Review of *Children of the Dark House*, Noel Polk

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Noel Polk is internationally recognized for his massive contribution to the study and teaching of William Faulkner. With Joseph Blotner, Polk is editor of the Library of America editions of Faulkner's novels. He has also established the definitive "new, corrected text" of all of the novels reissued as the elegantly designed and highly readable Vintage International editions. With Blotner, Thomas McHaney, and Michael Millgate, he is editor of the William Faulkner Manuscripts, 44 volumes reproducing facsimiles and typescripts at the University of Virginia and the New York Public Library. He is general editor of The University of Mississippi Press's Reading Faulkner Series, which consists of handbooks intended to facilitate the study and teaching of Faulkner's fiction.

The recent University of Mississippi collection of Polk's essays gathers materials presented and/or published over the past 10-15 years. Appropriately, the introduction focuses on the "pleasure" of the text, and the first essay examines Polk's editorial principles and practices. Here we find casual observations drawn from a rare and precious fund of knowledge, regarding, for example, the color of Faulkner's ink, the size of his nib, and the style of his lettering, editing, or pasting. Very few people have acquired such intimacy with Faulkner's material writing practices, "rituals of composition" that testify, as Polk remarks, to Faulkner's particularly "tactile engagement" with his work. Thus Polk informs us that, whereas Faulkner frequently composed, revised, and preserved his writings with an "almost finicking preciosity," he at times produced manuscripts, e.g., Fable, stunning for their "sprawling and vigorous disarray." Years of patient study and sometimes-tedious decision-making have given Polk-along with a handful of others-this unique angle on Faulkner's oeuvre.

His brief introduction and opening essay leave this reader hoping to hear a great deal more. What might Polk have to say, for example, about the work habits of Charlotte Rittenmeyer, the artist in If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem, particularly in contrast to those of her counterpart, Harry Wilbourne? Judging from the physicality of Faulkner's writing habits, it would seem that Faulkner denounced Wilbourne as a hack artist not simply because he was a poor imitator but more fundamentally because he failed to work, as Charlotte did, with and from the body.

I am instructed by the peculiar ease Faulkner discovered in work, in "the agony and sweat" of writing-an ease that did not endure beyond the act, that did not win him quick recognition, and that could not be recaptured via the printed books themselves. This may be why, as Polk points out, Faulkner himself took "almost no interest in the printed forms of his books." As Polk notes, Faulkner's desires lay elsewhere. Or, insofar as these desires manifested themselves in the still form of the printed book, "the still point of a turning critical world," rather than in the ceaseless turbulence of body and soul, Faulkner shunned and repudiated them. Nowhere more than in this repeated expression of dissatisfaction is the perversity of desire-the principal topic of Polk's essays, which cover the full range of Faulkner's literary and self-production-more eloquently expressed.