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Frédérique Spill

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France's Encounter with Faulkner

Frédérique Spill

"The writers that we read again, thinking, with a fast-beating heart, that we haven't read them enough, are rare. Faulkner is one of them: marvelous, bewitching, contagious, in a constant heaven of details."

(Sollers, *Lumière de Faulkner/*
Light of Faulkner," 645; my trans.)

Faulkner has always been part of what the French consider their literary canon. From the start, he has ranked high on the top list of the favorite writers of French readers. A March 2009 entry of *The Guardian's* books blog marveled that "*William Faulkner* was the second most-cited author in a French magazine's poll asking French writers to *name their favourite books*." Faulkner's presence at that height is still unquestioned: ask any French reader who Faulkner is, they will know; they will know about him even though they may never have read him—or read a whole novel. The images that come up most frequently when French readers talk about Faulkner involve the "idiot" Benjy trying to tell his own story in the first person or the rotting corpse of that poor mother, taken along the bumpy roads of northern Mississippi.

Why is that? *The Guardian's* books blog assumes that the privileged bond between Faulkner and the French dates back to the 1940s, referring to French Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who supposedly maintained that "for young people in France, Faulkner is a god" (Faulkner and Cowley 35).¹ Though Sartre's role in the invention of a French Faulkner was certainly decisive, his appropriation of Faulkner's work would not have

¹The expression appears in French in the text in an anecdote related by Malcolm Cowley. Sartre's "*À propos de *Le Bruit et la fureur*: la temporalité chez Faulkner*" was first published in 1939. In this article, Sartre contends that the similarity between Faulkner and Proust, though Faulkner's endeavor was much more radical, lies in the fact that they both "beheaded" time, depriving it of the future, the "dimension" in which action and freedom are possible (68).

been possible without the astute foresight of earlier readers. It is, indeed, to Maurice-Edgar Coindreau that Faulkner's work owes its appearance in French bookstores in the 1930s and its entrance in France's then particularly vivid intellectual life and, some time later, in French academia.² A *porteur*, ushering in and sharing whatever discoveries he made on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Coindreau undoubtedly is the instigator of a French Faulkner critical tradition, which has yet to show the first signs of fatigue. In the meantime, ever since Faulkner's work has been made available to French readers in French translations, it has influenced the creativeness of several generations of French writers, most of whom have forcefully acknowledged his legacy.

A few years before the French made their first encounter with Faulkner, Faulkner, then a writer in the making, traveled to France for the first time, following in the steps of other American writers that had already headed to the Old Continent. However, Faulkner chose not to enter their circle; instead, he developed a very personal and solitary bond with Paris. While focusing on France's reception and appropriation of Faulkner and on Faulkner's influence on France's academic and cultural life, this paper will also include a discussion of the impact his 1925 trip to France had on Faulkner's writing, thus highlighting what may be regarded as a reciprocal dynamic.

Faulkner's French Inventors³

France's attraction to Faulkner's work started earlier than Sartre's taking an interest in his work and publishing his groundbreaking essay on the treatment of time in Faulkner, whom he cunningly compared with Marcel Proust, suggesting that the latter's novelistic technique should have been Faulkner's, that it might have been Faulkner's, had Proust not been too eloquent, too fond of clarity and too intellectual to sacrifice "the appearances of chronology." France's privileged bond with Faulkner was, indeed, fostered by a few determining earlier encounters, the first of which occurred in the early 1930s. Faulkner was first brought to the French by professor Maurice-Edgard Coindreau, who taught French at Princeton University from 1922 to 1961. Not only was Coindreau one of the (then) few readers of Faulkner's early novels as they came out in the United States; he also convinced Gaston Gallimard, the founder of the prestigious Paris-based publishing house, that Faulkner was to be read by the French. Moreover, he offered his services as one of Faulkner's first translators into French.

²Both Michel Gresset and Jacques Pothier have devoted papers to Maurice-Edgard Coindreau's role as a *porteur* and translator of American literature. See Gresset's "Maurice Edgar Coindreau, traducteur ou 'porteur'?" and Pothier's "Passeurs de modernité: Coindreau et Sartre."

³Deriving etymologically from the Latin form *inventor*, *inventrix*, designating he/she who finds or invents (and by extension an author), the inventor defines as he/she who finds a hidden object.

In his 1952 article entitled “William Faulkner in France,” Coindreau retrospectively returns to the context in which Faulkner was revealed to the French and to the part he himself played in the increasing popularity of American literature in France. Coindreau associates the origin of what he refers to as “the American tidal wave which, after the Liberation, was to break upon intellectual France” to the simultaneous publication, in the late 1920s and in the 1930s, of the works of Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck in French translation (Coindreau 85). American novels were then “devoured,” he adds “with voracity” (85).⁴ Coindreau clearly dates Faulkner’s appearance in France back to 1931:

On June 1st of that year, I published the first article written on him in French. The United States had become acquainted with him only a few months earlier. . . . During the winter of 1932 I introduced to the French public the art of Faulkner by presenting two of the best stories in *These Thirteen: September ardent* [“Dry September”] and *Une Rose pour Emily* [“A Rose for Emily”]. These were enough to launch the future Nobel Prize winner on a brilliant career in France. (Coindreau 86–87)⁵

