

LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY

Reflections on William Faulkner: An Interview with Albert I. Bezzarides

THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW OCCURRED during a five-day visit I had with Albert I. Bezzarides and his wife, Silvia Richards, in their home at Woodland Hills, California, September 3-7, 1983. A screenwriter for more than fifty years, Mr. Bezzarides, as he explains, had a close association with Faulkner in the 1940s. Undoubtedly, the interview is the result of luck and timing, with some persistence mixed in. I trust it captures the special candor and articulateness, the strong, reliable sense of intuition and insight which, for me, best characterize "Buzz" Bezzarides. In editing the longer version of the interview yielded by the tapes, I have taken the liberty of placing in quotation marks snippets of conversations which, in the recounting, Mr. Bezzarides may have reconstructed from memory's contexts. I have rearranged a few portions of our conversation from this time, in the interest of continuity and clarity.

For providing me freedom from my executive responsibilities during the preparation of the interview, I am indebted to Biltwell Company, Inc., St. Louis, Missouri. I wish also to express my appreciation to Mrs. Rita Stam, Farmington, Missouri, for transcribing the tapes and typing the final draft. My greatest debt is to Albert I. Bezzarides and Silvia Richards, for welcoming me into their home.

—LDB

LDB: Can you recall your first encounter with William Faulkner, the writer, and with Bill Faulkner, the friend?

AIB: In 1931, when I was at Berkeley, going to college, I was given a book on my birthday by my girl friend who always said to me, "Al, you can write—you have to write," and when I lost confidence in myself, her urgings to make me write were very helpful, because they made me believe in what I was doing. She gave me Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, and I remember that as I read it, I had a totally new experience: the frustration of trying to read what he had written, trying to understand what he was saying; the anger of not being able to comprehend it; flinging the book across the room, then running to pick it up and going back to the beginning and trying to read it over again, desperate to understand it, and finding it difficult; cursing Faulkner for writing the way he did, but yet incapable of putting it down. The phenomenon of this man writing that book with its strange complexity, the inner feelings that it has, unstated statements that it makes, your having to read into it the things that he is saying: all of this was a remarkable experience for me, so I never forgot Faulkner. I read everything he wrote as the books came out. I tried, anyway, always with the same fury.

One day, perhaps around 1936 or 1937, my wife and I, and a friend of mine, Jim Holmsey, and his wife, Gwen, were at the Pig-'n-Whistle, in Hollywood, and who was sitting in a booth toward the back? William Faulkner! He was a smaller

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

man than I had imagined him to be, with his mustache, with his pipe; he was seated with a young woman who turned out to be Meta Carpenter. There wasn't anything that could have prevented me from getting up and walking along the row of booths to his booth, and saying, "Sir, you haven't the slightest idea who I am, but I know who you are; you're William Faulkner, and I have read everything you have written. I think you are a great writer." He got up immediately and said, "Thank you, sir," in his accent, and we shook hands. Then I turned around, went back and sat with my people, embarrassed as hell.

At Warner Bros. they had a writers' building, and on the ground floor there was a long hallway, with offices on both sides; at the end of the hallway, it opened up in what they called the "bullpen," where a lot of secretaries worked. I had an office at the very end of the hall on the right-hand side; the office across from mine was empty. I usually left my door open because I didn't like being alone in the office. One day, I looked up and saw this diminished figure of the man with the pipe and the mustache, leaning—he had a way of leaning backward when he walked—slowly into the bullpen; he went into the empty office, sat down, crossed his legs and started puffing a pipe. This was some five or six years after I had "met" him at the Pig-'n-Whistle. I remember sitting there, looking at him, and he looked across at me. I got up, went over, stood beside his chair, and I said, "I don't know if you remember me," and he said, "Yes, sir, I do," and I said, "My name is Bezzerides, and since I saw you last, I'm under contract with Warners; what are you doing here?" He said, "I'm under contract here at Warner Bros., too." I asked him, "How are you going home tonight?" because it was during the war, by then. He said, "Well, I take a bus and go to the Highland Hotel." I said, "I've got a car. I usually take a car pool, and take turns; you can ride with me." That began my friendship with William Faulkner.

LDB: During the war years of 1942 and 1943, who were some of the other writers with whom you and Faulkner associated at Warner Bros.?

AIB: There was Arthur Sheekman; he was a comedy writer, and a very nice guy; John Fante was another; W. R. Burnett, who wrote *High Sierra* and other pictures, was a very successful screenwriter and novelist. There was a wonderful western writer named Frederick Faust, who wrote under the name of Max Brand. Later, he volunteered his services as a reporter for the war and was killed in Italy. Faulkner and I were friendly with Frank Gruber, Tom Job, and Jo Pagano, as well.

LDB: You mentioned seeing Faulkner at the studio and being very surprised. Had there been any advance notice of his arrival? Was there excitement? Was he being brought there because of his name?

AIB: Well, that Faulkner was at the studio under contract startled me, but when I heard the conditions under which he had been put to work, I was appalled. I was getting about one thousand dollars per week at that point. I was stunned to discover he was getting three hundred dollars per week, which was what I had started at. The way I learned this—he didn't talk much about himself—came about one day while he was cleaning out his pipe. He pulled out a rather wicked-looking knife, and I said, "Jesus Christ, where did you get that thing?" and he said, "I bought it to cut Herndon." I said, "Why would—?" and he interrupted, "To cut the agent who got me the contract." I asked him why he would want to do that, and he told me that William Herndon had signed him to a seven-year contract with Jack Warner—by then I had heard about Jack Warner boasting how he had the best writer in the country under hire, for peanuts. Faulkner told me how Herndon had written to him and said if Warner agreed to hire him (Faulkner), he (Herndon) wanted to be able to tie Warner down, right away, not give him a chance to renege by examining his client's drunkenness; apparently Faulkner had given

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

Herndon the right to sign him to the binding contract, with only nominal raises. So when he discovered what had actually evolved, he bought this knife. I said, "If you would have cut him, you would have ended up in jail," and he said, "Yes, I know," and so that's what had prevented him from doing it. That's how I discovered how Faulkner got there at Warner Bros.

As for the little circle of writers at Warner Bros., they all knew who he was; they were all awed by the fact that he was there. He didn't mix with any of them, was older, by perhaps ten years or so, than most of us. He took the ride from me; I'd drop him off at the Highland Hotel, and as our friendship developed, we would have meals together, at Musso's, Schwab's, etc., and we were together often.

LDB: Did the fact that you were almost eleven years Faulkner's junior inhibit your friendship? Did it remain one of awe, or did it become a closer relationship?

