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Introduction

Faulkner's Continuities: Textuality, Materiality, History

Peter Lurie

In her opening remarks to the conference in Amiens, France that took place in September 2019 titled, “Le père du texte”: Continuités et ruptures du patrimoine faulknerien dans les littératures contemporaines” (“The father of the text”: Continuities and Ruptures of Faulkner’s Legacy in Contemporary Literatures”), the event’s organizer, Frédérique Spill, referred to the novelist Pierre Michon. She cited his 1997 essay in which Michon described his discovery of Faulkner: “I was past thirty. I hadn’t written a single line yet. By mere chance I read *Absalom, Absalom!*, which had just been republished in paperback; there, no sooner had I read the first pages then I found a father and a brother, something like the *father of the text*” (Michon 78-79, quoted in Bleikasten 215). With this passage Spill identified the conference’s theme, one that, as its title indicated, was indeed on questions of artistic influence and lineage, particularly in a contemporary context. Yet as the essays in this special issue suggest, the conference participants also presented work that varied importantly from this approach. Claiming that “What Michon found in Faulkner was not only a model with whom he felt an improbable kinship,” Spill went on to say, “Faulkner also ignited in him the urge to write. Michon associates Faulkner’s text with a generative inheritance likely to stimulate not only his own upcoming texts, but *the* text of limitless literature . . . [The] very vivacity of literature—its perpetually ongoing text—certainly makes it inexhaustible.”¹

Such a text as Spill describes, we can fairly say, is a particularly French notion. Few literary cultures value the literary *per se* in the manner and

¹I wish to thank Barbara Ladd and Susan Scott Parrish for their input to this introduction at key stages and, especially, my Co-Editor on this special issue, Frédérique Spill. Her incisive readings of the essays aided tremendously. Moreover, her graciousness and good will throughout the process made it a great pleasure.

the extent to which we find among France's scholars and its reading public. The act of writing and the love of language has long defined the French commitment to the ongoing, conjoined idea as well as fact of writing—as creative act, as material substance, as the converting of silent thought and feeling to what Spill went on to call the “haunting power of black and white markings.”

The model of kinship on which Michon finds his link to Faulkner thus has little to do with the latter's presence as influence or “patrimony.” As the papers here demonstrate, Faulkner's prose sounds a note that resonates with an imperative that precedes his own writing effort as well as extends beyond it. There is no “father of the text,” quite, whose prior presence initiates or authorizes a later writer's art. There is rather an ongoing continuum of writing on which others find Faulkner and on which he found himself and, as he described, antecedents to him such as Conrad, Balzac, Turgenev, or Flaubert, who themselves contributed to the “text of limitless literature.”

Spill identified another aim of the conference in her welcoming talk, one that the articles in this issue help to realize. Citing Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and Barthes's “La mort de l'auteur,” Spill declared, “The purpose of this conference is not [. . .] to celebrate a particularly generous father figure nor to make sure that Faulkner still stands firmly on his pedestal.” Contra Faulkner's lack of generosity as an actual father, Spill means this in the spirit of *largesse* that many writers who followed him found, including Michon and, as her article reminds us, André Malraux, Claude Simon, Pierre Bergounioux, and others. The papers in Amiens and those we furnish here move away from Faulkner as the Southern, white, male, cisgender, privileged individual who produced the writing by which we remain fascinated. As well they offer a dialectical take on the troubled notion of literary “paternity.” As Michon puts it in terms that suggest this dynamic,

[Faulkner] is the father of all I have written. Not that I have undergone his *influence*, as the saying goes: I have never been blamed or praised for writing like Faulkner, for having appropriated his mannerisms, his themes or his narrative tricks—for the [offspring] dwarfed by their fathers do their best not to resemble him, not to be his epigones. They feed on the father's strength, but in secret, and while concealing the strength they feed on, they may acquire a force assumed to be their own. Yes, what Faulkner has given me is the permission to enter language with axe strokes (Michon 79–80, quoted in Bleikasten 215).

Acknowledging that what he found in Faulkner means something quite different than having been influenced by him—as Toni Morrison would later say, and as Solveig Dunkel's article here reminds us—Michon declares that the link between him and the American writer amounted to

discovering something in his own approach to writing that Faulkner demonstrated. As with Morrison and, after her, Jesmyn Ward in terms John T. Matthews describes in his essay in this issue, this relationship took the later writer away from Faulkner and his work to something new and of her own. What is crucial in this declamation is how it in fact takes us away from Faulkner as “father” or influence, and in the Barthesian manner Spill indicates.