In the same article, proud Coindreau, to whom we undoubtedly owe a tremendous lot, shares the pride and honor of discovering Faulkner with French writer, poet, essayist, and translator Valéry Larbaud, who agreed to write a preface to Coindreau’s translation of *As I Lay Dying*, in which he foresaw “that Faulkner is an epic poet”; in other words, “not a regionalist writer but rather an artist who draws from the same sources that have always fed the great literatures of the world” (Coindreau 87–88). What is particularly moving in these early appraisals of Faulkner’s work is how strongly they advocate the universality of the Mississippi writer’s themes and art, eagerly freeing Faulkner from restrictive labels and considering him, right from the start and with impressive far-sightedness, as one of the masters. In “*The Making of a French Faulkner: A Reflection on Translation*,” François Pitavy comments on the early reception of Faulkner as follows:

⁴About the same time, the French market was flooded with *films noirs*, which had been released over several years during the War but were made available to the French all at once due to the embargo lifting in 1945. Faulkner himself incidentally contributed to that tradition, most notably through co-writing the screenplay of Howard Hawks’s *The Big Sleep*, which came out in 1946. Novels and films simultaneously contributed to the popularity of American culture in France. See Borde and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir (1941–1953)*.

⁵This article appeared in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, XXXVI, 926–931. After receiving the issue of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, in which the two stories mentioned by Coindreau were published, Faulkner wrote his French translator a letter, dated April 14, 1932, that is both grateful and amicably mocking as he refers to a critique Coindreau wrote in another issue of the journal: “I see now that I have a quite decided strain of puritanism (in its proper sense, of course; not our American one) regarding sex. I was not aware of it. But now, on casting back and rereading now and then or here and there of my own work, I can see it plainly. I have found it quite interesting” (*Selected Letters* 63–64).

From the start, then, instead of being categorized as a bizarre Mississippian or another Caldwell (*Tobacco Road*, published in 1932, would be translated two years later), Faulkner was, so to speak, de-regionalized, de-Americanized, and identified with a classical tradition familiar to the European public. Rather than a quaint Southerner, Faulkner became a tragic writer whose work transcended national and regional borders. So in France *Sanctuary* was received as a tragedy rather than a *roman noir* saturated with sex and violence, and *As I Lay Dying* as an epic, with mythical trials by water and fire, not a grotesque or comical novel of country life. ("Making" 86)

The impulse to "universalize" Faulkner is, however, indistinguishable from a marked tendency to overlook his work's engagement with the South's painful, material history, a reproach that was first addressed to Sartre.⁶ More than half a century after Faulkner's first readers expressed their boundless admiration for his work, in "Lumière de Faulkner,"⁷ a passionate call to arms and a love declaration, French writer and critic Philippe Sollers offers another version of this injunction not to limit Faulkner to the problematic social, political, and racial context in which he lived and with which he had to deal in one way or another:

No, Faulkner isn't the verbose, badly-punctuated, confused, ambiguous, puritan, sexist and perhaps insufficiently anti-racist regionalist novelist that we have too often been presented with against a background of faded-colored folkloric Mississippian figures, at a time when the rotten memory of slavery, the martyrdom of black people and the arrogance of white people were perpetuated. No, Faulkner doesn't belong to the uneasy past of the United States with its ill-digested Civil War, its pseudo-aristocratic nostalgia, its cult of ghosts that are hostile to the radiant future of a global democracy. No: Faulkner is a scorching author, very much up-to-date and still very much ahead of us. ("Lumière" 643, my trans.)

Drawing Faulkner out of the blunt accusations of excessive crudeness that have long hampered the recognition of his talent in his own country somehow became a French self-appointed collective quest. But this quest has often paradoxically obliterated Faulkner's profound anchorage in his time and place, as if taking Faulkner beyond the very singular context that is

⁶Aurélien Guillaumin comments on the criticism faced by Sartre's ahistoricist approach to Faulkner in her essay in the present volume.

⁷As a title, Sollers' "Lumière de Faulkner," which translates as "Light of Faulkner," is of course punning on *Light in August*. To my knowledge, the essays compiled in *L'Éloge de l'infini*, first published in 2001, which contain two texts on Faulkner, are not available in English. Hence the translations are mine. "Lumière de Faulkner" was first published in the May 19, 1995, issue of *Le Monde*.

part and parcel of his work demanded an almost exclusive attention to his text. Contextless, text-bound approaches to Faulkner's work have certainly shown their inherent limitations.

Pitavy argues that the reason that Faulkner's receptions in France and in the United States were so dramatically different is related to the fact that both countries had created their own Faulkner, emphasizing or neutralizing different aspects of his work:

The Faulkner who was to exert unparalleled fascination upon intellectuals and the general public before and mostly after World War II was modern and universal rather than regional and bearing the burden of the South. So the Americans and the French were not reading quite the same Faulkner, not only because of the differences in the availability of the texts, but also because each country (and each language) had construed for itself its own Faulkner. ("Making" 87)