AIB: We grew to be very good friends, and one of the reasons I think we were was I never asked him about writing or talked to him about his writing. I recall once a writer named Elik Moll wanted to meet Faulkner. It was an honor to meet Faulkner. You couldn't walk up to him and say "I'm so and so" and meet him, because his manner was one that discouraged that kind of behavior. So, Elik asked if I would introduce him. I promised I would, that night, but warned him not to ask Bill about his writing, because this would offend him, and he said, "I won't; I give you my word." That afternoon, as we were leaving the writers' building, Moll came up to the group, and I told Bill, "This is a friend of mine, Elik Moll. Moll, this is William Faulkner." "Yes, sir." Bill didn't offer his hand to shake; he didn't even take his hand off his pipe, and he kept walking, leaning backward like he usually did—I don't know how he kept his balance. As we walked along, I was stunned to hear Moll begin talking about *Go Down, Moses* and the story about the bear, the confrontation in that story and the emotional feelings he had gotten from it. Then, to climax it all, if you can call it a climax, Moll asked him, "How did you do that?" I just took one look at Faulkner, and I knew there was never going to be an answer to that question. Faulkner didn't say a word; he pretended he didn't hear. Moll looked at me and I shrugged and dropped back, because I was appalled that he had asked this question after he had promised me he wouldn't. Then he repeated his question to Faulkner. Again Faulkner made not a sound, not a word, and then Moll dropped back. I caught up with Bill and, as we were crossing the empty lot to my battered old Willys, I said, "Bill," and he said, "Bud," and I said, "You know, Elik Moll," and he said, "Who?" I said, "The fellow I introduced to you; he asked you a question and you didn't answer. Why didn't you answer?" He informed me in a very terse way that anybody who would ask such a question didn't deserve to be answered. And that is the sort of relationship Bill had with people at the studio. So long as they didn't violate his privacy, didn't ask ridiculous questions, he was there.

LDB: In the writers' building, did Faulkner ever ask you for any kind of assistance, or did he ever run story lines by you?

AIB: Never! He never ever discussed his stories or screenplays.

LDB: Then you were probably not aware, that summer of 1942, when you two first met, that Faulkner was at work on *The De Gaulle Story*, for Robert Buckner.

AIB: I was not!

LDB: In that vein, can you give me some image or impression of the atmosphere that existed during those years? Was there an air of stringency, high seriousness, somberness; or, despite the war, was there cheerfulness among the people working at the studio?

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

AIB: We were making pictures, essentially. It seemed to me that we were all isolated from it. We all knew the war was raging, knew what was going on, knew the atrocities that were taking place, but we certainly weren't deterred by it at the studio.

LDB: Well, wasn't Hollywood experiencing blackouts, food and gas rationing? Weren't all kinds of precautions being made for a potential invasion of the West Coast?

AIB: Oddly enough, that didn't seem to reach into the studio, because we were making pictures to entertain people. Sure, many of the movies were patriotic, sentimental war pictures. And I do recall that because I worked at the studio, my draft status was deferred; even when I went to work at Paramount in 1944, my draft status didn't change, and I felt safe about that. The movie industry was considered a wartime effort. What it was doing, in a sense, was serving to entertain people in a tense situation who needed to be diverted from the realities that were going on. In a peculiar way, it all served as a massive propaganda resource.

LDB: You mentioned, earlier, taking Faulkner back and forth in your car pool, from the Highland Hotel to Burbank. At what point did Faulkner accept your invitation to stay in your home on 621 North Saltair, just north of Santa Monica?

AIB: Well, we got acquainted in this first session, in 1942 which lasted, oh, five months, something like that, and then he went home, back to Mississippi, because he missed being home. He returned for nearly seven months, in 1943. In February of 1944, I got a telegram; all it said was he was arriving at the depot on a certain day, and I just went there and picked him up. At that point, he didn't have a place to stay, and I said, "Why don't you stay with us?" So he moved in with me and my family, in western Los Angeles. There was a bedroom that wasn't being used; he took over that bedroom and started to write *A Fable* there. Or, at least, he was working on it, because I would hear typing at three o'clock in the morning. One day, I asked him what he was doing, and he told me he was working on his "new fable."

LDB: Did Faulkner stay with you for a long period?

AIB: Oh, yeah! He stayed for nearly six months, in 1944, and almost four months, in 1945.

LDB: And, of course, you charged him no rent.

AIB: Not a thing! And he never volunteered to pay. But, then, I understood that the money he was earning was peanuts, and he was always broke. He had this meticulous little book in which he kept all his expenditures. If you looked at it out of the edge of your eye, you could see that the balance was always near zero; you could hardly ask him to pay anything.

LDB: Did you have children at this time?

AIB: We had a daughter, Zoe, and a son, Peter. To give you a slant on the kind of person Faulkner was: he was sitting some twenty or thirty feet away from the dining room table, clear across the room from my son in his high chair. When Peter pushed his foot against the edge of the table and the high chair started to fall back, Faulkner, with an explosion of movement, darted across that space, grabbed the chair before it toppled to the floor, and rescued my son. To watch Bill move was something to see, because this man, who ordinarily seemed to be moving backward when he walked, could explode into action.

LDB: Did this suggest to you a violence or passion?

AIB: Absolutely! This man was so intense behind that seemingly quiet surface, almost seething.

LDB: During those stays, did Faulkner eat many meals with your family?

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

AIB: We almost always ate dinner together. He didn't have a car, so he came home with me and became a part of the family. Yet, there was always a kind of distance between us. He always managed to keep himself separate. If he sat with people in the living room, you always had a feeling he was not really there; he was in his head somewhere. He was off thinking about what he was doing. I think we probably bored him to death because he participated very little in conversation or anything. And, we just took that; we weren't upset by it. He tried occasionally to be helpful—he was friendly with Yvonne, my wife, and he was friendly with the kids, but he really wasn't there. In the summer of 1944, Estelle and Jill came to visit Bill. He had moved out for a few months, rented a bedroom in a private house. Jill and Zoe became good friends; they swam, rode horses together.

LDB: Jill was maybe eleven years old at the time?

AIB: Something like that.

LDB: Tell me about the horseback riding.

AIB: We used to go to Jack House's stable, in Glendale, quite often, that summer. It was located very near Warner Bros.

LDB: Who rode?

AIB: I didn't ride. My wife rode and Zoe rode.

LDB: Did Faulkner ride at all?

AIB: Faulkner rode; Jill rode. They loved riding.

LDB: Was Jill close with your daughter?

AIB: They were very friendly.

LDB: On a different subject, were you aware of Faulkner's social affairs? His intimate friends?

AIB: No. I never knew many of the people he went out with or knew socially, other than Meta Carpenter, of course. Except for her, I don't believe he knew many people intimately. A lot of people have taken credit for intimacies with Faulkner, but they never happened.

LDB: How about places he might visit, or frequent?

AIB: He really didn't do much. He would go to the Players' Club, or to Musso's, to eat with friends if he was living alone or when he was staying at the Highland Hotel; then they would get out of there, walk around a little bit; then he would go to his room and retire. Occasionally, he would visit with Jo Pagano or Tom Job, their families. Once, at Pagano's house, he was drunk, sitting on the floor next to their child, and he was given a shot of whiskey, which he held up to the child, proclaiming, "God's gift to man," as he sipped it. I recall Pagano telling me this and how shocked he was that Faulkner thought whiskey was God's gift to man.

I remember one incident that occurred between Faulkner and John Fante, who was also working at Warners with us. John wanted to socialize with Faulkner. One night, Bill, Fante, and I went out. I think we went to Musso's to eat, but started drinking there in the back room, then left without eating, carrying a bottle of wine out with us, going from bar to bar. After we got drunk, we began to tell dirty jokes and sing dirty songs. Finally, old Faulkner began to sing a song about "Fucking in the cowshed, /Fucking on the bricks, /You couldn't hear the music/For the swishing of the pricks." And he sang it with a strong Scotch accent. It was three or four in the morning when we got home. Afterwards, when we got sober, I remembered the song and tried to get Faulkner to sing it again, so I could learn all the other stanzas. He just chuckled, but he wouldn't sing it again. He had to be drunk to sing that one, and I found that kind of amusing.

