

## *Faulkner and the Racial Crisis, 1956*

ON DECEMBER 10, 1950, in Stockholm, Sweden, William Faulkner received the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. This occasion would mark his emergence from a long and well-guarded privacy into the realm of public celebrity, and although he would continue to produce fiction, publishing five novels and four major compilations between 1950 and his death in July 1962, he would also involve himself directly in activities which would reinforce his unofficial role as a cultural emissary of the United States, humanitarian to the world.

By 1956, the most significant of these involvements, his position on civil rights in the South, had come to flash point. Like one of his favorite fictional characters, Don Quixote, Faulkner would sally forth to tilt lances with foes imaginary and very real; and at times reminiscent of the Don, he too might have been inclined to dub himself with the literal nom de plume, Knight of the Doleful Countenance. Yet, for all his disillusionments and rebuffs from family and a faceless public, he was decidedly, like Don Quixote, "hijo de sus obras," son of his own self-motivated labors and consequences.

During these years, one manifestation of Faulkner's celebrity was the actual mail he had become accustomed to receiving, letters from every conceivable source presuming humbly or arrogantly to impose on his time and energies. There is no way of quantifying the ratio of mail received to responses made, but even if he allowed it to accumulate, there is little doubt that he read his mail. And in the case of letters coming in to him during periods when his essays and open letters on civil rights were appearing in national and international publications, there is yet greater certainty that he was attentive and inclined to keep up with it. After all, Faulkner had calculated his essays to provoke just this kind of stir from the public. Actually, in many essays and letters to the editor, during 1956, Faulkner made specific reference to the fact that he was quite aware of responses to his public appeals, especially in the form of incoming letters, which, he conceded, were not generally supportive of his convictions and principles.

During a visit I made with Victoria Fielden Johnson in her home, in Cape Coral, Florida, May 20-24, 1985, she and I discovered, among family artifacts, a packet containing forty-three letters addressed to William Faulkner, some mailed directly to Oxford, Mississippi, others to the offices of Time-Life, in New York and Chicago, or to the headquarters of *The Reporter* magazine, in New York. Mrs. Johnson had no difficulty recalling the circumstances surrounding the seemingly anomalous letters she had inherited from her father, William, and mother, Victoria Franklin Fielden, Faulkner's step-daughter. During my stay, Mrs. Johnson related to me how Kate Baker, an Oxford neighbor and close friend of William and Estelle Faulkner, had driven over to her mother's house, in Oxford, in 1973, to return the packet to Mrs. Fielden. Kate Baker

The forty-three unpublished letters alluded to or excerpted in this essay—which passed in succession from William Faulkner to Kate Baker to Mr. and Mrs. William Fielden to Mrs. Victoria Fielden Johnson—are now part of the Louis Daniel Brodsky Faulkner Collection on deposit in the Kent Library of Southeast Missouri State University at Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I wish to thank Jill Faulkner Summers for permission to publish material in or relating to my Faulkner collection that currently appears in or will be published subsequently in *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi). I also thank Victoria F. Johnson for her trust in allowing me to be the present legal owner of her family archive and to develop its holdings into scholarly contributions.—LDB

told her, then, that Faulkner had given her this group of letters shortly after he had read them. Like Faulkner, Kate Baker had been keenly sensitive to the civil rights agitation that was then straining Oxford and the entire South, and she was highly sympathetic towards Faulkner's outspoken convictions on the subject. Apparently, during Faulkner's many comings and goings between Oxford and the world, Kate Baker had been unable to return the letters to him, then had misplaced them amidst her own household effects. They had gone unnoticed by her for seventeen years. Now, housecleaning, she had discovered them and wished Mrs. Fielden to have them.

The forty-three letters cover a period of approximately six weeks, the earliest being dated March 7, 1956, and the latest April 19, 1956. By far the most significant letters, representing about two-thirds of the entire group, are those containing direct or indirect responses to two specific publications which occurred just prior to and during this time period: Faulkner's controversial interview with Russell Warren Howe, published in the United States, on March 22, 1956, in *The Reporter*, and "A Letter to the North," which *Life*, printed on March 5, 1956.