Spill and other contributors to this volume demonstrate a further example of a particular French critical tradition. In her own essay’s close attention to a rich and often-considered passage the opens *Light in August*, Spill’s engagement with the text exemplifies precisely the role in that tradition of explication. In addition to showing the powerful sensory sense of place—dust and heat and “pinewiney silence”—and of a painstaking perception and motion, she traces out the indeterminate, changeable valences of the pronoun “it” in the account of Lena hearing Armstid’s wagon before she sees it. (This indeterminate “it,” Spill seems to say, thus functions like all language.) A similar interest obtains in the articles by two other French scholars, Dunkel and Aurélie Guilan. Dunkel returns to the important Faulkner-Morrison dynamic to show how each writer’s language serves their shared interest in a gendered, posthumous speech. Guilan examines the ways in which different generations of French philosophers have found in Faulkner a source for their reflections on temporality in literature.

Dunkel’s essay also shows an approach to Faulkner that treats the novel(s) as well as the language in them in ways that others have characterized as the “work,” in a variation on the French close regard for the text. In addition to her sustained attention to textual features of both *As I Lay Dying* and *Beloved*, she also situates both novels in their respective author’s material and extratextual worlds. Dunkel shows how Addie’s position as a rural farm mother in the Depression era South bears directly on Faulkner’s creation with her of a “verbose” ghost. Her account of Morrison then draws on the trope of haunting to describe the way a character like *Beloved*, whose own death prefigured Addie’s historically, allows a repositioning of Faulkner’s characters as inheritors of a post-slavery social condition that Morrison’s work allows us to see more clearly. Juliane Schalaus and John T. Matthews, in their articles on Faulkner’s relation to Günter Grass and Jesmyn Ward, respectively, similarly use later writers to consider Faulkner newly in their light.

I offer this overview as a way to draw attention to the role that France, Germany, and the U.S. play in this particular group of scholars’ thinking. In each case the essays at hand address matters of national or regional memory and/or reconciliation, one that is manifest in post-War Europe and the U.S. South’s lingering precarity. Yet as these pieces demonstrate, what a reference to the “father” produced in the conference title was not a sense of filial devotion or extended lineage. The generative dynamic these articles see is one that attends to the reparative work of memorializing and

grief, a collective act of mourning that registers regret at various national or regional "fathers," destructive acts.

Spill concluded her opening remarks in Amiens by quoting Faulkner's wish in his 1949 letter to Malcolm Cowley to be "voided from history" so as to leave it "markless, [with] no refuse save the printed books." Proposing with characteristic paradox that the printed text of his books become "markless," asking to "void" a history they richly detailed (and sharply questioned), and denying a literary history his books contributed to and a critical history their reception extended, Faulkner nevertheless set the terms for our efforts. From them Spill declared that "the purpose of this conference is to assess, once again . . . the haunting power of the black and white markings that became Faulkner's books." Spill's deceptively simple reference to these marks' haunting power is notable. For if, like Michon and others, we find in Faulkner a way to "enter language" itself, the realm in which we seek to express the ineffable, to fathom meaning, or even to find that ever-elusive source of what prompts speech, we have in fact found much. If French writers and thinkers beyond those in many national cultures have articulated the response to Faulkner as the *urge to write*, or found in him the endless impulse toward expression that language both satisfies and engenders, then we are right to see in their embrace of Faulkner something intrinsic to our role as readers more generally. As Dunkel puts in her essay, invoking Blanchot's "*L'Espace littéraire*" and Derrida's theory of hauntology, "Literature is spectral by essence, as a disembodied voice of the author reaches the readers through the pages" (60). Faulkner evokes all of this, and he has done so since the French first encountered his fiction and then furnished a path for the later appreciations that followed.

As Julian Murphet put it recently, if perhaps only a bit hyperbolically, in his early career "Faulkner produced a string of masterpieces of such arresting stature that they would have to be read and evaluated in France, by the most luminous intellects on the face of the earth, before 'America,' let alone the 'South,' would know what to do with them."² That stature has everything to do with the fiction's content: its themes and accounts of the South, modernity, and the region's as well as the country's class, racial, and socio-cultural history, including the violent histories of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. The changing understanding of gender and sexuality in the period of Faulkner's life also informs his most important fiction, as scholars such as John Duvall, Judith Sensibar, and others have long demonstrated. Yet if we allow that before these thematic understandings readers found something captivating in Faulkner's very sentences and a language that allows others, like Michon, to "enter [it] with axe strokes," I think we follow Proust and Barthes in our own proclivities as, we hope, attentive readers of Faulkner's language in the manner Spill both demonstrates and describes.

The tradition of French Faulkner Studies owes much to scholars who, in truth, left us with a weighty and precious heritage. Hence our grateful

²Faulkner's *Media Romance* (47).

thoughts go to André Bleikasten and to Michel Gresset, whom we remember fondly, and to François Pitavy. All three certainly contributed to producing some of our own texts. While establishing how vivid the French Faulkner tradition still is, this special issue also demonstrates how boundless Faulkner has become, as scholars coming from different backgrounds and national histories reflect on how some of the best-known writers in their countries have negotiated Faulkner's world.

