

ROMANIAN RESPONSES TO WILLIAM FAULKNER'S FICTION

Anca Mureșanu

Assist., PhD Student, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: As the title suggests, the present article is dedicated to Faulkner's reception in Romania. Along the years much has been written on William Faulkner. Several books and numerous essays have been published on Faulkner's influence on Romanian literature. This article will deal with studies published in newspapers and magazines such as Contemporanul, Secolul 20, Tribuna, Convorbiri literare. By doing so, I intend to shed some light on some of the articles published on Faulkner due to the fact that they were not always insisted upon when mention was made of Faulkner's reception in our country.

Keywords: William Faulkner, critical reception, translations, articles, newspapers.

In what follows I will offer a brief survey, in a chronological order, of the available articles, translations, prefaces, reviews and essays that were issued on the Southern author's reception in our country. The list opens with Mircea Ivanescu's essay on Faulkner published in Steaua magazine in 1962. The Romanian scholar sees Faulkner as one of the most important contemporary writers and as a representative of the American literature with its traditions and themes. As if anticipating Sorin Alexandrescu, (*William Faulkner*, Editura pentru Literatura Universala, Bucuresti, 1969) Ivanescu too portrays Faulkner as a chronicler of his time and space depicting a certain social environment characteristic to South America. The chronicle of Yoknapatawpha exceeds in its meanings the portrait of a closed, provincial world somewhere in America. It becomes a parable of the history of the United States after the Civil war with all the psychological and social drama it brought for the entire country. Yet, unlike Alexandrescu who chooses to portray Faulkner's characters in their positive traits, Ivanescu views them in their negative features: we no longer have an array of character typologies but the simple distinction between the Black and the White. The Black are ex slaves, living in precarious conditions and doomed to be inferiors forever, while the White are made up by a decayed and

sometimes degenerated aristocracy, by a bourgeoisie wishing to climb up the social scale by all means, by unhappy farmers.

Further on in the economy of the text, Ivanescu discusses Faulkner's writings into two parts: the beginning period and the second period of creation. The Romanian critic intends to improve the perception of Faulkner as a writer obsessed with his delirious phantasms, unable to explain their meanings and which had little to do with the real world. He believes that there is an obvious progress in these first writings of the attitude of their writer towards the world he describes and thus, towards the real life that this world stands for. (95) The second period of creation is marked by the writer's desire to offer a more realistic justification for the hard to decipher tragedies depicted so far in his writings. The essay ends with an analysis of Faulkner's poetics. Ivanescu does not see Faulkner as an experimentalist. He admits that his writings are characterized by a mastery of structure (*virtuozitate de compozitie*), (106), but he deems it futile: the sequences of interior monologues (that defy the normal chronology of events thus leading to an unnatural move back and fro sometimes within the same phrase), the deliberate withholding of decisive details and characters, the use of over elaborated sentences.

In 1965 Biberi Ion publishes in Gazeta Literara a short article on Faulkner's universe, mentioning the novelist's desperate need to create a world on its own, a fantastic one with a subjective character, next to the real world, a world inhabited with characters resembling those from the real life and allowing them to move freely according to their inner dynamism.

Same month, but this time in another magazine, Tribuna, Radu Badila mentions the need – when analyzing Faulkner's work – to take into account the role that the South and its problems play in Faulkner's novels and short stories. He blames Faulkner for not being able to understand that the meaning of the Civil War lays in the fight of the Black for freedom. The author believes that Faulkner considers the enslavement of the Black not as a means of the White to get rich but as a psychological drama.

According to Astra library, the next year witnesses the publication of two essays on Faulkner in Viata Romaneasca si Orizont. The first belongs to Alexandru Ivasiuc– *Destin si character in opera lui Faulkner* –and it is meant to be a study on Faulkner's characters and their ties with the ancient drama. The Romanian novelist portrays Faulkner as one of the last, if not the last creator of powerful characters ready to face their destiny. He sees in Faulkner's novels and stories many of the principles of the ancient drama. At first this may seem odd since Faulkner's style owes much to the baroque and not to the classics. The structure of his novels