Michel Gresset and Patrick Samway assess Faulkner's reception across the old and the new continents in disarmingly simple words: "The Americans tended to regard Yoknapatawpha as developing from a South that Faulkner knew so well, what they might call the "real" South, while the Europeans favored a more "mythic," certainly a more abstract Yoknapatawpha, that was universally understandable" (6). As obvious as this sounds, the main difference between French and American readers and critics of Faulkner may, from the start, have resided in the fact they have read his work from different places and cultures. The French may have compensated for their lack of familiarity with Faulkner's "'real' South" with a mood and method of their own that pays particularly "close attention to the Faulkner text" (Wilhelm 420). Yet, lyrical outbursts like Sollers', whose compelling repetition of negations evokes the tradition of negative ontology, thus placing Faulkner in the position of an indefinable deity, show that several versions of Faulkner are not mutually exclusive. When dealing with literary works which are, like Faulkner's, so laden with history and so densely poetic, at the same time so metaphysical and so entrenched in the world of things, critics are forever trying to secure their own precarious balance. The poetic density of Faulkner's writing is inseparable from its historical weight. Yet it takes particularly sensitive and gifted scholars to manage to take both aspects into account.⁸

In the 1930s, the French translations of Faulkner's novels came out within a few years of their original publications, providing the French readership with a relentless flow of novels of a brand new genre: *Sanctuaire* (translated by René Rimbault and Henri Delgove) was published in

⁸One of the most remarkable recent examples that come to mind is John T. Matthews' *William Faulkner: Seeing Though the South*, which finds that balance while developing its own unmistakable method and writing style.

1933 with an admiring preface by André Malraux, which contains the now famous consideration that “*Sanctuary* is the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story” (Malraux 94), thus confirming Valéry Larbaud’s intuition. For editorial reasons, the publication of *Tandis que j’agonise* (translated by Coindreau) with Larbaud’s introduction was deferred to 1934. *Lumière d’aôût* (translated by Coindreau) was published in 1935, *Sartoris* (translated by Raimbault and Delgove) in 1937, and *Le Bruit et la fureur* (translated by Coindreau) in 1938. With a few-year gap and in a slightly different order, the uninterrupted continuity of new French translations matched Faulkner’s extraordinary yield in his native Mississippi.

By the mid-1940s, the contrast between the availability of Faulkner’s books in France and in the United States had reached a peak. In his “Introduction” to the original edition of *The Portable Faulkner* (1946), a selection of texts meant to revive American readers’ interest in Faulkner, Malcolm Cowley remarks that “in 1945, all of his seventeen books were out of print, with some of them unobtainable in the secondhand bookshops” (Cowley x). By contrast, Coindreau indicates that “[a]t the present time,” that is in 1952, “the works of William Faulkner in French consist of twelve volumes (all but two printed by the Librairie Gallimard), the latest being *Les Palmiers sauvages* (February, 1952) which followed by just a few months *Le Gambit du cavalier*. *L’Intrus dans la poussière* and *Requiem pour une nonne* are in preparation, as well as a collection of poems, *Le Rameau vert*” (Coindreau 88). Of course, between the two statements Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which undoubtedly contributed to shedding a new light upon his work all around the world. It is nonetheless striking that while the Faulkner novels that are now regarded as classics were unobtainable in his own country, the French were publishing not only his minor books, but also his youth poems.⁹ As highlighted by Pitavy, since there were few translations of Faulkner (if any) in other European languages, “the early accolades of the French intellectuals often sanctioned Faulkner’s recognition elsewhere in Europe” (“Making” 86).

As emphasized by Coindreau in the article I have been referring to, Faulkner’s work soon found particularly sharp readers among the French intellectual elite. In “The French Faulkner: Visibility, Absence and *Sanctuary*’s ‘Lake of Ink,’” Peter Lurie suggests one possible reason for their fascination: “readers like Maurice Coindreau, André Malraux, and Jean-Paul Sartre were among the earliest readers to recognize a particular quality to his fiction, one that, especially in the case of certain novels, evaded Faulkner’s contemporary American readers” (51). Lurie defines that particular qual-

⁹Starting with an examination of Faulkner’s poetry and early sketches, I recently embarked on a project the purpose of which is to highlight how deeply poetic Faulkner’s work has been from the start. I had a chance to introduce that project at the third annual Faulkner symposium in London (via Zoom) organized by Dr. Ahmed Honeini, whom I want to thank here for giving me the opportunity to give a keynote address entitled “On the Way up ‘The Hill’: Faulkner’s Poetic Beginnings as a Fiction Writer.”

ity as “something dark or unwholesome” (51) that has long simultaneously appealed to early French readers and baffled—and often discouraged—contemporary American readers. That unwholesome darkness might be just what Malraux evoked in different words when he described Faulkner’s world as it appears in *Sanctuary* as “an ill-assorted, powerful, and savagely personal world, sometimes one not without crudity” (Malraux 92). In an article entitled “The Novel in France since 1945,” John Cruickshank suggests a few reasons for the attractiveness of American novels in France at the time: “The absence of traditional psychological analysis in many of the American novelists, their pragmatic, behaviourist emphasis . . . attracted those who felt that the pre-war French novel had become bloodless and over-refined. Novels that were direct, unintellectual and violent, but which also conveyed sensory details very powerfully, were a revelation” (Cruickshank 66). Likewise, Coindreau identifies the French readers’ devotion to American novels in general and to Faulkner’s novels in particular with the fact they offered “a direct and brutal account, a series of pictures, produced by self-taught writers whose emotions were sufficiently violent to compensate for their deficiencies in technique” (Coindreau 86). Today’s critics cannot help but react, in turn vehemently, to what now appears to be an aberrant reproach in regard to Faulkner’s unquestionable narrative virtuosity. Yet the striking similarity between such reflections lies in their attempt to grasp, then to verbalize, the roughness, the savageness, the crudeness, that lies at the heart of Faulkner’s writing and arouses such contrasted, if not diametrically opposed, responses. Malraux associates that something with the intertwined motives of obsession and irreparability.¹⁰ Coindreau praises the powerful force of its violence. Lurie suggests it is related to “a striking thematic of loss” as well as (and we will come back to this later) a “deeply wrought melancholy subsumed,” at the end of *Sanctuary*, “in the Luxembourg Gardens ‘in the embrace of the season of rain and death’” (“French” 56). Sollers encapsulates that “something” in a revealing oxymoronic sentence: “Faulkner blows onto us the dazzling light of nothingness” (“Lumière” 647; my trans.).