The letters from the group not bearing directly on civil rights reveal a diffuse spectrum, which makes possible an overview of the kind and caliber of requests to which Faulkner's ubiquitous celebrity had made him vulnerable. One came from his Italian publisher, Alberto Mondadori, concerning the hope that Faulkner might help secure permission to translate *Sartoris*, to complete his full run of titles to appear in Italian. Other requests included three invitations to speak: one from the William Faulkner Chapter of a Memphis high school Quill and Scroll Society, a second from women students at Duke University, and a third from an eastern arts festival. One correspondent asked Faulkner for his signature; another (the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) asked for a personal item, presumably to be auctioned; still others asked for assistance with work on Faulkner and other southern writers, for permission to stage *Requiem for a Nun*, and for Faulkner's ideas about the word "humanist." A Parisian asked Faulkner to lend his name in support of an "International Jazz Club"; another Frenchman solicited Faulkner, as a member of the Nobel Academy, to vote for a particular candidate for the "Grand Prix De Littérature 1956"; and the Brown-Forman Distillers Corporation, of Louisville, Kentucky, invited Faulkner to attend their "22 Annual Derby Party at the Distillery," on May 3, 1956.

Obviously, this pastiche of incoming mail can only hint at the actual quantity and the almost inconceivable variety of requests Faulkner was getting during this stage in his career. Yet, it seems to me, to be privy even to this sampling gives us certain distinct advantages: most singularly, having the privilege of sorting through some of Faulkner's mail allows us to participate vicariously in Faulkner's experience, which, no matter how ephemeral and tangential, nonetheless, makes for a potentially closer, more textured approximation of the *weltanschauung* which Faulkner himself must have been perceiving during the twilight of his life. Having access to this foregoing group of letters makes Faulkner's oft-quoted exhortations against strangers intruding on his privacy seem far less calculatedly cynical or even misanthropic. Hopefully, we shall be forgiven for being history's intruders and eavesdroppers; especially since the majority of these letters renders an expanded context in which to view William Faulkner operating during the mid-fifties. Indeed, those dealing explicitly with the race problem help sharpen hindsight's focus, and as such, allow us to make even less partial, more palpably objective judgments regarding Faulkner's courageous stand in support of the central issue of his time and place: civil rights for Negroes.

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Faulkner's position on civil rights was most elaborately postulated in a manifesto entitled "A Letter to the North," which was published in *Life*, on March 5, 1956. In this essay, he asserted:

From the beginning of this present phase of the race problem in the South, I have been on record as opposing the forces in my native country which would keep the condition out of which this present evil and trouble has grown. Now I must go on record as opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate that evil overnight. I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration. . . . So I would say to the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration "Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. . . . You have shown the Southerner what you can do and what you will do if necessary; give him a space in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge . . . that he himself faces an obsolescence in his own land which . . . has got to be cured if he, the white Southerner, is to have any peace, is not to be faced with another legal process or maneuver every year, year after year, for the rest of his life.

Regarding his own personal position within the situation, Faulkner saw himself, foremost, as a son of the South, a liberally enlightened son, whose most pressing responsibility, as its spokesman, was to help convert those still crusading for obsolete ideologies, by proselytizing for change—moderate, gradual change, to be sure. He envisioned himself and a relatively few other southerners in his milieu occupying a middle ground, "still being Southerners, yet not being part of the general majority Southern point of view: by being present yet detached, committed and attainted neither by Citizens' Council nor NAACP; by being in the middle, being in a position to say to any incipient irrevocability: 'Wait, wait now, stop and consider first.'"

However, Faulkner's greatest anxiety arose from being compelled to accept outside intervention, because, then, he would have "to vacate that middle where [he] could have worked to help the Negro improve his condition"; he would then be forced to side with one group or the other. For aesthetic reasons, when writing about this approach-avoidance complex, Faulkner conveniently could avoid defining this alternative. In "A Letter to the North," he would say simply that given no other choices, he and his fellow advocates of moderate change "will have to make a new choice." Nor was it necessary to stipulate a precise time frame in which the changes leading to a fully integrated society would take effect.

The actual situation that provoked Faulkner to write "A Letter to the North," the court-ordered admission of Autherine Lucy, a Negro student, to the all-white University of Alabama, and the dire problem of her safety, also gave rise to two even more urgent attempts to bring Miss Lucy's plight to the public's attention. On February 21, 1956, just after Faulkner learned that the Supreme Court had overruled the high court of Alabama and made mandatory Autherine Lucy's admission on March 5, 1956, and on being notified that *Life* could not publish his "Letter to the North" until the week of March 5, he desperately acquiesced to what, unwittingly, became a highly controversial interview with Russell Warren Howe, New York correspondent to the London *Sunday Times*.