is a complicated one, the plot is anything but linear and most of the time complicated by the existence of different narrators and different point of views. But behind all these differences, Ivasiuc identifies a characteristic common to the classics: the way Faulkner describes his characters. If the story – line is an intricate one, the way Faulkner creates his characters resembles that of the classics: the people that inhabit Faulkner's universe are reduced to their essential traits, they are placed in opposition to one another or they find themselves facing extreme situations. For Ivanescu they no longer represent character types but they are heroes in a literature which – as the Romanian novelist notices – celebrates the anti-hero. He also seeks to explain the idea of destiny which, in Faulkner's case, holds a special place: this destiny is no longer perceived as a curse but rather as a historic and psychological reality, an unavoidable one. Although Faulkner changes the notion of destiny, he keeps from the classics its unavoidable character. Faulkner's hero doesn't run from his destiny but he is rather defined by it, unable to exist outside it. Further on, Ivanescu brings to discussion another particularity of Faulkner's characters: they are all driven by their obsessions up to the point where they identify themselves with it. The Romanian critic concludes that the drama of such characters resides in their inability to live outside certain values – which they imposed on themselves – even when they realize that they are false ones simply because such values are part of themselves.

The second publication belongs to Stelian Balanescu and is entitled *Chei pentru Faulkner*. The article is meant to offer some keys to help us understand William Faulkner, who is seen as being more than a simple writer of fiction. Trying to decode Faulkner's realism, he brings to discussion such writings as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Requiem for a Nun*. To narrate real events in an accurate way can be as important as narrating fiction and vice versa. What is important is not the way of telling or the manner adopted, for that matter, but that *je ne sais quoi*, that dimension remained hidden, which shapes the characters, the density of their drama and above all, what makes the reader accept that what is unfolding before his eyes is relevant for the real life (55). For Balanescu, the author should be part of this world, of the events, observing them. But according to the same critic, things are quite different in Faulkner's case. As the American novelist confesses, nothing that he writes about happens in real life, people and events alike belong to a different world. To be convincing – Balanescu continues – he even creates an imaginary world. Faulkner's fiction creates the world as much

as it reveals it. Just like his contemporaries, Balanescu too mentions the need to approach Faulkner's writings as a whole in order to fully understand it.

The next year, in 1967, Ioana Comino, publishes in *Contemporanul*, an article about the mythological coordinates of Faulkner's world, *Coordonate mitologice ale lumii faulkneriene*. Faulkner's world is once more described as a chronicle of the violent history of the South, an original cosmogony of a world that, by exceeding the concrete, geographical or historical data, acquires mythological scale (4). This cosmogony – deeply rooted in the author's reality – brings forward a unique world that lives in a strange place somewhere between history and legend. The critic notices a distancing from nature, which finds its correspondent in Faulkner's world in the Civil War which ends the natural cycle of life (this idea of the presence of a natural cycle of life is to be found in most of his writings). Everything is destroyed and a new world emerges, a world in which Faulkner's characters can no longer find their places. With no moral values to turn to, such characters turn their attention to the past, to that mythological golden age which – according to them – housed the lost moral values. Ioana Comino describes Faulkner's world as carrying the echoes of the author's puritan mentality, a world of the paradise lost, a place in which each generation to come must pay for the primordial sin. In this disoriented world Faulkner gives voice to the faith in humans, in their ability to endure and survive all hardship. He brings into this world some values which he considers eternally humane: love, honor, pity, compassion and last but not least, sacrifice.

In the year 1968 two critics, Pelin Mihai and Virgil Stanciu published articles on Faulkner in *Ramuri* – *Faulkner* and *Steaua* – *William Faulkner. "Casa cu Coloane"*. Mihai Pelin, like Ivasiuc before him, focuses on the idea of destiny. Faulkner is seen as being possessed by the dreadful thought that behind every gesture there is an ancestral, implacable metaphysics – transmitted from generation to generation – that each and every character tries desperately to oppose. With few exceptions, the characters inhabiting Faulkner's novels reveal themselves as being a whole, a single body. According to the Romanian critic, the characters are organized like a system of intercommunicable pots: despair or hope, happiness or sadness run up and down through these vessels like successive, strong waves.(8)

In *Steaua* magazine, Virgil Stanciu talks about the novel *The Mansion* (Casa cu Coloane). The Snopes are portrayed in all the negative characteristics that in the 20th century, unfortunately, gain more and more ground: the blind materialism, greed, stubbornness. The old – fashioned ideals of chivalry and nobility collapse only to make room to pettiness. Having no

scruples, the Snopes take possession over Jefferson turning it into a place where money becomes almighty. The Romanian critic sadly mentions that in such a world, there is no room for courage, honor or pride. The promoters of such notions are forced to become helpless viewers witnessing the disintegration of their moral values.