Faulkner and French Academia

Determining why French readers have, right from the start, adopted Faulkner so warm-heartedly is an issue that needs much more space for development.¹¹ But the French have certainly been very sensitive to that

¹⁰“An intense obsession crushes each of his characters, and in no case do the characters succeed in exorcizing it. The obsession still hovers behind them, unchanging, summoning them instead of awaiting their summons” (Malraux 92). According to Malraux, the motif of irreparability manifests as Faulkner’s main obsession: “Certain great novels have been for their authors primarily the creation of the one thing that could engulf them. And, just as Lawrence wraps himself up in sexuality, so does Faulkner dig down into the irreparable” (Malraux 93).

¹¹In various publications and projects, Peter Lurie has started inquiring into the components making up what he calls the “French Faulkner.” In the 1990s, Gresset and Bleikasten had

"something" they failed to find in their national literature, possibly due to an excess of polish and polite good manners, possibly due to the overconfident supremacy of the intellect over the senses that has insistently characterized contemporary French literature, as a result of which a whole range of objects may have been disregarded. Hence the allure of the radical form of novelty offered by Faulkner. To use the term Michel Gresset turned into a figure,¹² thus transforming his own fascination with Faulkner into an analytical tool, that "something," which the spirit Ariel in *The Tempest* might have referred to as "something rich and strange" (I, 2), still indefatigably fascinates Faulkner scholars, both in France and far beyond. Many new scholarly endeavors, especially those that put the examination of the very texture of language at their core, in turn grapple with it, forever redefining its contours. It is remarkable though that French scholarship has quite consistently focused on notions that allow and privilege close readings and analyses of the workings of the senses in Faulkner's writing while engaging into a continuous conversation with key theories developed throughout the twentieth century, in the wake of André Bleikasten's pioneering *Parcours de Faulkner*, which was significantly translated as *The Ink of Melancholy* in 1990. Bleikasten's groundbreaking studies on Faulkner take the form of monographs centering on Faulkner's major novels; but starting with Gresset's 1982 *Faulkner ou la fascination: Poétique du regard* (translated as *Fascination: Faulkner's Fiction 1919–1936*), Faulkner's French critics have, indeed, often focused on one main "object" similarly transformed into a figure: Aurélie Guillaud, for example, explores the manifold facets of the notion of distress in her *Faulkner: Le roman de la détresse* (2003). Considering Benjy as the true catalyst of Faulkner's singularity, I controversially played with the notion of "idiocy" in *L'Idiotie dans l'œuvre de Faulkner* (2009). Solveig Dunkel and Astrid Maes, who are French doctoral candidates, are respectively working on the aesthetics of bodies and on the representations of love in Faulkner.¹³

It is in the early 1980s that Faulkner started capturing the attention of French academia with an unprecedented energy. This is when the French

seemingly embarked on a similar project: indeed, there are several traces of a supposedly upcoming book under the title *The French Face of Faulkner (1931–1981)*, meant to be published by Indiana UP (see Gresset & Samway 166; Wilhelm 428). To date, this project seems to remain unpublished.

¹²I'm referring to Genette's use of the term "figure" as a combination of form and content, or as the form adopted by a content.

¹³Nicole Moulinoux and Marie Liénard-Ytérion have more classically focused their studies on the influence of the Gothic heritage in Faulkner's writing. Jacques Pothier explored the links between Faulkner and South American literatures. As for Françoise Buisson, she made Faulkner's short stories her privileged object. There are currently six PhD dissertations being written on Faulkner's work in French universities, both exclusively on Faulkner or in the form of thematic parallels between his work and one or several other writers'. Single-author studies in the U.S. have come under question in the last several years, based on a number of factors. A focus on Faulkner among scholars abroad, however, promises to further the move toward opening literary study out toward other interpretive contexts. As one example, Faulkner's French reception reveals dimensions of his work that American readers have not always recognized.

academic triumvirate—André Bleikasten, Michel Gresset and François Pitavy—started publishing one astounding book or paper on Faulkner after another, both in France and across the Atlantic. In March 1980, the first international Faulkner colloquium convened at the Sorbonne and the *Institut d'Anglais Charles V*, gathering both European and American scholars. The proceedings of their exchanges were published in 1983 as *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris*.¹⁴ In the introduction, Gresset and Samway, who coedited the volume, suggest that the French Faulkner tradition, the third generation of which Bleikasten, Pitavy and Gresset himself represented, is strongly marked by the influence of human sciences:

If one looked for a common denominator among “the new generation” (third generation might be more appropriate) of Faulkner critics in France, one would probably see that they started writing just as the “human sciences” were coming into their own; the advent of structuralism (in linguistics, anthropology, Marxist ideology and Freudian psychology) in the late 1950s and early 1960s caused many to change their loyalties from Jean-Paul Sartre, the formidable law-giver, to Roland Barthes, the enticing desire-inspirer, and to Jacques Lacan, the Freudian master-disciple. As a consequence, French literary critics were not only used to, but trained on, a constant questioning of literature, especially as their education coincided with the emergence of the “New Novel.” (10)

Thanks to their tremendous individual and collaborative work, Bleikasten, Gresset and Pitavy, in turn, ended up constituting a weighty legacy for the next generations of French Faulknerians.