Having steadily increased his intake of alcohol, for nearly three weeks, Faulkner allowed himself to be more garrulous and explicitly volatile on one specific point than he had in his essays. Possibly, Howe had antagonized or subtly taken advantage of Faulkner's vulnerable condition. Regardless, Faulkner punctuated his otherwise relatively coherent, consistent, and effective interview (subsequently published in the London *Sunday Times*, on March 4, 1956, and in *The Reporter*, on March 22, 1956) with the following statement: "As long as there is a middle road, all right, I'll be on it. But if it came to

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fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes." According to Howe, Faulkner followed this ill-advised remark with yet another equally disturbing and inflammatory one: "I will go on saying that the Southerners are wrong and that their position is untenable, but if I have to make the same choice Robert E. Lee made then I'll make it." Whether isolated from, or read in, their contexts, these damaging statements cast, for some, perhaps many, an irrevocably ambiguous and unsettling shadow on Faulkner's credibility as a spokesman for racial equality.

Unfortunately, the interview does not record Howe's questions or conceivably baiting remarks, which might have provoked Faulkner's instantly attributable comments about "going out into the street and shooting Negroes." In "A Letter to the North," Faulkner had addressed the possibility of being preempted from his position by federal intervention with the veiled allowance that under such circumstances he and his fellow workers on the Negroes' behalf necessarily would "have to make a new choice." Always, in his prose, he had time to ponder, select the best possible choice of words, to make his points effectively; obviously, this had not been the case, with Howe, whose "verbatim shorthand notes" of Faulkner's comments had seemingly been etched in stone.

On February 24, 1956, three days after the Howe interview, and even more visibly inebriated, Faulkner went on live radio as a guest celebrity of "The Tex and Jinx Show" and made yet another set of infelicitous remarks, trying to promote integration. This time, when, again, forced to answer directly, without the safety net of his own revisable prose, he suggested that the racial situation in the South might fare better were the policy of maintaining separate schools for blacks and whites to continue. Obviously, to anyone who had read Faulkner's April 3, 1955 letter to the editor in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, this statement would have sounded a patently flat note. In that letter, he had called for one school system for "white and Negro both." For Faulkner, the lingering stalemate seemed to center on the notion of "forced integration." He believed that if the Negro were exposed to superior education, he would advance on his own merit to full equality of opportunity for jobs, housing, political positions, and all the fundamental freedoms and amenities denied blacks. Indeed, at the outset of his essay "On Fear: The South in Labor," in the June 1956 issue of *Harper's*, seemingly articulating an explicitly apologetic corrective to the slip he had made about segregated schooling on "The Tex and Jinx Show," Faulkner would clarify and reinforce his insistence on integrated schooling.

A letter from the editors of *Time*, dated April 13, 1956, addressed to "Mr. William Faulkner/Box 124/Oxford, Mississippi," began: "Thank you for writing to us at length concerning the statement about Mississippi attributed to you in our March 26 cover story on Senator Eastland. We also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge Mrs. Faulkner's wire concerning it." While concluding with a formal confirmation of the forthcoming publication of his letter with only "a few slight deletions," this letter from *Time* could have done little to assuage what by that time must have been extreme disillusionment occasioned by the unfortunate comments he had made in his interview with Howe.

As the *Time* letter promised, Faulkner's recantatory disclaimer was published in their April 23 issue. In it, Faulkner attempted to distance, if not completely disassociate, himself from obviously irresponsible remarks "imputed" to him, reasoning that the specifically cited passages from the interview "contain certain opinions which I have never held, and statements which no sober man would make and, it seems to me, no sane man believe." Also, as promised in *Time's* letter to Faulkner, his statements were followed by a terse rejoinder from Howe. Actually, four days earlier, a similar letter to the editor had appeared in *The Reporter*; it also was accompanied by Howe's rebuttal, though, in that instance, Howe's remarks

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were more emphatic than those *Time's* editors had printed. Howe wrote: "All the statements attributed to Mr. Faulkner were transcribed by me from verbatim shorthand notes of the interview. If the more Dixiecratic remarks misconstrue his thoughts, I, as an admirer of Mr. Faulkner's, am glad to know it. But what I set down is what he said."