Virgil Stanciu also published in Steaua: *William Faulkner*. “*Orasul* in Febr. 1968 and *William Faulkner. Zgomotul si Furia*, in August, 1971.

One of our most important poets and translators, Mircea Ivanescu, publishes in 1969, in Secolul 20, an article entitled *Dostoievski si Faulkner*. As the title suggests, the article intends to shed some light on the connection between the Russian writer and the American novelist. Ivanescu reckons that the correspondence between these two writers is a spiritual one which resides in the use of similar artistic views and ethics. They share the same disposition to romantic style, the same rhetoric, their writing seems to abound in melodramatic episodes, they both identify themselves with their characters.

In an article published in Romania literara in 1971 (*William Faulkner. “Zgomotul si furia”*), Virgil Cristea discusses Faulkner as a representative of the so called subjective realism. He notices the rapid transformation of the structure of the novel along the 20th century due to the replacement of the author by his hero. But with Faulkner, there is more than just replacing one person by another. The author and the hero become one, thus adopting another point of view, a narrower, imperfect one but which has the advantage of being the only natural one. The modern writer is no longer an impersonal observer but tends to get involved in what is narrated by bringing real life into fiction.

The next year, 1972, brings to our attention 3 more articles on Faulkner. The first one, in a chronological order, belongs to Alexandru Ivasiuc who – six years after he published in Viata Romaneasca – publishes another article on Faulkner this time in Romania Literara. In this article entitled *Semnificatie universala [a operei lui Faulkner]*, the Romanian novelist approaches Faulkner from another perspective. He no longer talks about Faulkner’s characters but focuses on Faulkner as a regional writer. Ivasiuc calls Faulkner “one of the most regional authors” (2) due to his lifestyle, his obsessions, the content of ideas of his writings, the source of inspiration. Although very attached to the moral values of the South, he was painfully aware of the abomination of the slave system that tried to justify itself through these moral values. He never left his native place, physically or spiritually.

A few months later Ioan Comsa publishes the article *Faulkner un inovator al artei narative* in Revista bibliotecilor. As the title suggests, this article is meant to acknowledge the universality of Faulkner's work. The Romanian critic points out that at the beginning, Faulkner's literary skills did not enjoy much public attention. However things are about to change when – returning to his native place – he writes *Sartoris*. Only then did he realize that his native region could be an inexhaustible source of inspiration and saw the possibility to make the most of this place by creating a Cosmos of his own. From here on – the Romanian critic notices – with few exceptions, Faulkner focuses his attention on the destiny of a few families living in Oxford, Mississippi and on the fate of people from Lafayette (Yoknapatawpha). The outcome is a cycle of novels and short stories dedicated mainly to the main descendants of the Sartoris and Compson and the trilogy of the Snopes. All these writings bring to our attention the fascinating movie of the clash of interests, prejudices and passions that was unfolding in the South of the United States for more than a century. Faulkner's work – sometimes hard to decode – relentlessly seeks to render the complex subconscious psychology of his characters in an attempt to decipher the roots of their complicated code of ethics.

With *William Faulkner. Semnele timpului mitic: 75 ani de la nasterea lui Faulkner*, (publ. in Cronica) Sorin Parvu ends the series of articles published in 1972. The article is meant to be a study of two opposing attitudes: pride and modesty and the way they are portrayed in Faulkner's work. The characters that inhabit such a world are uninitiated children, young men awaiting for their initiation, lovers incapable to face life together, sensual women, dehumanized, dying elders, Black, White, Indians (13). According to Faulkner, pride (derives from the conscience of superiority) and modesty (the denial of pride) are two essential attributes of humans. The later involves the knowledge of Evil in its metamorphoses: the physical evil (Cash), the biologic evil (Dewey Dell, Eula Varner), the social evil (Isaac McCaslin), the psychical evil (Darl) and implies the acceptance of the fatality of Evil as redemption of the original sin. (13). Faulkner's hero does not have his or her place within exact historical coordinates: the space is something conventional and the time – a hectic game of past and present perspectives – eludes common sense comprehension, assigning itself the stillness of a myth. This feeling of a mythical time – eternal and at the same time present – is one of the most characteristic features of Faulkner's universe. When reading his novels one is left with the impression that Faulkner's hero is governed by time as much as time is governed by the hero. Time does not follow an objective chronology but is somehow at the hero's disposal. The

Romanian critic notices that the sequence of events is almost never a linear one; the past intercrosses the present and thus ceases to have meaning by itself. The present can be understood only in relation to the past and the past becomes noticeable by its intrusion into the present.

The renowned Romanian critic, Nicolae Balota also writes about Faulkner in a short article published in Romania literara, in 1973 (*Increderea in Faulkner*). He considers that the American author didn't make life easier for himself or his characters for that matter. Faulkner's heroes, even the most humble ones, are all troubled by a presence that torments and worries them.

A year after the publication of her volume of essays, (*Eseuri de literatura engleza si americana*, ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1973) Ana Cartianu publishes in Secolul 20 an article on Faulkner. She considers that Faulkner's novels integrate the romantic tradition of the American novel, the local realism and humoristic popular anecdote. What Faulkner does is to absorb the history of the South from witnesses and protagonists alike and create Yoknapatawpha Country. This cosmos is not an imaginary or regional chronicle but it becomes the colossal novel of the American consciousness as well as that of the humans in general. Within this world, the past, the present and the future constitute an inseparable body, the "atemporal seed" called eternity (188).

The year 1979 brings to our attention an article signed by Marcel Cozma (*Tipologii Faulkneriene*) and published in Amfiteatru in which Faulkner is seen as a creator of a mythology of the land. For the first colonists, the land means work and not obsession. It means an ancestral curse that will haunt their existence turning them into slaves. The land destroys the personality of its owners reducing them to a fight whose outcome is already established (2). Cozma then addresses the issue of the sacred and the profane. In Faulkner's case, these two are intertwined in a space objectively settled. However, the boundary line is a subjective one, due to the power of the man to access the sacred. He divides Faulkner's characters into three categories: the unaligned type (subiectul neutru), the initiated one and the profane one. The first type is perfectly adapted to the profane world unaware of the existence of a sacred one. Being denied the possibility to ascent, this particular type is placed outside sin and therefore outside the idea of retribution. For him, the world is not a labyrinth. The second type has access to the sacred structures through magic rituals. Cozma mentions here the journey of initiation undertaken by Isaac McCaslin (*The Bear*). The main character is granted access into the

labyrinth only after he gets rid of the earthly possessions – his watch and his compasses – and becomes initiated. He will not get lost in the labyrinth. The last type – denied the initiation into the sacred – is the one that commits the sin. They will be thrown into the labyrinth and thus condemned to death.

The next few years were relatively quiet in as far as such publications are concerned. However, the year 1985 bear witness to the publication of two articles signed by Mircea Mihaies (*Faulkner – intregul si partea*) and Nardin Mircea (*Rebreanu – Faulkner: drumuri si destine in lumea romanului*). Both articles address specific, narrow issues: Mihaies focuses on the novel *Sartoris* and its follow-up and Nardin's article, on the common aspects between the novel *Ion* and the trilogy *Catunul, Orasul si Casa cu coloane*.

Much of the criticism published after the revolution has been reprinted or slightly revised old material. In 2001, Constantin Toiu publishes an article entitled *Tatal nostru Faulkner* in which he sets to defend Faulkner. Talking about the American novelist reception to Europe, the Romanian translator mentions that Faulkner was not fully understood or appreciated for that matter. He brings to discussion three important French figures who criticized Faulkner: A. Gide, Malraux and Sartre. Faulkner is accused of being unable to create heroes with a soul – as defined by the European tradition, for his world which is seen as unequal, wild, even vulgar or for his style. Toiu defends Faulkner, concluding that – unlike the above mentioned critics – Faulkner's "word" carries the seal of the modern era. The impact is felt – in particular – by the "immature" literature like the Romanian one which is thus much more inclined to accept a role model, a "paternal figure".

Like Toiu before him, Nicolae Balota in his article *Lumini si umbre faulkneriene* (2007) considers that, with few exceptions, the critical reception of Faulkner's writings – both in the United States and in Europe – is a disappointing one, if not outrageous. He too mentions Sartre who views Faulkner's metaphysics as metaphysics of time which is nothing more than a reduction to the extreme of a novelistic universe. To defend his assessments, Balota talks about the existence in Faulkner's novels of numerous allusions to time in general, to the past in particular to the fact that the present does not exist but it "becomes" and many other examples that do not involve the presence of a specific metaphysics of time. Balota believes that in Faulkner's case, there is no past: the past events never cease to exist, to be part of the present and in its turn, the present is nothing more than a certain presence of the past. This article continues in fact the one published 34 years ago. Both articles stand evidence for his deep

consideration for the American novelist. Balota is genuinely impressed by Faulkner's trust in the man's ability not only to endure but to win against all odds.

Even if Faulkner has not been as admired in Romania as his contemporaries E. Hemingway or J. Steinbeck for instance, he has enjoyed a wide critical readership. The great number of books, articles, essays and translations stand testimony to this and accommodate a large number of interpretations. Faulkner has been perceived in different hypostases: as a humanist (S. Alexandrescu, N. Balota), realist observer (S. Alexandrescu, A. Cartianu, R. Lupan, V. Stanciu), linguistic experimentalist (N. Balota) or historiographer (S. Alexandrescu, N. Balota). But no matter how many interpretations he may have housed, Faulkner's reception in our country has been determined by this regional – universal duality. Faulkner's work is grounded in his native South, a land comprising both the souls and the soil of the American South encouraging comparisons between its mythical and "real" history. At the same time, much of the events narrated as well as the character types are illustrative of the human condition everywhere in space and time. Therefore it doesn't come as a surprise that much of the criticism before 1989 intensively dwell upon this regional identity of the novelist, highlighting his preoccupation with the plight of the downcasts and the dispossessed and the social injustice. In as far as the post revolutionary criticism is concerned we notice a shift in the critical approach – now criticism is mainly stylistic. This is also a time when Romanian critics feel urged to defend the American writer against an earlier rather negative reception in Europe. However, in Romania his reception is a positive one almost all his work being translated.

According to many renowned critics of the American literature reception in our country – Dan Grigorescu, Mircea Popa, Ioan Comsa to name just a few of them – in the years after the Second World War emphasis is laid on a more profound knowledge of the American culture . The 1930s and 1940s and then the 1950s – 1960s set the scene for the reception of American literature in Romania, first and foremost through the help of numerous translations which reach the climax in the 80s and 90s. Therefore, the late 60s and early 70s witness an outburst of translations from Faulkner published especially in Secolul 20. The year 1962 marked the publication of the first translation from Faulkner, *The Mansion*, translation belonging to Fanus Neagu and A. Leicand. Later on, between 1966 – 1974, *The Bear* (Ursul) and *Light in August* (Lumina de august) were translated by Radu Lupan to be followed by the trilogy *Catunul*, *Orasul si Casa cu coloane* translated by Eugen Barbu si Andrei Ion Deleanu; *Zgomotul si furia* and *Absalom! Absalom!* by M. Ivanescu and last but not least *Pe patul de moarte* by H. Popescu

and Paul Goma. During this same period – but different publications – we mention the following translations in a chronological order: *Victorie* (Margareta Sterian, 1957), *Nechemat in tarina* (Eugen Barbu si Andrei Ion Deleanu, 1964). The rest of the 70s and 80s were less propitious in as far as translations were concerned: *Neinfrintii* by Virgil Stefanescu-Draganesti (1978) and *Sartoris* by Mircea Ivanescu (1980). The post revolutionary period opens with *Pogoara-te, Moise* by Mircea Ivanescu (1991) and continues with *Gambitul calului* by Radu Lupan (1993), *Recviem pentru o calugarita* by Mircea Ivanescu (1995), *Sanctuar* by Mircea Ivanescu (1996), *Hotomanii* by Mircea Ivanescu and *Steaguri in tarana* by Mircea Ivanescu (1999)

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