For a while, thanks to Nicole Moulinoux’s initiative, France was equipped with its own Faulkner institution. Indeed, from 1994 to the mid-2000s, the *Fondation William Faulkner* was hosted by the University of Rennes II. An ebullient center for the study of Faulkner’s writing, the foundation organized international conferences, seminars, and meetings with American writers and it published five volumes of the *Études faulknériennes* series between 1996 and 2005. In “Dedication of William Faulkner Bust at University of Rennes,” Joseph Blotner, who took part in the event, elaborates on the appropriateness of Faulkner’s celebration in France as follows: “Sooner or later, anyone who writes about the formative experiences of [Faulkner’s] life and his art must write not only about France but also about the insights into his work provided by French scholars and critics” (128). In the same article, he pays tribute to those he calls Faulkner’s French “musketeers,” whom, together with Bleikasten, Gresset,

¹⁴Besides Bleikasten, Gresset, and Pitavy, the volume’s contributors include Thomas McHane, Dieter Meindl, Noel Polk, Joseph Blotner, Monique Pruvot, and Patrick Samway. It includes Pitavy’s “Idiocy and Idealism: A Reflection on the Faulknerian Idiot,” to which my own work on Faulkner owes a great deal.

Pitavy, include Roger Asselineau, who put a particularly possessive claim on Faulkner, demonstrating “not only how Faulkner received an early, sympathetic, and understanding reception in France in a measure that would be accorded him in his own country only much later, but also how the French had perceived a deep rapport between Faulkner and their own literary tradition” (128). “Thus it is,” Asselineau concluded, “that Faulkner can, in a way, be regarded as a French invention” (Asselineau 157).¹⁵

In his 2007 overview of Faulkner's critical reception, Timothy P. Caron considers André Bleikasten—whom he puts in a separate category of his own, together with American critic John T. Irwin—as a dramatic turning point in Faulkner studies, “[bringing] either chaos or liberation” (Caron 485), after decades of “a strain of cultural and political conservatism” (Caron 483).¹⁶ Caron contends that, as seen retrospectively, despite its “new” attention to Faulkner's language, the 1960s New Critical approach represented by key Faulkner critics like Cleanth Brooks, Olga Vickery, Michael Millgate, or Edmund Volpe mostly contributed to Faulkner's canonization, as they created “a ‘Faulkner’ that was simultaneously both celebrated as a genius and made accessible for consumption by a wide and diverse reading public” (Caron 484). By “regularizing” Faulkner, they offered a vivid and necessary counterpoint to the charges of immorality and unreadability endorsed by most of Faulkner's early American readers; but they also tamed him, all the while contributing to rendering him more conservative than he in fact was.¹⁷ In this context, Bleikasten's approach can best be described as a mixture of close readings, actually in keeping with the method adopted by New Critics, with references to “an eclectic blend of contemporary European thinkers, theorists and critics such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Roman Jakobson” among others (486). Common ground for Bleikasten and Irwin—and this is one of the reasons that Caron associates them besides their contemporaneity—lies in their praising rather than regretting “Faulkner's particular resistance to interpretive closure” (Caron 486). Hence they paved the way for the plurality of

¹⁵Blotner broaches the influence of French culture and language on Faulkner's life and work: “France in Yoknapatawpha county takes varied and sometimes strange forms. It supplied some of the oldest inhabitants The French language appears in the fiction and the life” (132). Probably making his audience blush with pleasure (as mentioned, the paper was initially a talk given at the Faulkner Foundation in Rennes), Blotner adds, between brackets: “With his handsome aquiline face, with that flowing moustache, to me Faulkner *looked* like a Frenchman of a certain age and time” (132). He concludes with an anecdote revealing that the Faulkner Blotner was familiar with proudly wore the rosette of the *Légion d'honneur* he had been granted at the French Consulate in New Orleans in May 1951.

¹⁶As he delineates the different phases of Faulkner's reception across decades, Timothy P. Caron establishes seven different moments or distinct traditions in Faulkner studies as follows chronologically: 1. “Early Readings” (480); 2. “New Critical Readings” (483); 3. “New Directions: Bleikasten and Irwin” (485); 4. The “Theory Boom” (488); 5. “The Problem of Late Faulkner” (492); 6. “Comparative Faulkner” (493); 7. “The Contemporary Scene,” in a brief conclusion opening onto the future.

¹⁷The Agrarians gathered in *I'll Take My Stand* certainly celebrated Faulkner as a defender of the Old South values and system. See Rubin.

compatible *Faulkners* that have been developing since the 1980s: “[q]uite simply, we no longer have *Faulkner* but *Faulkners*” (Caron 479).