A textual comparison of Faulkner's two letters to the editor reveals few dissimilarities, even in phraseology; however, in the earlier letter Faulkner submitted to *The Reporter*, he mentions having seen a quotation of his "shooting Negroes in the street" statement in *Newsweek* as well as in *Time*. More significantly, he suggests that although he has not seen the interview "as printed," his conclusion that "some parts of the interview with me . . . are not correct" is based on insights derived from firsthand evidence, namely, "from letters I have received." There is no way of knowing how many letters Faulkner got in direct response to his *Reporter* interview with Howe, but four extant letters, which, once, were in his possession, attest to the fact that despite his most dire anxieties and insecurities about the ensuing scandal he had precipitated, public perception of his pronouncements ranged from cynical and vitriolic outrage to praiseworthy confirmation, all with varying degrees of qualification.

The first of these, dated March 16, 1956, postmarked Paris and subscribed by thirty-four members of the National Union of Family Allocations, was written as a direct outcry against the "go out into the street and shoot blacks" comment from the interview's appearance in *The Reporter*. Translated into English, it reads:

Considering, whatever may be your position with regard to the segregation problem, that these words reflect a total absence of humanity on your part, we are proceeding to rise up vigorously against your attitude which, because of your fame, risks having a momentous repercussion.

We uniformly advise you that as of today, we are asking our library personnel to refrain from the acquisition of works bearing your name.

Conversely, excerpts from the following two letters demonstrate essentially affirmative and complimentary approval of Faulkner's position as expressed in *The Reporter* interview:

Dear Mr. Faulkner;

A few days ago the interview you gave the London Times man, as reproduced in *The Reporter*, came to my attention. As one born down in Texas, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And, as an SAE, I wish to say that I am proud of you. . . . Your words are very apt: "There is no such thing as an Anglo-Saxon heritage and an African heritage. There is the heritage of man."

Those are great words.

I wish the hotheads in the north would read what you have to say.

Dear Mr. Faulkner:

I want to write to you, and tell you how much I appreciate your interview in *The Reporter*. It is a strong note of real wisdom and courage and understanding, so badly and quickly needed now. . . .

I think—and I have many friends here in Princeton who take the extreme liberal position—that your position is the difficult position, and that it takes real greatness to advocate calm and patience and understanding of such widespread ignorance. . . .

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Also, I would like to say, that I appreciate very much that you speak out in your great understanding and feeling for human beings. Not only do you write it down in your magnificent *Light in August*. I don't demand this of artists, but I'm always glad when they do it.

Thank you again — perhaps you have saved Miss Lucy's life. What a perfect name — Autherine Juanita Lucy.

The final letter in this sequence, displaying a brand of arrogance and reverse prejudice, was written by a New York author and lecturer:

Dear Mr. Faulkner:

Your Negroes come to New York, just as the Irish came after the potato blight, and the East-European Jew after the pogroms [sic]. Your Negroes come for similar reasons: to find decency and build a better life.

If you care for the Negro, advise him to come here. New York is impersonal and hard, and grumbles at all the new refugees, but New York is civilized and will not turn the Negro away. Those that are strong, and well-advised, will educate themselves at the public schools and colleges here, and get—free and with respect—a better education than they could get anywhere in the South. Once they have that, their battle will be half won.

The other half to be won is the bitter memory that less than a century ago a dark skin meant slavery to a whiter skin. In your South the Negro is never allowed to forget it. But in New York he grows in our streets, along side the Puerto-Rican, the Jew and the Mediterraneans who treat him as just another guy. This is worth more to a refugee Negro than all the pious mouthings about how happy he is in "his place" in the South. If he wishes to avoid the Southern Hospitality which spits on him, robs him and then calls him "Nigger," tell him to get on a train and come here.

There is a saying in Harlem; "better a lamp post on Lenox Avenue, than the govenor [sic] of Georgia."

The author of this letter placed in the bottom left margin the following postscript: "I was fascinated by the 3 novels of yours that I read. If only *you* had grown up in N.Y.!"