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

LDB: You mentioned that on returning to California, in 1944, Faulkner had sent you a telegram, asking if you would pick him up. Was this customary for him to rely on other people?

AIB: Oh, yeah! He had a way of using people. After I got acquainted with him and understood the relationship he had with Meta, I also knew that he had just used me to go to the railroad depot to pick him up, or to do various other chores. He used Meta in a different way, though; he used her in the sense of diminishing his loneliness. When he was out here, in California, it's true he was away from the commotions of his family. He was alone, totally alone, and his way of going home was to have a relationship with the young southern woman Meta Carpenter. I always felt sorry for her because I could see she was being used. I don't think she was even aware of it. But I realized there was no chance that their relationship would go beyond what it was here in Hollywood, because that would have required him to make a commitment and take her back to Oxford. That simply wouldn't have happened.

LDB: Was there anything, specifically, he said, or just your closeness to the situation, which led you to this conclusion?

AIB: After being with Bill and knowing him the way I did, I realized that he just simply couldn't make any permanent relationships.

LDB: Was he really that selfish a person?

AIB: Absolutely! He was a very selfish fellow and didn't seem to be aware of the demands he was making, the burdens he was putting on people.

LDB: He put demands on you and others around him. In what respect?

AIB: It was done rather quietly—you found yourself inviting him to do something, because he needed it. You were very aware of his needs.

LDB: Even his alcoholic bouts required other people.

AIB: True. If he got dead drunk and fell on the floor, somebody discovered that he was dead drunk lying on the floor, called the hospital, and took him to the hospital, where he was put together again.

LDB: The irresponsibility of the drunkenness . . . do you feel he knew someone would always help him, be there at his side, or do you think he really didn't care?

AIB: There were times when I felt this kind of drinking bordered on suicide, because if someone hadn't walked in and done something about it, he might very well have died. A doctor once told me, "You better tell your friend that he's going to get a heart attack and die if he doesn't watch his drinking." So I told Bill. The next thing I knew, he had gotten terribly drunk, and he had vanished. Then I noticed that his bags in the Highland Hotel where he was staying at that time had vanished; two bags had vanished, along with the books that he had—he was always surrounded by books. I couldn't understand what the hell had happened. His clothes were there; he hadn't packed and left. So I began looking for him, yelling, "Bill! Bill!" all over the place. There were two entrances to the Highland Hotel; you got out at the front where it ran along Highland Avenue, and went up three or four floors, where he was staying, or you got off at the lobby on the top floor to the street level—it was built on the side of a steep hill. So, I finally went out into the street at the back end of the upper floor and yelled, "Bill!" and got no answer. But I saw him climbing the hill with the two bags in his hands. So I ran up to him and I said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" And he said, "If I got a bad heart, I want to find out." I said, "If you find out, it will kill you." He said, "I want to know," at which point I knocked the bags out of his hand, picked him up in my arms, and started carrying him down the hill. As I was carrying him over my shoulder, I saw him make a tremendous grimace while he tugged with pinched fingers against his collar, and I said, "What are you trying to do?" "I'm trying to get

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

down." I remember bursting into laughter because I thought his trying to get loose from me by tugging on his own collar while still in my arms was so ridiculous. He was chuckling drunkenly as I put him down, and I said, "Well, come on." Then I let him walk, because the indignity of being carried by me, like a child, back to his room was too much for either of us.

LDB: Can you recall other incidents, surely less comical, in which Faulkner required your assistance?

AIB: Whenever Faulkner got drunk and passed out, I would take him to some sanitarium that specialized in such things; there was a special nurse that he knew whom I would call. He'd come and they would put him on juices and sober him up. The first time he got drunk, I took him to a sanitarium in Los Angeles. It was a rugged place downtown, filled with old men and drunks to whom they fed orange juice and things, and kept on a diet and gradually got them back on their feet. They put Faulkner on a cot, and he was lying there. I remember being startled by this sight. Faulkner was very stubborn and refused, at first, to drink the orange juice; he refused unless they would give him a drink first. The nurse said, "All right, Bill," and filled Faulkner's whole glass from the whiskey bottle. Faulkner drank it and said, "Ah, that's good." Then he accepted the glass of orange juice and drank it down to the last drop. I was appalled, and that's when I blew up. "Look, he's drunk," I shouted. "We're paying you all this money and you're giving him whiskey out of a bottle. What the hell gives?" With that the male nurse interrupted, "I'll give you some, too," and we touched glasses. I drank it; it was tea, and I was stunned because I could see Faulkner was so very drunk he couldn't even tell the difference between tea and whiskey.

On another occasion, I took Bill to a sanitarium on Van Nuys Boulevard, in Van Nuys. After I left him there, I got a phone call from him: "Bud, they stole my watch; somebody stole my watch," and I said, "Jesus Christ." He said, "You got to get me out of here," and I said, "No, Bill, you have to stay there. If they stole your watch, they can't steal anything else, because you didn't have anything else; you left your wallet in the front office. If your watch is gone, it's gone, but you have to stay." I was kind of firm about it, not so much because I wanted to be firm with Bill, but because I didn't want to run around finding another place. But I came back and when I got to the place, I asked about the watch being stolen. The nurse said it wasn't possible; she didn't understand how the watch could have been stolen. Then I discovered that Bill had stuffed the watch in his shoe, in order to be able to tell me that it had been stolen, so that I would come and get him out of there.

Always after he came out of the sanitariums—I took him to four or five—I'd give him a ride in the car. We would go running around to different parts of Los Angeles, just to get him back into the air again. I remember, one day, driving along Vine Street, and as we stopped at Sunset, two girls in their pretty dresses started to cross the street, in the pedestrian lane. They looked at us, lingeringly, as they went by. Then the light changed and we drove on. An hour and a half, perhaps two hours later, Faulkner said something I couldn't quite hear because he always mumbled, and I said, "What did you say, Bill?" He said it louder so I could hear it: "I could sure do with a strange woman!" I thought that was very funny.

Another time, after he was released, I drove Bill all the way to Ventura along the coast and then came inland up to Ventura Highway (which wasn't a freeway in those days), past the orange groves, back into town. He would just tilt his head, nod at something, and I would look off. Maybe it was something remarkable that he was looking at or just a vague thought he was having. Once, we stopped at an orange grove to smell its fragrance. You could see the ocean in the distance. During these trips, I always talked because he never said a thing; he never said one word. I found the silence a little difficult to stand, so, to fill the silence, I would talk about hunting or trucking trips I had made out of Fresno in my youth. Once, during one of my transitions or pauses, Bill said, "Bud," and I said, "Yeah, what is it, Bill?" He said, "Bud, you're an animal, but I'm just a vegetable!"

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

LDB: Surely, Faulkner was appreciative of you, not only for allowing him to stay in your home, but for your friendship and occasional ministrations.