From the start, Faulkner’s writing has offered French thinkers and academics an exclusive territory and a singular material from which they drew inspiration. Faulkner gave grist to the mills of French philosophers from Sartre to Jacques Rancière, through Claude Romano’s *Le chant de la vie: Phénoménologie de Faulkner*.¹⁸ In the collection of essays translated as *The Rules of Art*, first published in France in 1992, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu focuses on Faulkner’s “A Rose For Emily” to articulate his “theory of reading in practice.” Bourdieu’s approach to literature in general is averse to strictly formal, poetical, and aesthetic readings of literary texts, and, of course, it is deeply marked by his concern with a writer’s belonging to an identifiable time, place, and social network, his *habitus*. But his chapter on Faulkner’s short story paradoxically takes the form of an extended “internal reading” (Speller 83), which gives him the occasion to distinguish between two modes of reading, the naïve uncritical mode and the more explorative “scholastic” mode.¹⁹ Bourdieu’s assumption is that “A Rose for Emily” “plays on both these levels, beguiling us into believing its literary illusion, only then to send us back to see how it had led us astray” (Speller 85). In *Le nom, le sol et le sang* (2011), anthropologist Jean Jamin examines the interrelatedness of names, place, and blood in Faulkner’s work, highlighting both fictive and real lineages and genealogies, while questioning what has been referred to as the biographical illusion.²⁰ Such readings, deriving from a remarkable diversity of research fields and approaches, further demonstrate that Faulkner has been inspiring an incomparable variety of conflicting, yet companionable, readings.

Philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists have similarly found food for thought in Faulkner’s novels. So have translators, of course: it is needless to say that Faulkner’s language constitutes an inexhaustible challenge for translators, who have kept “trying” to render the multiple complexities of his style into French. The first volume of Faulkner’s *Oeuvres Romanesques* published by the prestigious Gallimard collection, *La Plé-*

¹⁸Aurélien Guillaumin contributes to the present issue of *The Faulkner Journal* through a detailed examination of the unflagging interest of French philosophers, among them phenomenologists, in the singular character of Joe Christmas. In the process, her article also offers non-French speakers a much-needed introduction to Claude Romano’s book-length phenomenological reading of Faulkner.

¹⁹In “Reading and Reflexivity: Bourdieu’s Faulkner,” John Speller clearly expresses his surprise at finding such an essay “at the end of a work that has spent most of its length extolling field analysis, and chiding other modes of reading, from New Criticism to Structuralism and deconstruction for failing to position works in their socio-historical contexts” (Speller 83). Bourdieu’s assumption in “A Theory of Reading in Practice” is that for “A Rose for Emily” to do the trick, the two distinct modes of reading were programmed into the text; in other words, Bourdieu’s theory stipulates that the success of the scholastic reading depends on the reader’s naïve entrance into the text. But Speller contends that “[i]n his enthusiasm to find in Faulkner a support for his theory, we might say, Bourdieu bent the story to make it literarily ‘flatter’ than it in fact is” (Speller 89).

²⁰See also Jamin, “Retour à Rowan Oak.”

iade, came out in 1977. Taking monumental work in the next four decades, it was followed by four other volumes covering Faulkner's entire novelistic work.²¹ The most recent example of the unrelenting urge of the French to translate Faulkner in the right way is imposingly exemplified by Pitavy, who reedited Faulkner's complete short stories in a 2017 volume that completes the five preceding volumes. Pitavy revised the translations of all the short stories included in *Nouvelles*, which consists in a combination of Faulkner's 1950 *Collected Stories*, his *Uncollected Stories*, and the posthumous stories. A decade earlier, together with Marc Amfreville and Antoine Cazé, Aurélie Guillaïn contributed to a revised translation of Faulkner's late novels in a volume that Gallimard published as *Les Snopes* (2007).²²

French Writers' Indebtedness to Faulkner

Starting with Sartre, French novelists too have long been stimulated by Faulkner's forms and figures, acknowledged his impact upon them, and claimed to be his descendants.²³ There is, unfortunately, no room here to expatiate on that aspect of France's encounter with Faulkner. Besides, Faulkner's heritage has already generated many discussions by specialists of comparative literature.²⁴ However, what I would like to remark is that many French writers inspired by Faulkner have also developed a singular urge to write *about* him, thus developing a parallel literature that is totally unembarrassed by the anxiety of influence. Like Philippe Sollers,

²¹Gresset edited the first volume that contains *Sartoris*, *Le Bruit et la fureur*, *Appendice Compson: 1699–1945*, *Sanctuaire*, and *Tandis que j'agonise* in their original translations. The second volume of Faulkner's *Oeuvres Romanesques* appeared in 1995. In this volume the original translations of *Lumière d'Août*, *Pylône*, *Absalon, Absalon!*, and *Les Invaincus* by Coindreau, Delgrove, and Rimbault have been revised by Didier Coupaye and coeditors Bleikasten and Pitavy. The third volume, coedited by Bleikasten, Gresset, and Pitavy, similarly contains revised translations of *Si je t'oublie*, *Jérusalem*, *Le Hameau*, *Le Père Abraham*, *Desends*, *Moïse* and *Lion*. New translators include Aurélie Guillaïn and Nicole Moulinoux. It was published in 2000. The fourth volume, coedited by Alain Geoffroy, Pitavy and Pothier, who also revised the early translations, came out in 2007 and includes *L'Intrus dans la poussière*, *Le Gambit du cavalier*, *Requiem pour une nonne* and *Parabole*. The fifth and last volume of Faulkner's *Oeuvres Romanesques* in *La Pléiade*, coedited and revised by Pitavy and Pothier, came out in 2016; it includes *La Ville*, *La Demeure*, and *Les Larrons*.

²²Pitavy's "The Making of a French Faulkner: A Reflection Translation" is fraught with illuminating observations about the necessity of revising the translations of Faulkner's texts across generations. See also Annick Chapdelaine & Gilian Lane-Mercier's *Faulkner. Une Expérience de retraduction*.

²³Besides Aurélie Guillaïn's "An Aspect of William Faulkner's reception in France: The long shadow of Joe Christmas in the philosophical works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Romano and Jacques Rancière," see also Simon and Oore. Jean-Paul Sartre's indebtedness to Faulkner is particularly complex and manifold, since, as pointed out by Aurélie Guillaïn in the present issue, Sartre was developing his own fictional work at the time he became one of Faulkner's first critics and later came back to Faulkner in his philosophical work.

²⁴One of Bleikasten's first articles is entitled "Faulkner et le nouveau roman." See, for instance, Anne Bourse's "Images du temps et inscriptions de l'événement dans les œuvres de William Faulkner et de Claude Simon"; Mahigan Lepage's "Michon et Bergounioux lecteurs de Faulkner"; Hughes Azérad's "Édouard Glissant and the Test of Faulkner's Modernism" or Michael Wiedorn's "Go Slow Now: Saying the Unsayable in Édouard Glissant's reading of Faulkner."

who has been evoked earlier, contemporary French novelists and poets Édouard Glissant, Pierre Bergounioux, and Pierre Michon have, in various ways, perpetuated this tradition of French novelists become essayists for Faulkner's sake. In "Le Père du texte," Michon inventories his ambivalent reasons for "loving" Faulkner; here is one of them: "I also love Faulkner in a brotherly way Because he was a barbarian. A barbarian in a barbarian country, a bumpkin among bumpkins—a Southern bumpkin. . . . His inconceivable exploit was to become something as civilized as Proust for a sad saloon of lynchers wearing Stetsons in Oxford, Mississippi, without ever failing to claim his belonging to Oxford, Mississippi" (Michon 85; my trans.). In *Corps du roi*, Michon expresses his gratitude to Faulkner for giving him the pluck to put his own uncertain little man in motion. Illustrating the relentless fascination that Faulkner is likely to stimulate, Bergounioux was not happy with one book on Faulkner: he published *Jusqu'à Faulkner* in 2002, an ardent homage to the writer's contribution to world literature; then, in 2017, he came up with *Prendre la Parole: Les Larrons de William Faulkner*, an improbable little book that reads like a literary commentary of a scene from *The Reivers*. In *Faulkner, Mississippi*, a postcolonial study of Faulkner that is also a poetic book with strong biographic undertones, Glissant points out that "the universe of the South shares a crisis of filiation, a parental and historical trauma, with the world of the Caribbean islands" (Glissant qtd in Azérad 200). This awareness may account for Glissant's talent for grasping the haunting quality of Faulkner's writing, naming the color of his influential melancholy: "Faulkner's landscapes are suffused with a fragrance of mauve, with a power of melancholy that makes you feel like painting your own countryside, whether near or far" (106). Glissant's wondrous use of synesthesia associating color and odor betrays the pervasive influence of Faulkner's writing of the senses on the poet. What's more, the melancholy fragrance identified by Glissant might well have budded in the Luxembourg Gardens, as I will note later.

The most famous French novelist who admittedly owed a clear debt to Faulkner was most notably Claude Simon, whom Bleikasten called "today's most Faulknerian French novelist" ("Faulkner" 422). Simon's writing is quite obviously haunted by his admiring reading of Faulkner. For instance, any page of his 1960 novel *La Route des Flandres* offers examples of Faulkner's influence on Simon's writing, in the form of punctuationless mergings of voices (two male voices remembering, "trying to" / "sefforcer de" shape the past), contradicting themselves, gradually adding up information and material through which, little by little, the story takes shape amidst fragments. Simon's writing also contains numerous asides clarifying the use of pronouns and an uninterrupted reflection on the nature, on the thickness, of time. The recurring motif of incest constitutes yet another similarity between the two writers. Simon paid tribute to Faulkner in his *Discours de Stockholm*, the talk he gave on receiving the 1985 Nobel Prize for Literature. There's no doubt that the French have been tending the fire

of their collective partiality to Faulkner, making sure it keeps perpetuating itself.