There can be little question that Faulkner, the writer of essays and letters to the editor, had complete mastery over his conscience and its conscious expression. After all, in this medium he had the luxury of proofreading to ensure the efficacy and correctness of every syllable as well as each weighty implication. By contrast, when venturing out of his special province, either to make a "public" statement, through person-to-person interviews, or when asked to respond to unrehearsed questions on live radio, frequently he might confuse his well-intentioned emotions with the facts and say flagrant things. In both letters to *The Reporter* and *Time* of April 19 and 23, respectively, Faulkner implied he would have caught any tactless or factually incorrect statement "if I had seen it [the interview] before it went into print."

Fundamentally, Faulkner's position on civil rights was of a whole; it was ethical and universally humanitarian in its Ghandian non-violent posture. And only by focusing on individual lapses, lifting them from the large contextual body of Faulkner's pronouncements on civil rights issues, thereby clouding with ambiguity his otherwise bold humanitarianism, might one conclude that his essential formulations for dealing with the endemic malaise of race relations in the South and in the United States were hypocritical or disingenuous. Indeed, it might be easier to excuse Faulkner's few public lapses, or at least put them in proper perspective, if one were aware of his physical condition and emotional state during that brief period

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between February and early March 1956, when he was in New York, anticipating publication of "A Letter to the North" and making himself available, at any cost, to promote whatever immediate reconciliatory and ameliorative actions he could, to help avert threats or actual danger to Autherine Lucy.

In a reflective letter to Joan Williams, ten months later, Faulkner apologized for having failed to meet her for an engagement they had made during that period of personal turmoil:

At that time, the Lucy girl had been expelled from the University of Alabama. The next step would be for the NAACP to return her by compulsion, force. If they did that, I believed she would be killed. I had been rushing here and there, trying to get air time before they sent her back. I dont know now why I thought then that drinking could help, but that's what I was doing, a lot of it. I woke up that morning in an apartment not mine with just sense enough to tell you I couldn't make the luncheon, collapsed. Came to Friday and friends resuscitated me just in time to make a presentable appearance on the Tex Something and somebody like a Frankie and Johnny team on the air from the Waldorf and make my plea.

If nothing else, this document makes possible a more insightful appreciation of the calculated strategy Faulkner employed in couching the apologies he sent to the editors of *The Reporter* and *Time* magazines, in which he totally disclaimed apparently false quotations "imputed" to him, relegating them to "statements which no sober man would make and, it seems to me, no sane man believe." Arguably, Faulkner could have considered himself during that period in a state of inebriated *non compos mentis*.

What Faulkner did not relate, in his letter to Joan Williams, was that a week and a half after arriving in Oxford, from New York, he had collapsed from severe alcoholic intoxication, and on March 18, 1956, had been confined to Baptist Memorial Hospital, in Memphis. However, on March 23, the national wire services did report that Faulkner was "convalescing satisfactorily" from an unidentified illness. But at least one young writer, Terry Southern, was aware of Faulkner's condition and, on March 28, did respond, wishing Faulkner a "quick and entire recovery." He went on to say:

I suppose I was either always too awed by your actual presence to properly say how much I like your writing, or else perhaps felt the saying it would have been (from my standpoint) too superfluous—if not even more tediously useless (from your own). Anyway, it will always be an inspiration to me, and I want to express my thanks for the opportunity of being with you.

On that same day, William Eastlake, a novelist from New Mexico, wrote Faulkner. Quite possibly reading "A Letter to the North" had stirred memories of an acquaintanceship which may have occurred, evanescently, around the time Faulkner was fleeing from Hollywood, in late September 1945. In their hyperbolic tone, the following excerpts from Eastlake's tongue-in-cheek letter almost seem to have been mined from the same vein as the Al Jackson letters Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson had exchanged thirty years earlier:

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Dear Bill Faulkner:

I got nothing but horses now on the ranch. The damn Indians eat cows, brand and all. My neighbors are fixin' to get ready to take their stuff up on the mountain. But I am fed up with cattle. It's about time the Indians earned their own living. The Indians have been exploiting us since they discovered us—egged the first covered wagons on. I will try a few more Angus and that's the end. How are your animals doing? . . .

When do you think you might make it? It seems to me you should get shut of writing for a while (you write better than anyone in the damn world now) and do something serious like buying one of my horses.