Although her work is not represented here, Mary Knighton appeared at the Amiens event and provided a comprehensive account of Faulkner's influence in post-War Japan, one noted in earlier studies such as *Faulkner in Nagano*. Also not addressed in this issue is Faulkner's position as a writer of the Global South, one that has been discussed extensively in recent years and is among the most promising developments that studies of the author have seen, as is the highly contested account of him as a postcolonial writer.³ These considerations follow as well as depart from earlier accounts of Faulkner's oft-acknowledged role in Latin American fiction, initiated with Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and Mario Vargas-Llosa.⁴ While there is not space in this introduction to trace the critical movement away from Europe as a privileged site for Faulkner's reception, we acknowledge with Randy Boygoda that at this late stage of Faulkner studies there may be "nowhere for us to go but east," as he shows by way of his attention to this passage in *A Fable*. He attends to its place in the trajectory of Faulkner's writing about empire, colonialism, and what Boyagoda argues, with Pankaj Mishra, is the most important historical and economic event of the 20th century—"the intellectual and political awakening of Asia and its emergence from the ruins of both Asian and European empires."⁵

The Amiens conference was conceived more modestly (and practically) as a way to revive the long-standing tradition of Faulkner studies in France. Spill's opening essay here, "France's Encounter with Faulkner" traces the origins of the country's long-standing role in conveying aspects of Faulkner's art to parts of the world remote from France, including the Caribbean in the work of Edouard Glissant.⁶ In describing her own encounter with Faulkner, Spill opens the issue with a lyrical example of the verbal acuity and the sensitivity to sound and the workings of language that animate so many French readings.

In "'Heirs-at-Large': Precarity and Salvage in the Post-Plantation Souths of Faulkner and Jesmyn Ward," Matthews shows how Ward's *Salvage the Bones* illustrates a more productive working-through of maternal mourning than the Bundrens' historical and material circumstances

³See Hosam Mohamed Aboul-Ela's *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition* and Wilson Harris, *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*.

⁴See Deborah Cohen and Ramón Saldivar's essays in *A Companion to William Faulkner* and *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, respectively.

⁵*A Fable* 960; Mishra cited in Boyagoda 206.

⁶See also Hugues Azérad, "A New Region of the World: Faulkner, Glissant, and the Caribbean"; Richard Godden, "Absalom, Absalom!, Haiti, and Labor History"; Melanie Benson-Taylor, "Faulkner and Southern Studies," and the essays in *Global Faulkner: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* 2007.

allow in *As I Lay Dying*, a novel Ward's narrator invokes as a way to shape her own story of loss. Dunkel's "Faulkner and Morrison's Verbose Ghosts" adds to the rich body of work on the two authors by showing how Addie and *Beloved* share a capacity to unsettle the worlds of their novels through their utterance of specifically female and, in *Beloved*'s case, racial longings they can only voice posthumously. Juliane Schallau's "Texts of the Sons—William Faulkner, Günter Grass, and the Narration of Guilt" takes us to post-War Germany's "violent and guilt-ridden past," where, she argues, Faulkner prompted "a generation of 'sons' whose texts contributed greatly to the formation of German commemorative culture and to the 'sons' admission of the collective guilt of the fathers in German post-war society" (73). Through an original comparison of Faulkner's Quentin Compson with Grass's Oskar Mazerath in *The Tin Drum*, Schallau challengingly explores the motif of coming to terms with one's own and one's country's historical sense of guilt.

In "The Long shadow of Joe Christmas: Visions of a Faulknerian character in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Romano, and Jacques Rancière," Aurélie Guilan examines how, at the crossroads of cultural domains, Faulkner's writing, and more particularly the character of Joe Christmas, have relentlessly engaged French philosophers, starting with Jean-Paul Sartre and the phenomenological tradition as it extended and shifted in the thought of Jean Rancière and Claude Romano. She shows how each thinker questions Christmas's singular way of experiencing the world and of dealing with time along with his unparalleled status as a novelistic character, a nigh-unreadable cipher whose impact on his community as well as on the novel, Guilan demonstrates, effects the need for a formal and social position like Hightower's.

What the articles in this issue show are the ways in which a focus on Faulkner, and in particular on his language, allows that focus to travel, as it were. For in them, Faulkner himself is productively dis-placed as the center of discussion. Moving from his prose and narratives to trace others' efforts to use language to "tell about" their own regions, countries, histories, or families, as Shreve implores Quentin, Faulkner becomes the (mere) vehicle to the tenor of other writers' figurative, imaginary worlds. These articles open Faulkner out to others' readings of him and, then, to our reading of various national, racial, and gendered others to Faulkner. This is what Spill called the "perpetually ongoing text of literature," one that she and Michon recognize and that her conference sought to highlight. If literature remains vital by way of these responses, then Faulkner's place within a literary culture defined variously as global or nonhegemonic can remain an important one. Dispersing his presence or that of his work into other places allows writers that follow Faulkner to produce their own texts in a language that inspires their readers to fashion other worlds anew, vivid and strange but also familiar in the ways of Yoknapatawpha, even upon entering it, and in their equally haunting black and white markings.

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