AIB: Yes, he was! I'm sure of it. Shortly after Bill left Hollywood for good, in September of 1945, perhaps a year or two later, I was assigned to do a picture for Paramount about sponge divers off the coral reefs. It required doing research. I took my wife and family to Tarpon Springs, Florida, and to parts of Cuba. On our way home, I called Faulkner. I didn't say, "We're here and we would like to come visit." I called to say that we were in Florida and were about to go back to California; I thought I'd call to say hello. And he said, as I knew he would, "If you don't come to visit us, I'll never see you again." And he really meant it. We went on a train to Memphis and he came and picked us up at the depot, in a car that had no floorboards in the driving compartment. I sat with my foot on the sloping part of the dash, and we drove for hours, it seemed, through the darkness, to get to Oxford. On arriving, I remember spying that fabulous house in the woods on the edge of town. Estelle was up and she greeted us. We talked for quite a while, then went to bed. We were given a room adjacent to another large room upstairs, where Faulkner and his wife slept, while we were there. There were sliding doors between our two rooms. My daughter slept with Jill.

LDB: Was the visit all that you expected?

AIB: Yes, for the most part it was quite pleasant, though I remember wanting to leave after a few days, yet feeling that it was too soon; you couldn't leave that soon. A decent amount of time had to pass. I realized that Faulkner was trying to pay me back for the hospitality he had received in California. He couldn't pay in any other way, so the only way he could do it was by giving us his hospitality, and he did. He was just great. Mrs. Faulkner, the fragile woman that she was—she was so thin I wondered how she could be in good health—was wonderful. We had marvelous meals. He would go into the back smokehouse and pick out a ham and we would eat ham that they had smoked. We met some of the blacks who used to be servants, but who now had jobs in town. Although their status had changed, there was enough of the past there that you could see where the slaves had lived out in the back. Faulkner tried to give the image of a house that had proper servants and stuff; he had trained a young black to serve the table, but he did it very badly. I remember Faulkner being very tolerant with that, trying to explain to him how to do things and so on.

LDB: How long did you actually stay at Rowan Oak?

AIB: We were there quite a while. Perhaps a week. I remember one day walking with Faulkner over to the drugstore, where he was going to exchange a stack of mystery stories for a new stack. I asked him, "Why do you read all of these damn mysteries?" and he said, "Bud, no matter what you write, it's a mystery of one kind or another." As we walked into town, he with his armload of books, I just following along, I noticed that as acquaintances greeted him, there was an air of contempt in their "Good morning, Bill"; the way they looked at each other and then looked at him, it was as if they didn't know who he really was, or if so, begrudged him his celebrity.

One day, we went out to Bill's farm. He had planted some kind of corn, and it hadn't come up. He discovered that they had given him corn infested with worms. So, we went over to the place where they sold seed, and there was a bunch of men sitting in a circle: "Good morning, Bill." The look they had for him was contemptuous, as he pointed out, politely, that the corn hadn't seeded; the seed hadn't germinated. He wanted to get more seed. They said, "Well, try again, Bill," and it was kind of a joke. I can recall my feeling of amazement that these people didn't know who he was. They had no understanding—none of them read anything; and if they did know he was a writer, they held that in contempt.

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

Back at the farm, we were walking along a road, and Bill touched my arm. I looked down at a poisonous snake. I had almost stepped on it and could have been bitten. A sense of danger seemed imminent when I was in the South. There was a sense of hazard, always a sense of hazard. Especially when Jill and my daughter went out, I feared they might not come back, because something terrible could happen. The southerners didn't seem to be aware of this presence, but I was!

LDB: During your visit, did Faulkner introduce you to any of his family or old friends?

AIB: I met Phil Stone. We went to his brick law office, just off the Square, but it was just a quick introduction. And all the time we were in Oxford, nobody came to the house. I never met his mother, or his brother John or his nephews. I didn't get to meet his stepdaughter, though I did meet Malcolm Franklin, his stepson.

LDB: Did you spend most of your time at the house?

AIB: Yes, at the house. I went around some with Bill, but my wife stayed at the house with Estelle.

LDB: Was Faulkner doing any writing at the time?

AIB: Not that I recall. I didn't hear the typewriter.

LDB: What made up your day?

AIB: We drove around the countryside quite a bit. I recall one afternoon when Bill took me out to a place where he liked to go fishing. We drove and drove in wooded hills. As we got to the place he wanted to show me, he stopped the car, seemingly surprised, and looking around with mounting anger, he began to swear: "God dammit! God dammit! They never leave anything alone; they always destroy things, and pretty soon, this country won't be anything like it was." It seemed the stream had been dammed up, and instead of a stream, it was a lake the authorities were busy stocking with fish for the tourist trade. Faulkner fulminated about how they had destroyed a natural stream that was a beauty in the area. The lake would eventually fill with mud, would be polluted after a while, wouldn't even tolerate fish. He was furious. So, on the way back down, with him fuming away, we stopped, suddenly, and waited a while, and, pretty soon, an arm was thrust into the car through the open window, and in it was a bottle of what he called liquor, brewed at some still in the woods nearby. He paid the fellow, and as we sat there, he uncorked it and we drank the clear liquor. It was like drinking fire. He drank lots of it. I didn't drink much. I could see that it didn't affect him. When he didn't want to get drunk, he could drink any amount and it didn't matter, but when he wanted to get drunk, the liquor would begin to take hold, and he couldn't stop drinking. He didn't drink just to drink; always it was to escape something.

On another excursion, Bill and I were driving through town, around the Square. Somebody said, "Bill, Bill." It was a woman, a car full of women, and one said, "Did your guests from California arrive?" He said, "Yes," and introduced me. And the woman said, "How is Estelle?" and again this was said with that strange air of contempt. "How is Estelle?" meant, I later realized, "Was she sober or drunk?" They handed Bill a bouquet of gardenias for Estelle and asked to be remembered to her, but there was a strange ridicule in their airs.

LDB: Who were these women?

AIB: They were neighbors, friends, friends of Estelle. But friends who had this attitude startled me. Later that day, after dinner, we all sat outside talking, getting tipsy. Soon, we went to our various bedrooms. I was always very aware of that sliding door that separated Faulkner and his wife lying in their bed from us lying in our bed, but there was no sign of embarrassment by anybody. But, on this night, I awoke about two or three o'clock in the morning, and I heard the fierce, vicious whisper of Estelle's voice: "Don't touch me, Bill. I don't want you to touch me. Don't you touch me." I woke up my

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

wife, and she heard Estelle's protest, and in the middle of all this, there was a sound that I'll never forget: that sharp, intense striking of a hand against flesh. He had apparently slapped her in the face. Just to hear that slap inflicted pain; and then silence. Shortly after that, we became aware of a sexual encounter on the other side of the door. My wife and I had been parties to the sadness of the relationship between Estelle and Bill. I remember lying there, awake for a long time, conscious of how appalled my wife was. Next morning, Estelle was cheerful as she could possibly be when we sat down to eat with her and Bill. Breakfast was served, as if nothing had happened. Later that morning, we prepared to leave. We came back home to California, and that was the last I saw of Faulkner.

LDB: In what way, at least inadvertently, might that stark bedroom incident between the Faulkners that you and your wife overheard on your visit to Rowan Oak, in July 1947, have symbolized for you the loneliness you believed Faulkner suffered?

AIB: Bill and his wife did not have a good relationship. For a long time they were on the verge of breaking up, if they only realized it. Faulkner's efforts to touch Estelle were probably a need for sex, but also a need for loving and being loved. And I could understand her feelings, too, her angry response. She didn't want to be taken advantage of; they probably slept separately. In fact, things that I have read long after suggest they didn't sleep together. But because we were there, they were forced to sleep together. And in that situation, he was apparently unable to control his appetites.

