from RAF ground school in Toronto, losing his girl, pretending to have "served" as a flyer, planning to enter a university, and going to work in a bank. But Faulkner not only distances himself from Lowe (and himself) through his parody; he also achieves strong thematic and structural reinforcement for his novel by skillfully contrasting Lowe's ridiculous experiences with the tragic ones of the main story.

Watson continues analyses of the functions of letters in Faulkner's fiction throughout the canon, and it is difficult in a brief review to indicate the detailed, subtle and imaginative quality of his insights. The very number of functional letters which Watson finds in Faulkner's fiction is astonishing. Admittedly, some of these are "untranscribed" (such as the notes Joanna Burden leaves for Joe Christmas) and others are merely imagined (such as Jason Compton's vengeful "wire" to his stockbroker). Still, Watson demonstrates

convincingly their important functions in the fiction, and never—or almost never—seems fanciful in his arguments.

An argument which some readers may resist as fanciful is one of the most interesting segments of the book. Watson suggests that the letters of Eloise to Abelard may have been a model for those of Temple Drake to Alabama Red (and Eloise an inspiration for Temple). At first glance the contrast between the two women and situations is so great that fanciful seems an understatement for the suggestion. But Watson very sensibly qualifies his suggestion while making such fascinating points about parallels between the two women that the argument becomes rewarding whether one agrees with it or not.

It would be hard to argue that this book deals with more than a peripheral aspect of Faulkner's work (though what is left to deal with inside the periphery?), but it is a deeply informed, sanely argued, often intellectually challenging study.

Flora Alexander

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN NOVELISTS

London: Edward Arnold, 1989. Pp. 111

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

In this volume, part of Edward Arnold's *Modern Fiction* series under the general editorship of Robin Gilmour, Flora Alexander provides a readable and extremely useful survey of British women novelists born between 1931 and 1950. The oldest writer included is Fay Weldon and the youngest is Sara Maitland; Alexander's parameters exclude not only the well-known women of the earlier generation—Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark—but also those older writers who, like Penelope Fitzgerald and Christine Brooke-Rose, have less established reputations. Novelists who, like Lisa St. Aubin de Terin and Jeanette Winterson, have begun to publish only in the 1980s, are likewise necessarily excluded. Less easily understandable—and, in light of Alexander's critical acuity, regrettable—is her unspoken decision to omit the promising young writer Rose Tremain (born in 1943, she began to publish fiction in the mid-seventies) and—most puzzling of all—Penelope Lively, who, born in 1933, had already produced six substantial novels before *Moon Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 1987. Nevertheless, Alexander accomplishes very well what she sets out to do: provide studies of ten authors, separately and in relation to one another, which manage to combine intelligent introductions, for readers for whom a given author is entirely unfamiliar, with provocative analysis—all within constraints which allow only a few pages for each writer discussed.

The book has four main sections. The introduction gives a skilled and economical account of the approaches and issues of feminist theory, together with a brief overview of fiction by women. In the second, longer chapter, "Versions of the Real," Alexander examines three writers—Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt,