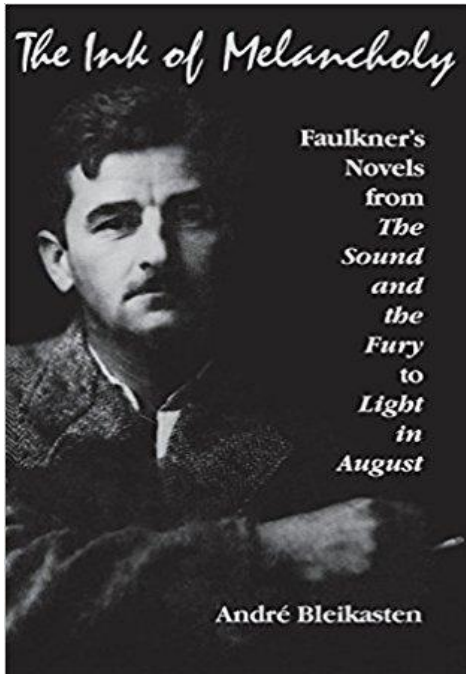




## The Ink of Melancholy. Faulkner's Novels from *The Sound and the Fury* to *Light in August*

André Belikasten

Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. 400



Review by Beatrice Melodia Festa<sup>1</sup>

Much has been said, written and thought about William Faulkner, yet to understand his narratives to know his work and to approach his literary trajectory are certainly challenging tasks for both readers and literary critics. His works stumble across dangerous paths, evoke powerful mechanisms without offering precise interpretations. Notoriously and intransigently difficult, Faulkner's fiction has been analyzed by many critics, all of whom have tried to interpret his literary complexity, characterizing scenes and tropes from his novels in the attempts to offer a reinterpretation of his compelling narratology.

Faulkner's "cataloguing strain of scholarship" (Hagood 2017: 20) gave birth to a compendium of essays providing responses to a form of writing which is to some extent, still, inaccessible. However, Faulkner's fiction needs the presence of an exhaustive text, surveying and reviewing all of his narratives and looking at major and minor works as well. This is certainly the task of this volume, *The Ink of Melancholy*, originally published in 1990 by Indiana University Press and recently released in this new re-edited version in 2017. How does one become Faulkner? With this question, the author opens his critical overview of one of the greatest literary minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. André Bleikasten, renowned French critic of American literature and Faulkner's scholar<sup>2</sup>, has been recently considered as one of the greatest experts on William Faulkner, deeply focusing on the circumstances and motivations of his works from a new and yet original perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> Noteworthy among his books are: *The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's 'The Sound and the Fury'* (1976), *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* (1973), *Parcours de Faulkner* (1982), *'Sanctuaire' de William Faulkner* (1993) and the recently published *William Faulkner: une vie en romans: biographie* (2007).



In *The Ink of Melancholy* the author traces the trajectory of Faulkner's novels or, as he states, "[...] the curves of a life work" (2017, VIII). His aim is to offer insights through the language of Faulkner, "a language of faints and enigmas or silences, by the texts themselves- *en passant*" (XIII). Faulkner's "quest of language" (X), in its fullest sense, which is also one of his main narrative traits, becomes one of the main concerns of Bleikasten. Linguistic analysis is in fact one of the tools for analyzing the mastery of such a great literary genius. This critical account is so complex and prolific as to seem almost Faulknerian, at least in the way it is written, recalling the intricacies of the novelist's prose. The author challenges Faulkner's linguistic complexity with writing by unravelling patterns through a simple yet fluent language, far from the writer's linguistic barrier, that is to say, the unbroken form of a language that remains fluid but extremely ambiguous.

But let us now come to the volume itself. *The Ink of Melancholy* is a huge book, both in its length and in the prolix complexities of its content. It is composed of four parts including an introduction entitled "Masks and Mirrors" and the epilogue "Under the Sign of Saturn". The analysis ranges from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) through *As I Lay Dying* (1930) to *Light in August* (1932) tracing an arc from the 1920s to the 1940s, one of Faulkner's periods of major and extraordinary narrative fertility.

The analysis opens with a discussion of *The Sound and the Fury* and the persistent lack, namely that sense of incompleteness which haunts both the protagonist, Caddy Compson and the novel itself, leading to that sense of void that haunts most of Faulkner's novels including his first masterpiece. Given this premise, Bleikasten turns to addressing his concerns on Faulkner's views in his second novel, *As I Lay Dying*, which represents one of the rarest and quite extraordinary examples of his linguistic experimentation. Following this thread, the analysis proceeds to *Light in August*, which confirms the Faulknerian sense of absence in its textual acceptance of uncertainty. Drawing from Faulkner's psycho-biographical experience, Bleikasten fills in the void of desolation, expressed by novels such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, in which narratives are inevitably bound up in a pervasive sense of grief and loss. What our author chronicles, however, is also a sense of intense melancholy - which he finds mostly present in *Sanctuary* (1931) - that serves as the title to this complete critical volume.

Despite the broad and extensive criticism of Faulkner's major novels, his minor poetical production has only recently received serious attention. The following chapter also fulfills the challenging task to excavate the intricacies of Faulkner's minor poetry. Bleikasten reinterprets Faulkner's poetical exercise as a rather experimental work that - as our author points out - starting from *The Marble Faun*, soon solicits our attention and yet deserves more extensive investigation. As the discourse unfolds, Bleikasten rightfully states that, even in his early writing Faulkner displayed the two hallmarks of his work, personal introspection and self-criticism. Yet, Faulkner's personal insight is not new to his critics and readers who immediately see themselves transported into the deepest essence of the South and in Faulkner's own reality, that of an author who lived in and through his novels. Faulkner's real truth, at least in this critical account, lies in his contradictions, in the conflictual aspect of his work as well as in his intricate narrative maneuvering hidden beneath complex plots, mishandled flashback narrations, and the unsurpassed juxtaposition of language and psychological introspection. The author concludes then that Faulkner's main concern does not lie in the complexity of narrative structures, but rather in his choice of constructing a thin dichotomy between writing and silence. As he clearly states, "the fragments of his narratives flout on expectations of continuity, order and significance, we have to accept them as such, in all of their random brokenness and final provisionality" (Bleikasten 2017: 46). In Faulkner - as in modernist fiction - "the knots are not untied, the threads not unraveled" (132). This is perhaps the aim of Bleikasten, shedding a new yet extensively detailed light on the psychological mechanisms that affect and forge Faulkner's narratives and their sense of provisional brokenness. Bleikasten does not reveal the secrets of Faulkner's novels. He rather allows aspects of a fiction that still needs to be unraveled as it keeps its impersonal and neutral status.

By carefully tracing the threads of Faulkner's critical interpretation, Bleikasten provides an extraordinary account of the novels and their literary complexity. Drawing from philosophy, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, through a detailed and meticulous usage of language, Bleikasten's book can be considered a brilliant example of fresh literary criticism, one of the most insightful and stimulating studies Faulkner's work has ever received.