LDB: Did Faulkner experience countervailing pulls on his emotions? When he was out in California during the time you knew him, did he desperately long to be in Mississippi? When in Mississippi, was all he could think about getting away from there and coming back out?

AIB: He never ever wanted to come to California, and when he came out here, he hated it. If Warners could have given him an assignment and he could have written it back there in Mississippi, he would have, because, unhappy though they might have been, Estelle and he were together; they were bound to each other. There was no way to divorce Estelle, separate from Estelle, any more than he could divorce himself from his brothers, his mother, his various nieces and nephews, his stepkids. I don't think he understood this, but he was bound to them by an unbreakable bond.

LDB: A sense of responsibility?

AIB: His sense of responsibility, the claims they all made on him because he was the oldest: "You're the oldest, you have to be the best"; that was never ever forgotten by him. Whether he tried to forget it or not, there was no way to forget that.

LDB: So there was an enormous sense of torment!

AIB: Torment! Absolutely! And he didn't want to be away from them. Couldn't! When he came here, he felt at loose ends, and, in his desperation, he tried to make a connection; and what other type could he make than one with a girl from the South, Meta Carpenter. He could have had other women, had relationships with them, but his way of returning to Oxford was to be with Meta, so when he came out here, he was with Meta. When Bill was out here, between 1942 and 1945, Meta was between marriages to Wolfgang Rebner. She divorced him in 1939, I believe, and remarried him, but not until after Bill left, virtually, for the last time, in 1945. So they saw each other openly during all those years Bill spent here in Hollywood. And as his mistress, Meta provided Bill with a way of going home. Bill was a very lonely man when he was here—very lonely!

LDB: When Faulkner arrived at Warner Bros., in late July, 1942, his first major project was *The De Gaulle Story*. In hindsight, what do you feel about Faulkner's effectiveness on this assignment?

AIB: It didn't come off—with Faulkner. That was a project he was going to do that actually excited him in the beginning, but you know, it didn't come off. Very few of the things that he tried to pull off at Warners came off! This had to lead to a

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

kind of writer's disenchantment. Staying at Warner Bros. became a bore, because he wasn't doing the things that he wanted to do or succeeding at the things he did care about, and he had a point there. I was at Warners, and I was doing things I didn't want to do, too. There was an apparent repetition of failure, which has led many critics to assume that Faulkner didn't like writing scripts, felt it was a total waste of time. In fact, Bill seemed to do them assiduously and actually took considerable care in what he was doing.

LDB: When Faulkner would do one screenplay after another and find they were either not getting produced, or, if so, that his work had been rejected and replaced with pages from another writer who would subsequently garner the screen credit, how did he respond?

AIB: He gave up, because nothing he did was coming off.

LDB: It wasn't that he didn't like doing the writing?

AIB: Quite the contrary; he actually enjoyed inventing the story lines, filling them in with his dialogue; and he could turn out pages prodigiously. You see, Hollywood is a challenging place. Writers of Faulkner's caliber—Huxley, West, Fitzgerald—all thought that writing for the movies was an easy thing to do. They all, more or less, tried their hand at it because it was challenging to sit down, do a script, then make a motion picture out of it; and suddenly it comes to life in front of you on the screen. If it's done well, it's really very exciting. If it's done badly, there's nothing worse than a lousy picture, where the characters don't ring true. So, Faulkner really thought he could write scripts, thought that he could do stories that were meaningful, and he landed on heavy subjects to do, but they never came off. He had to be bitterly disappointed.

LDB: Why did Faulkner fail to bridge the gap between novelist and screenwriter?

AIB: Well, screenwriting requires a totally different choreography. If you're writing a novel, you can talk about people's feelings; you can write about the things that they think about; you can delve into the characters, psychologically; you can write descriptions and develop a progressional story that gradually moves toward and arrives at a conclusion. *The Sound and the Fury* tells the same story four different ways; it's got a totally different hold on you. The magic of that is something that is beyond the capacity of the screenplay. The story in a screenplay is pretty well laid out. The dialogue has to be economical because people won't listen to pages of dialogue. It has to be terse and meaningful and pointed, to progress the story, just as the narrative has to be more on the surface, more pictorial.

LDB: You've also suggested a second, more major, dilemma—was Faulkner attuned to the characters he was being asked to create?

AIB: Take *The De Gaulle Story*—I've now read the script again, after forty years. Faulkner's characters talk about things instead of progressing things so that they happen; things are discussed rather than made to happen. The script is long and it simply doesn't progress the way a good screenplay should develop.

LDB: Was it possible that Faulkner may not have felt at ease with or at one with the characters themselves?

AIB: Well, the things he wrote about had to do with his own past, in a crazy way.

LDB: You're talking about his fiction?

AIB: Fiction. His writing about the war and De Gaulle and Churchill, in *The De Gaulle Story*, was not based on personal experience. He talked about having been in a war, but he had never gone to a war. He was writing about things that he knew

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

very little about. He knew little about the people; he knew little about De Gaulle, less about Churchill—so when he tried to write about them, they didn't ring true; they were two-dimensional, rather than three-dimensional. I'm sure that when De Gaulle and Churchill sat down and talked, there were some pretty personal things that went on between those two. They weren't superficial things that dealt with heroics and the fate of countries and so forth. It had to do with a man talking to a man. You never get this feeling when you read the script. You really had to get under the skins of those characters, really know them, to do that, and I don't think Faulkner was capable of doing that. That required a kind of research that he didn't do.

LDB: In one of the scripts which Faulkner left with you, after his last stay in Hollywood, there were a number of fact sheets about De Gaulle and his progress in the early stages of the occupation and Free French movement that the story and research departments of Warner Bros. had prepared for him.

AIB: Research done by Warner Bros. and research done by a person out of a driving need to know are vitally different. Reading about whores is one thing, but going to a whorehouse and seeing them living their actual lives is something else.

LDB: Was it that Faulkner was not interested in the material, or was it that he just couldn't connect with most of this material that he was being assigned to write about? Was it too contemporary?

AIB: Bill read newspapers, like all of us did. He was plenty aware of world events. But, it was a little exotic to be sitting in Hollywood, in an office on the Warner Bros. lot, trying to do a meaningful story about a complex man like De Gaulle and another very complex man like Churchill and a situation of which he had no knowledge. How would Faulkner know what a village in France goes through when it's being occupied by the Nazis unless he were there?

LDB: One of the problems with this script may have been that his imagination wasn't the crucial factor at all; rather, what was required was mere accuracy of detail as opposed to an imaginative rendering. Facts, per se, just may not have been Faulkner's long suit—not Faulkner, the novelist, anyway.

AIB: *The De Gaulle Story* probably should have been written either by a French or English writer, who knew firsthand about the lives of these people under siege, in ways Faulkner had no way of knowing. Faulkner couldn't admit his incapacity for doing it, and that got him into trouble.

LDB: What do you mean by "trouble"?

AIB: I'll tell you what I think was wrong here, where he failed. I remember walking with Bill across the Warner Bros. lot, late one afternoon, back to the car. He did a kind of dance of rage, in which he punched fist into palm, fist into hand, and said, "God dammit! Why do I do it? Why do I do it?" and I said, "Why do you do what?" And he said, "Get drunk the way I do." "Bill," I said, "if you really want to know why you do it, you'd go to a good psychologist and sit down and talk to him, because if you want to know, you can find out." He quickly composed himself and retired into a vast silence. I knew I had touched a touchy subject. He had no intention of really exploring why he did it, and this was the flaw in Faulkner's attempts to try to write about things that he didn't know. How can a man who not only doesn't know what motivates him, but doesn't know who he is, begin to write about people he doesn't know? How can he delve into them and find out who they are, what they are, when he fights and resists finding out who he is and what he is? Faulkner couldn't take the first step to explore into himself, and it made him incapable of exploring characters not even intimate with his imagination, let alone his daily self.

LDB: And yet, he is very successful in exploring some of the characters— those best within his fictive realm.

AIB: Ah, but those characters are innate to him; they arise out of his past; they arise from his life experience. He is very

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

knowledgeable there, but it's a subconscious knowledge that's very deep within him, and he doesn't . . . he lacks insight as to why these things actually happen and what they are. He just writes about them.

LDB: He was good at liberating them and letting them do their own act.

AIB: That's right! But he knew them very intimately in a subconscious way, and subconsciously, artistically, anyway, he could control them, put reins on their actions, at will. The liberating was a therapeutic thing, whether he knew it or not. *The Sound and the Fury*, if it's about anything, it's about his life, in a way. He showed me the fence where the idiot prowled.

LDB: He took you there to see the Chandler house?

AIB: Yeah, and he told me about the idiot who lived there, about how he had incorporated him into the story. That really was a story about himself, his cousin Sally, his brothers, his mother and father, and grandparents; it's all there.

LDB: But the characters in *The De Gaulle Story* — they weren't real?

AIB: They weren't real to *him*; they didn't relate to his subconscious, to his past.

LDB: And yet, you've said that he did make a very conscientious effort to do the best work he could.

AIB: Oh, well, of course. He was earning a paycheck every week. I'm sure Faulkner tried to be as honest as he could be. He tried very hard to make a good script out of *The De Gaulle Story*. He worked like a demon on that. It wasn't for lack of wanting to that he failed; it was . . . he was incapable of doing it, because it was beyond his reach. He was reaching for something that he couldn't grasp.

LDB: This seems to bring us back to the vital notion of responsibility.

AIB: Faulkner was plagued by his sense of responsibility. At an early age, he was told by his mother: "You're the oldest; you have to be the best." Also, he had it pointed out, over and over again, that since he was the oldest son, he would ultimately take on the responsibilities of the family. In his life, he knew from watching his father and watching his grandfather that the last thing he wanted was to take on the responsibility of his family. How to avoid taking on the responsibilities that were going to be dumped on him, because he would be smothered by them: that was the dilemma! This was a kid who, having watched his father's failures—his resorting to drunkenness to escape from the responsibility of owning up to his failures—knew that he didn't want any part of that, as a child, and the only way he could protect himself against it was to avoid doing the things that they wanted him to do: to get an education, to become a lawyer, a banker, engineer, like one of his brothers became. He didn't want any part of that, so, at an early age, he dropped out of school. He went back only because he wanted to play baseball or some ridiculous thing like that, and then dropped out again; he quit his education because he wanted no part of the responsibilities for which this would prepare him.

Now, together with that, he also saw something else. It had to do with the Old Colonel, with the books he had written and with his deeds. The great-grandfather was a womanizer, a politician; he built a railroad, fought in the war; he got involved in duels and he killed people. I'm saying it roughly, but he was a man who misbehaved, and all of his misbehavior was forgiven because he had written books, done deeds, achieved not only notoriety but celebrity. What they remembered of him, finally, wasn't his misbehavior of the past, but the books which constantly made him seem to people who came after him that he was a man of some substance, or he wouldn't have written those books. Faulkner apparently came to believe, or romanticized, that he, too, could be forgiven his irresponsibilities for not doing; not becoming a lawyer or banker; not finishing school, going to college; not becoming formally educated. He educated himself by reading, and he picked being a writer because if it forgave the Old Colonel's profligacies, just think of the sins it might forgive for him.

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

But it didn't give Bill the escape he thought he was going to get, because, later on, being an obedient son who attended to his mother and listened to what she said, regardless of whether he agreed with her or not, he finally became a victim of the business of being the oldest son, and it landed on him like a ton of bricks.

LDB: What form did this victimization take?

AIB: Faulkner was endlessly pressed by demands on him by his family. When he was in Hollywood, letters would come, and he would be writing checks, sending them out, or there would be problems that he would have to resolve, and he tried to resolve them. But there was a kind of desperation about him, because he didn't want to be doing this. Yet the thing that he was afraid would happen had happened, and there was no way he could get out of it.

LDB: Is there any connection between the notion of Faulkner's "using" people and this idea of responsibility?

AIB: Well, I told you earlier that after my visit to Rowan Oak, in 1946, I never saw Bill again. He had abrogated his contract with Warner Bros.; we weren't near each other. I didn't go out of my way to call him when he was here, because I felt that it was an intrusion. There was always a sense that unless there was need on his part, you were intruding. His relationship to you was always very casual, as if he had other things to do and you were getting in the way. So, I made a point of not intruding. The same thing was true with Meta and Bill. Once he went home, he didn't need the solace of her companionship.

LDB: Meta relates in her book, *A Loving Gentleman*, that when Faulkner left Hollywood, in 1945, with one brief exception, in 1951, she never saw him again.

AIB: Well, he didn't need her.

LDB: Once you parted, were you aware of Faulkner as a growing presence in world events?

AIB: When he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1950, I heard about it, and called immediately. I said, "Bill, this is Buzz." He said, "Oh, hi, hello, Bud. How are you?" and I said, "I heard about the Nobel Prize. I wanted to call and congratulate you." He said, "Thank you, thank you, very much," and that was the conversation. Then I hung up, and that was it. It was very short. Once I wrote him a letter; there was no answer. I had written letters before, and there was never any answer. But when he needed me, I would get a letter, meet him at the depot, and so forth.

LDB: You're talking about earlier.

AIB: Earlier. Once the Nobel Prize thing happened, he certainly didn't need Hollywood, and when he came out here, he knew my phone number; he never called.

LDB: He came out, early in 1951, to work on *The Left Hand of God*, for Howard Hawks.

AIB: He never called; when he came out he never called. So, when I say that he was a user and he needed people, I mean that he had a need for certain people around him, and when he had that need, he made his demands in his subtle ways, and people gave of themselves to him. I didn't feel used. I was glad to do what I did, and I don't think Meta felt used. She was glad to do what she did, because she loved him. I was very fond of Faulkner, and I liked him very much. I respected him. I had contempt for his inability to recognize that one has responsibility when he accepts this kind of responsibility from others, but he showed no signs of recognizing it. He took it as his privilege, as a great writer, to make demands on people, get what he wanted, what he needed.

LDB: And, after the Nobel Prize, did you follow his celebrity?

AIB: I actually learned more about Faulkner's activities during the last fifteen years of his life by doing research for the documentary script, commissioned by the Public Broadcasting System, on Bill's life than from anything else. Stories were

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

told to me about how he was always drunk, always had a bottle of wine or whiskey during his stay at the University of Virginia, made a ritual of drinking there. To me, Bill seemed to have become a victim of his own legend and was living a part that seemed totally false. The esteemed writer, the Nobel winner, the man who had written these great things bore no relationship to the young man who had written these wonderful things he had written when he was a struggling writer trying to make a scratch, trying to earn a living, writing things he was impelled to write, not deliberately, but impelled to write because they came out of his subconscious. Now, here he was very conscious of the greatness he had achieved without the memory of the consciousness that had actually done the achieving. He was living a role that seemed fraudulent to me. It seemed sad to me. He lived next door to his daughter, in a house, and he was back with Estelle again; they hadn't separated. Finally, they even went back to Oxford, where he died and was buried. I think, in the end, it got to him that he was living the kind of life that he was living. I feel strongly he must have been aware of the fraudulency of what he was doing.

LDB: These intuitions came mostly after the fact, from your work on William Faulkner: *A Life on Paper*?

AIB: I did a lot of research on this and talked to a lot of people. I talked to people at the University of Virginia. I talked to people in Oxford. They all told me a lot of things that had happened in these intervening years. I met his stepdaughter, who got out of a deathbed to drink with me and talk to me—with the pure, pure anger that she had about how Faulkner had been mistreated over the years by the family and by the people around him and so forth, about the demands that were made on him. She told me things which I couldn't use.

LDB: This was Victoria Fielden?

AIB: And I loved her for doing it, telling me, but I also had to use discretion, because you simply couldn't say these things. Yet, I put together a sequence of events, from which I finally came to understand and believe that toward the end of his life, Faulkner realized that the life he was living wasn't Faulkner. He and Estelle came back to Rowan Oak. Now, the two of them had had a bad relationship, for years, yet they were bound together, from childhood, because they were childhood sweethearts. They had traumas in their childhood — she in her family, he from his — that made them seek each other out, in strange ways. I'm sure that if a good analysis were made of this, you would see that they were doomed to be together, and they were.

As a conclusion to the PBS script, I wrote that at the end of his life, Hemingway discovered the loss of his faculties, and that the grief over this made him put a shotgun in his mouth and pull the trigger. Likewise, Faulkner surely committed suicide by getting drunk so incessantly and riding the least manageable horse, the one that had thrown him several times before and he knew would throw him again. I think the last few months of Faulkner's life were dedicated to committing suicide, in a way, because he had sensed a loss of faculty.

LDB: To what might you attribute this loss of faculty?

AIB: Oh, the drinking, for years, had certainly dulled his sharpness. When I read that he had had shock therapy applied to him by a psychologist who hadn't even asked for permission to do it, had done it without getting permission of the family, I asked a lot of questions about what shock therapy does to a person. One of several very bright doctors put it this way: "It deletes memory; the memory of the past, the pain." Faulkner's great fiction had been written out of the memory of pain; this had been deleted. Suddenly, I could understand how, in *The Town*, Flem Snopes had become a lovable character, not the monster he had been depicted as in *The Hamlet*. Suddenly, Bill was a man who had sweet memories of his past. Certainly

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

Bill must have realized, in some strange, profound way, that he had lost something terribly important. And this loss drove him to his special kind of suicide.

LDB: Why do you imagine Faulkner submitted at all to the shock therapy?

AIB: I have no idea, in fact. Perhaps to curb depression, help him cure his drinking problem. I do feel that Bill couldn't benefit from therapy of any kind. He simply couldn't examine why things happened. He couldn't face the realities of his life; it was too painful! There is nothing simple about this. There is nothing wrong about this either. A lot of people can't face what they have done in their life.

LDB: Do you feel, perhaps, that Faulkner's reluctance to probe into these personal things had to do with an uneasiness that if he did discover the root, the core of many of his personal problems, he might, in the process of removing the source of the disturbance, eradicate or annihilate or nullify the need to create, fictively?

AIB: No way! If Faulkner was afraid that more insight would somehow keep him from his writing, he was full of shit! He would have written even better. Writers shouldn't be afraid of insight. The more you know, the better you can understand the people you're writing about.

LDB: Then, speculatively, at least, to what do you attribute his unwillingness, Faulkner's emphatic unwillingness . . .

AIB: To probe? Pure terror! Pure terror at knowing the reality that you come from. Pure terror! Can you imagine how it must have been to be a child, an infant, to be in the presence of a dominating, angry mother, and an incompetent, drunken father, who failed at everything he did. Faulkner heard this even before he was born, when he was rocked, in the amniotic stage. Can you imagine how terrifying it must have been to explore into that—terrifying! No wonder he didn't do it. No wonder people don't do it!

LDB: In summing up: You were born in 1908. Your life has encompassed many radically changing cultural movements in our society. Earlier, you expressed your excitement, in 1931, on having discovered, for the first time, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Now, in looking back over the span of fifty years, how do you see Faulkner? How do you see his work? Will it last?

AIB: I see Faulkner as a very sensitive, very bright, very intelligent, high I.Q. guy. He was great—in the intellectual sense. I see Faulkner, in the personal sense, in the sense of relating to people with empathy, as not having been terribly effective. If he had appreciated all the things I did for him when he was at Warner Bros., knowing him, liking him as a writer, respecting him, it seems to me that there was a little more he might have given back than just a few days over at his place, at Oxford. If he had been a sensitive man, and he was sleeping with his wife and we were in the next room, it seems to me he would not have allowed himself to become enraged that night. There was an insensitivity and an inability to relate. That's tragic!

Yet, I think, despite all of this, he was somehow driven to express himself, to prove he was a writer, since he had taken the cop-out of being a writer, to escape his responsibility as the oldest son. He had begun to write out of desperation, without even realizing it, and he succeeded in writing things that were Faulkner, the things that he knew, the things that he was, things that came out of his own life. So, in many ways, he was a sensitive guy.

LDB: Are you making a distinction between the man and his fiction?

AIB: Well, he was very sensitive to the things that touched him, that meant something to him. He was totally insensitive toward the feelings of other people. He was basically a selfish, self-serving person.

LDB: But, in his best fiction, what you get, most often through artistic implication, is a strong sense of moral value, of ethical substance. Are you suggesting that although Faulkner may not have been an exemplary person in his deeds, his

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

fiction could still express and project strong positive moral values?

AIB: Up to a limit—there is a limit. In his writing, in the intimate details having to do with intimate relationships between men and women, he fails, because in his life he failed. He couldn't face that dilemma in his life, so when he wrote about it, there was no way for him to touch it. If Faulkner had had the capacity to recognize what he was doing to Meta Carpenter, if Faulkner had had the capacity to recognize what his mother had done to him, then he could have humanized the characters in his stories; he would have fulfilled those relationships. But he couldn't, because he couldn't fulfill them in his own life.

LDB: Which isn't to say that he couldn't express sorrow and pain and regret and all other abstracts.

AIB: Pain and regret, perhaps, up to a limit, but when he came really down to the man/woman relationship in his stories —

LDB: But, how about the Dilseys and the Riders, the Fentrys and Wash Joneses and Nancy Mannigoes of Faulkner's fiction? He seems certainly capable of expressing, powerfully, a whole emotional range of sentiments and passions, strong moral and ethical values, standards of right and wrong.

AIB: Oh, yeah, in the larger sense; when blacks were abused, he knew they were abused, were being abused. Look what he does in *The Sound and the Fury* with Quentin and the other characters; when he does it in that context, it is fine.

LDB: You're saying that in male/female contexts he is less convincing.

AIB: That's right! He seemed incapable of sustaining a man-woman relationship in his life. He failed again and again and again with the different women in his life, failed to respect them as persons, not just as women, which he couldn't do either. He thought talking about writing fulfilled his relationship with one of the girls that he was with, but that wasn't what she wanted.

LDB: And that was Joan Williams?

AIB: Yeah, that didn't fulfill anything. That was an incomplete relationship.

LDB: Meta Carpenter Wilde suggested in an interview that Faulkner was probably best as a lover in his letters to her. He was, apparently, unable to verbalize his sentiments, his passions.

AIB: Yes, but relationships have to do with being a person, not writing letters from two thousand miles away. Just think how safe he was writing letters from Oxford. "Live up to what you said." "I can't, I'm two thousand miles away."

LDB: To bring this back around again, will you give me your estimation of Faulkner's literature, divorced from the man you knew? Will the literature last? Is it authentic? Is it valid? Is it valuable, and, if so, why?

AIB: In a peculiar way, when I say that Faulkner had limitations, despite the limitations, something comes across. When you read *The Sound and the Fury* and don't quite get what the hell he's talking about, you read it again and again and you get it. It is very hard to criticize because you don't know where to attack it and where to praise it, except that a world he recreates really does come to life.

LDB: The best of the writing, then, what does it do? How does it affect us? Will it live?

AIB: I certainly think it will live. God! If the Japanese and the French accept it as great writing because they're involved in doing the abusive things to their own people that we have done to people in our own South, then it's great writing and it's going to live—because people are going to do these stupid things to each other all along, and his writing is going to say this is where it gets back to. His fiction says, "Look what we did," and it tells about the abuses of the black and white relations. Now, there it's not personal; there it's a thing that he is viewing, and he writes very honestly about that. The pains of that are wonderful. When the black and the white kids are growing up together, so that they don't know whose breast is whose or care if this black woman is their mother or not, but when they get to a certain age and something terrible happens, and he

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

writes about this—this doesn't have to do with his utterly terrible relationship with his own mother and father, so he writes about this like a house on fire. And an aspect of our society's heritage comes to life in a way that is incredible. Faulkner has done something! He has said a crime was committed, and this is what it was. And in the best of his writing, like *Absalom, Absalom!*, he says to what degree of white and black you must be before you can be forgiven for being black, what percentage of black blood you must have in you in order for you to be persecuted. That's a hell of a book. If you want to know the crime that was committed against the people in the South, read *Absalom, Absalom!*. You don't have to go any farther than that! It tells you! No wonder his own family turned against him! I doubt anyone of them even read the goddamn book!

LDB: Well, they certainly read *Intruder in the Dust*, and they turned against him at that time.

AIB: Yeah, and *Intruder in the Dust* couldn't cast a shadow on *Absalom, Absalom!*.

LDB: Except that it was certainly provocative enough to his family and those around him, like his old friend Phil Stone, whom he had long since outdistanced in sentiment.

AIB: My feeling is that the best of Bill's writing wasn't focused on personal dilemma, although that's where the writing began, but on depicting the crime that was being committed, and Bill had the sensitivity to see the crime, to size it up. In personal relationships, he didn't have that sensitivity, but in the relationships in his South that he saw and could view without personalizing them, he succeeded masterfully.

LDB: He didn't like individual persons, but he loved People.

AIB: People, right! Also, it was difficult for him to touch on the personal for himself, having to do with his own life; he had to enlarge it into a marvelous fantasy.

LDB: The fact that Faulkner could have had some of the insights he had, having grown up in that rather provincial, strangling environment embedded in bigotry and racism . . . the fact that he could somehow seemingly rise above a lot of that and create a universal literature amazes me. Do you feel that his success had to do with his getting out of Oxford, from an early age, going to New Orleans, New Haven, New York, California?

AIB: No! This all happened long before. He got out of Oxford and in a sense the world in which he was living, and could view it objectively because he got out of the demands of being the oldest child and taking on attendant responsibilities, by becoming the writer: first, the bohemian poet, then the writer of *Sanctuary*, finally, the Nobel laureate—though by that late time, it no longer worked, as I have said. See, if he had looked at his world subjectively—turn-of-the-century Oxford, Oxford of the teens and twenties—he never would have questioned it. He would have done what his father demanded, what his grandfather demanded before him, what his mother demanded of him, which was really nothing but failure—at least in terms of his father's poor record. He even refused to accept his literary mentor's dicta in the final analysis—Phil Stone's restrictive and rigid ethical, racial, and literary principles—and that's when Faulkner discovered how to make great, innovative fiction! Not wanting any part of that life in Oxford made him objective and removed him just as if he had gone to Hollywood or New York; he left that town long before, and the way he left it was by wandering about and watching people in their lives, their oppressions, watching the mules pulling the plow, watching the stuff over by the river; this all happened in his teens and early twenties. He just didn't want to be a part of it! His revolt was against a sense of responsibility!

LDB: So he got out of Oxford even though, for the longest time, he never left it at all. He did remove himself from it!

AIB: Intellectually!

LDB: Spiritually, too! He removed himself from it, not by going to Hollywood, New York, not even by going to

THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

Memphis, Greenville, or Clarksdale, rather by wandering around the town, the courthouse, the Square, the countryside, and, in wandering around, he saw and kept seeing, objectively, the world in which he was living. How much did the intensive reading he was doing in his youth tend to reinforce or augment his perceptions?

AIB: I think that what the reading did for him was to say these writers lived in a world and, in their way—the Joyces, Hardys, Conrads, Balzac — they wrote about the world they lived in. Seeing this and reading it made him see the world he lived in, and when Sherwood Anderson said write about the world you know, bang, that clicked!

LDB: Being close to it, and having access to other writers as models gave Faulkner the insight into how other people, writers living within similar closed societies, could yet gain distance and be objective.

AIB: Right! That's right! They provided him with endless examples; their examples made it possible for him to do what he did.

LDB: The literature which he had assimilated, his great-grandfather's image as well, plus the dread of having to fulfill the responsibility of becoming the head of a household in that town: these impelled him toward his vocation!

AIB: Absolutely! Once Faulkner said, "I'm going to be a writer like my great-granddaddy," then he had to be a writer. So he read and did all these things because he had to fulfill what he was going to become. We all make choices. He could have chosen to become a drunk and fail in everything, but he chose to be a writer.

LDB: Perhaps he chose to be both writer and drunk because he was flawed, because even choosing is flawed.

AIB: Right! His writing was flawed, and so was his life. But the point is, he did choose them both.

LDB: And in choosing both, he was forced to make and accept his compromises.

AIB: Yeah, but also he would have been the first to admit that not all of his writing was great.

LDB: He wasn't *born* a great writer, but his circumstances made him choose writing as a way of escaping the realities of his life. He *made himself* a great writer, and, in the process, created a greater reality of his own.

AIB: You know something? What I get out of all this isn't a sense of pity, but a sadness for Bill, and at the same time, the realization that without all that agony, the writing wouldn't have happened. If the agony hadn't been there! If the anguish hadn't been there! I tell you, it makes me want to cry, and yet I wouldn't have denied him any of the pain because without the pain, he wouldn't have written *The Sound and the Fury*; he wouldn't have conjured *Absalom, Absalom!*.