Between March 7, when Faulkner settled in at Rowan Oak, to unwind from his New York trip, and March 18, when he was hospitalized, and again between March 24, evidently having recuperated sufficiently from acute alcoholic incapacitation, and early April, when he briefly traveled to Charlottesville, to see his first grandchild, before continuing on, again, to New York, he attended to accumulated correspondence. Already, responses to the March 4 London *Sunday Times* interview with Howe and the March 5 *Life* essay, "A Letter to the North," had begun to pour into offices of *The Reporter* and *Time-Life* in New York and Chicago, respectively, and were being forwarded directly on to Oxford. Some time soon after his arrival in Oxford, on March 7, 1956, Faulkner wrote to the editors of *Life* magazine. His open letter began: "Since *Life* printed my 'Letter to the North' I have received many replies from outside the South. Many of them criticized the reasoning *in* the letter but so far none of them seem to have divined the reason *behind* the letter [which was] the attempt of an individual to save the South and the whole United States too from the blot of Miss Autherine Lucy's death."

This letter to the editor appeared in the March 26 issue of *Life*. In some ways it is similar to the twin disclaimers of the Howe interview Faulkner would place in *The Reporter* and *Time* almost a month later; however, this time his need to make qualifications would result from his not having been explicit enough, rather than overly so. In fact, in "A Letter to the North," Faulkner had only once mentioned by name Autherine Lucy or alluded to her plight at the University of Alabama. Also, in this letter, Faulkner reaffirmed what he had already stated in his "Letter to the North," namely, that "since I went on record as being opposed to compulsory racial inequality, I have received many letters." Indeed, his March 26 letter in *Life* was accompanied by four ostensibly random samples which the editors had chosen to supplement Faulkner's contribution. Both letters "from outside the South" are strident; both are written by Negroes with grievances. The two samples from within the South are from presumably white Alabamians, natives of the abusive state where the demonstrations had been occurring; both these letters are sympathetic to Faulkner's moderate views. Obviously, *Life*'s editorial staff was attempting to add support to Faulkner's contention in "A Letter to the North" that "the rest of the United States knows next to nothing about the South."

Regarding Faulkner's qualification, it might be argued that he may have greatly exaggerated the actual significance of the Lucy incident, at least in real, physical terms. As a symbolic event, surely he was correct in employing it as a pivot for his expressions. And yet, rereading his last brief paragraph, one can hardly fail to evoke, with poignant irony, the situation that developed in Faulkner's hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, just three months after his death, in July 1962, when James Meredith made his stand as the first Negro to gain admittance to the University of Mississippi. Faulkner had concluded his March 26 letter to the editor of *Life*: "She was not sent back, so the letter ["A Letter to the North"] was not needed for that

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purpose. I hope it never will be. But if a similar situation bearing the seed of a similar tragedy should arise again, maybe the letter will help to serve."

In hindsight, it appears perhaps that Faulkner underestimated the clarity of his "reasoning *in* the letter," that it may have been far more significant than the "reason *behind* the letter." Several letters written from outside the South, which Faulkner received, in Oxford, were laudatory rather than critical of his reasoning in "A Letter to the North." One correspondent wrote: "Let's hope the transformation is achieved with sound common sense and in the absence of violence and bloodshed. Don't desert your position in the middle of this issue. The South needs wisdom and reason now far more than it needs patriotism." Another assured Faulkner "that many others are thinking along your lines—maybe enough to get officials to reconsider or at least to move slowly." "May we suggest that you make a mistake in thinking of northerners as a massive heap of ignorance when it comes to thinking about the South and its problems," wrote a New Yorker. A Californian told Faulkner: "I was rather surprised to read in *Life Magazine* that you had received many critical letters from the North concerning your letter on integration. Actually, I believe there are a great many more 'moderates' up North than many Southerners think, partly due to the fact that the moderates do not tend to write letters on the subject so readily." And a Dane wrote Faulkner:

In this country nobody is able to understand that civilized people can treat negroes as many Americans do at present. Autherine Lucy's fate can make us hate these stupid unfeeling people who are not able to place themselves in the same situation (in their imagination). USA loses a lot of reputation on account of such conditions. Of course it is not *all* Americans who show such bad behaviour, but however few they are (and I hope they are few) this abominable behaviour reduces the reputation. At first I did not understand your words the other day, but now I see that the purpose was as could be expected from you, and of course the progress must come gradually, but *PLEASE* help the negroes and accelerate progress as much as possible, for conditions now are a disgrace for civilized people—and heartless for the poor innocent.

