



The Well-Wrought Urn: Faulkner and Jefferson on the Practice of Freedom

Claude Pruitt

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Thomas Jefferson placed a number of perplexing ideas into the stream of American thought, and in the thirty-six years of his Mississippi cycle, Faulkner takes up those ideas and comments on American history, particularly the history of the American South as he perceived it and as his predecessors and contemporaries shaped it. When he named his apocryphal town “Jefferson, Mississippi,” Faulkner placed Jefferson precisely at the center of his discourse, creating a structural metaphor that persisted throughout his writing career. In short, the "ripples on living water" that occupy the absent center of Faulkner's fictive universe ripple in large part from Thomas Jefferson. The Well-Wrought Urn examines how Faulkner uses the facts of Southern and American history re-imagined in apocryphal settings to approach the truths of that history as they relate to the classic liberal article of faith—individual freedom, self-reliance, the commonwealth. The result is a synthesis of literary criticism and history that relies on the best works of Faulkner criticism in tandem with the best work of American historians to approach, through historical reasoning, a new reading of Faulkner. History (factual historical events) are transformed in Faulkner's imagination into the building blocks of fictive verisimilitude; as Carl Rollyson has said, Faulkner sifts the "facts of the thing" to approach the "truth of the thing." The Well-Wrought Urn sifts Faulkner's fiction through a screen of criticism and historical writing to reveal how Faulkner comments on the practice of freedom within a republic. Life in a republic, citizenship in the commonwealth, the practice of freedom were timely subjects when Thomas Jefferson recorded his dream of an American republic; they were timely subjects when Faulkner took them up in his Mississippi narratives; they remain timely subjects now, as Americans face a challenging and uncertain future.

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