Regardless of the essay's relatively unambiguous and non-prejudicial tone, there were those who read "A Letter to the North" and found in it just the tinder they needed to reignite their own bigoted animosities. Misconstruing Faulkner's attitudes, convictions, and purposes, the authors of two other letters wasted little time in communicating with the person in whom they mistakenly felt they had discovered a kindred spirit:

Dear Mr. Faulkner,

I live in a small southern city—perhaps thirty-thousand population. . . . The primary reason for segregation here is to keep the white race white, so far as I can see. But you see so many half-whites. Which race do they belong?

None of the white women I know want integration. No southern woman wants integration, because she has been taught to fear negro men. Can't that be understood by anyone. Fear is a strong thing and we are panic-stricken. What shall we teach our daughters? Mine is eleven.

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Dear Mr. Faulkner,

Countless LIFE readers must have been deeply stirred by your searching article of March 5th. It is to be hoped that you will use other avenues to broadcast this just and worthy viewpoint. . . . Are [men . . . in high places] not aware that segregation is practiced in every phase of human existence? The Negro students at Tuskegee Institute of Alabama practice segregation according to color. Negroes as well as all other nationalities are happier when they are with those most like themselves. They feel normal and natural and not "thrown away" as in the presence of mixed groups. Negroes especially have a natural good humor and are always happy when among themselves, as evidenced by the town down South which is inhabited by Negroes only. They are so happy among themselves there is no need for a jail.

Do the thinking people in high places actually know about the terrible atrocities committed every hour of every day in the mixed sections of their cities where mixed romances turn into ghastly murders? Have they weighed their decision through experience among the Negroes in these crime-ridden areas where the whites and the Negroes are forced economically to live next door to one another? Do they know anything at all about the deep devotion that exists between the Southern Negro and his White Folks? . . .

Like yourself, Mr. Faulkner, we are proud of the illuminating article you have written, and we want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

The next two letters exemplify attitudes remarkably similar to two selections from black writers "from outside the South," which the editors of *Life* had included with Faulkner's letter, in their March 26 issue.

Dear Sir:

The present unrest is not of northern design. It cannot be denied that the Supreme Court decision gave heart to the colored peoples of the south, but having taken heart they seem determined to go forward. Many of the young men have tasted a different sort of life when they have been transported to the armed forces. Some through the GI Bill have been educated in the north. The cry of Moses to "Let my people go" has always held a place in the hearts of colored Christians. The unity of the participants in the bus boycott continued to amaze your neighbors who were convinced that most Negroes preferred "peace to equality."

"Wait, wait now, stop and consider first." This is not a revolutionary statement and after 98 years it would seem we have waited long enough. "You cannot force integration by legal edict," this we hear over and over, "These things have to be done gradually." There is such a thing as moving so slowly that you are going backward.

Mr. William Faulkner

Your main theme is understanding of the southern white man and his situation. What makes him hate the Black man to the point of utter madness?

What causes him to let this hate degenerate his soul and turn his insides as black as the very pits of hell.

Segregation creates an economic stale-mate and yet the white southern man choose to live with it, why?

This hatred causes him to murder innocent women and children, to lie and steal, rape and pillage, why?

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When a black man commits a crime or some one says he has, he is shot down like a dog or lynched, why?

A person or group of people who would do these things, would you say was sane and rational, just how would you classify such people Mr Faulkner? You have asked for understanding Mr Faulkner, we are trying to understand Mr Faulkner, and have been trying for one hundred years.

You want the forces of decency and equality to stop so that the forces of evil and corruption can lick their wounds. Have they been wounded Mr Faulkner? . . .

You speak of personal crimes of race against race, when a southern white man forces his intention on a colored woman and she conceives and give birth to his children is that a personal crime race against race? When a southern white man demands that a negro rise and give him his seat on a public bus or train is that a personal crime race against race Mr Faulkner? When the negro works from sunrise to sunset without proper compensation, ill housed, ill fed and not given equal opportunity to vote and to obtain a proper education, is that a personal crime race against race Mr Faulkner?

### Trying to Understand

On April 15, 1956, Faulkner also received the following teletype from California news analyst Sidney Roger. Like the preceding letters, this one was in direct response to Faulkner's "A Letter to the North."

WILLIAM FAULKNER

DOCTOR W.E.B. DUBOIS—88 YEAR OLD NEGRO CO-FOUNDER OF NAACP, CHALLENGES YOU TO DEBATE ON STEPS ON COURT HOUSE SUMNER, MISSISSIPPI WHERE EMMETT TILL CASE WAS TRIED, ON SUBJECT OF YOUR "GO SLOW NOW" ADVICE TO NEGROS

REQUEST FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSION WITH YOU WAS MADE BY DR DUBOIS IN RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH NEWS ANALYST SIDNEY ROGER ON RADIO STATION KROW, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA SUNDAY APRIL 15TH AT 8 PM

URGENTLY REQUEST YOUR EARLIEST REPLY TO DR DUBOIS CARE SIDNEY ROGER PROGRAM RADIO STATION KROW, 19 AND BROADWAY OAKLAND CALIFORNIA

On April 17th, Faulkner responded to this request by means of an open telegram he sent to the *New York Times* with the following message:

I DO NOT BELIEVE THERE IS A DEBATABLE POINT BETWEEN US. WE BOTH AGREE IN ADVANCE THAT THE POSITION YOU WILL TAKE IS RIGHT MORALLY LEGALLY AND ETHICALLY. IF IT IS NOT EVIDENT TO YOU THAT THE POSITION I TAKE IN ASKING FOR MODERATION AND PATIENCE IS RIGHT PRACTICALLY THEN WE WILL BOTH WASTE OUR BREATH IN DEBATE. WILLIAM FAULKNER

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A week and a half earlier, Faulkner had received the following solicitation from the Morehouse College Personnel Office on behalf of Norfleet Strother. Strother had served as a butler, at Rowan Oak, and with Faulkner's intellectual example and encouragement, Strother had decided to pursue a college education:

Dear Mr. Faulkner:

One of your former employees, Mr. Norfleet Strother, who, currently, is enrolled at Morehouse College, is in dire need of financial assistance. He needs a minimum of \$135 to carry him through the second semester of the current academic year.

He is to [sic] proud to make known his needs, and, yet, he is so deserving that I feel that the least that I, his counselor, can do, is to apprise you of his situation.

Norfleet is a gentleman. He is honest, reliable, deserving. He is lifting himself up by his bootstraps. All he needs is a little financial assistance.

I've done what I can for him. So have others here at the College. However, it is now necessary and imperative that we seek additional outside help.

Are you willing—able—to help him?

To this request Faulkner would respond readily and would continue doing so throughout the span of Strother's studies. Faulkner would meet this obligation with funds generated from interest earned on a portion of his Nobel Prize stipend specifically set aside for educating Negroes he deemed worthy of his sponsorship.

In December 1955, William Faulkner began writing *The Town*. Despite many distractions and interruptions caused by his highly committed involvement in the public debate raging over civil rights, he continued to gain momentum on the novel, and by the end of August 1956, he had completed the manuscript. One month later, possibly as a way of debating W.E.B. DuBois after all, Faulkner published in *Ebony* magazine an article entitled "If I Were a Negro." He began this essay with what amounted to a third public apology for faux pas he had made in his interview with Russell Warren Howe, earlier in the year; then, from a Negro stance, he went on to advocate those same humanitarian principles he had been espousing polemically from his own white perspective since the late forties. Published in September 1956, "If I Were a Negro" postulated moderation. Faulkner urged his "fellow blacks" to continue peacefully applying to white schools, saying:

This was Ghandi's way. If I were a Negro, I would advise our elders and leaders to make this our undeviating and inflexible course—a course of inflexible and unviolent flexibility directed against not just the schools but against all the public institutions from which we are interdict, as is being done against the Montgomery, Alabama, bus lines. . . . The white man has devoted three hundred years to teaching us to be patient; that is one thing at least in which we are his superiors. Let us turn it into a weapon against him. Let us use this patience not as a passive quality, but as an active weapon.

Now, as then, it would seem difficult to misconstrue Faulkner's "gradualist" position on the central issue of human rights. Certainly, he had given his detractors—northern liberals, Negro activists, and segregationist southerners—all they needed to vilify and discredit him. Yet, he had taken his stand and would continue to hold his ground tenaciously and with passionate courage, prescience, and an unabashed humanitarianism few men have demonstrated so persistently toward their fellow man.