Faulkner's Encounter with France

There are good reasons to assume that France's privileged bond with Faulkner was, to some extent, reciprocal and to believe that it started with young Faulkner's appreciation of France in the course of his stay in Paris in 1925. As pointed out by Barbara Ladd in "Faulkner's Paris: State and Metropole in *A Fable*," "Paris seems to have had a special significance for him. It shows up, either as a setting (perhaps briefly) or as a reference in a number of his novels and stories" (Ladd 115). Faulkner arrived in Paris on August 12, 1925, after spending a few days in Italy, which he found "[f]ull of Americans—terrible" (SL 10). His first letter to his mother, dating back from August 13, registers the two places that particularly struck him on his very first day in Paris—two places that he constantly refers to in his correspondence—"the Luxembourg gardens and the Louvre" (SL 11). On August 18 he actually moved to the "nice room just around the corner from the Luxembourg gardens," which is evoked in the Aunt Bama letter, "where I can sit and write and watch the children" (SL 13). The place referred to is located on 26 rue Servandoni, in the sixth *arrondissement*. For an impression of the tight room Faulkner occupied there, under the benevolent attention of a middle-aged landlady forever equipped with a broom, for a sense of the local color (the steep narrow stairs, the collective lavatories on the first floor), one may want to take a close look at the different versions of *Elmer*, the short story and the unfinished novel that Faulkner started then and there.²⁵ To celebrate Faulkner's centennial in September 1997 a plaque was installed on rue Servandoni, on the façade of what used to be the boarding house where Faulkner spent a few months in the fall 1925.

Of course, Faulkner was not born in Paris, he did not die there, he did not write any of his novels there; yet his brief passage in a Parisian boarding house is proudly remembered.²⁶

It is on the Left Bank of Paris in the 1920s that one could find "the ultimate bohemian community": "It was here that the American expatriates of the 1920s gathered, living at extremely cheap rates, enjoying some of the

²⁵*Elmer*, both the unfinished novel that was first published in *Mississippi Quarterly* in 1983 (Gallimard published Gresset's translation in 1987) and the short story known as "A Portrait of Elmer" are indeed imbued with Faulkner's Parisian mood and observations.

²⁶A comparative reading of the obituaries that were published in the days following Faulkner's death in July 1962 reveals that while France mourned him wholeheartedly, expressing a sharp sense of loss, reactions to Faulkner's demise in his own country actually repeat his American readership's very mitigated reception of his work. See, for instance, "La Mort de William Faulkner" in the July 9, 1962, issue of *Le Monde* and "Faulkner's Home, Family and Heritage Were Genesis of Yoknapatawpha County" in the July 7, 1962, issue of *The New York Times*. While the French obituary starts by observing that "Faulkner's demise is mourned by the whole world's literature," the American one highlights that "some saw little merit" in Faulkner's achievement.

(Wikimedia Commons / Mu)

best food and drink in the world, and playing out dramatic lives of artistic pursuits” (Hagood 75).²⁷ But it would be wrong to associate Faulkner with the Lost Generation, as the young writer did not mingle much with the other American expatriates and was not inclined to the kind of festive life they led there. As he puts it himself in a September letter to his Aunt Bama, “I am living a funny sort of life—for Paris. Partly financial reasons, but principally from inclination. I live just around the corner from the Luxembourg Gardens, where I spend all my time. I write there, and play with the children, help them sail their boats, etc.” (SL 19). The young Faulkner visited museums and mostly observed the world around him while growing a bohemian beard, sitting on a bench in the gardens.

Faulkner’s 1925 stay in Paris actually splits into two distinct moments and two rather dramatically different moods. Judging from the letters he sent home, August and September 1925 were happy months, in the course of which Faulkner eagerly walked in and around Paris. Besides the Louvre and the Luxembourg, in which he “spent afternoon after afternoon” (SL 24), he mentions museums and exhibits, cafés, places like Montparnasse, Place de la Concorde, the Pantheon, the Tuileries, Place de l’Opéra,

²⁷“While Faulkner spent time in Paris during its heyday of American artistic presence (an important credential for a Modernist), it would not be accurate to understand him to be part of the expatriate scene” (Hagood 76). Faulkner actually spent very little time with the American expatriates. He apparently spent an evening or two at Gerturd Stein’s; he came across Joyce who was writing in a café near L’Opéra (see Bleikasten, *Une vie* 169).

les grands boulevards, Vincennes, and a night at the Moulin Rouge. He records anecdotes about the impropriety of drinking coffee with a meal in Paris, obviously appreciates French wine, and praises the French culinary talents. Faulkner's Parisian letters are therefore scattered with humorous aphorisms about his experience of French cultural differences: "Good thing the Lord gave these folks wine—they rate a recompense of some kind for this climate" (Watson 228); "Coffee here is a general term which means nothing. Something black in a glass which authorized you to sit in a café for an hour and to watch the people pass" (SL 25); "A french [*sic*] cook can take an old shoe and make it taste good" (SL 31). As he lived nearby, most of his walks took him over and over again to the Luxembourg Gardens, which he ended up envisioning as *his* garden: "I have come to think of the Luxembourg as my garden now. I sit and write there, and walk around to watch the children, and the croquet games. I always carry a piece of bread to feed the sparrows" (SL 17). Faulkner's evocations of the gardens become more and more elegiac, betraying—together with his sense of proprietorship—his deep fondness both for the place and for its regular visitors, especially children and elderly people: "There is an old bent man who sails a toy boat on the pool, with the most beautiful rapt face you ever saw. When I am old enough to no longer have to make excuses for not working, I shall have a weathered derby hat like his and spend my days sailing a toy boat in the Luxembourg Gardens" (SL 19–20); "The bandstand is outdoors, in a grove of chestnut trees in the Luxembourg Gardens. It's lovely, the way the music sounds" (SL 23). The Luxembourg Gardens is also the place where Faulkner seems to have developed a sense of France's post-war, downhearted grayness, intertwining relief and loss in the aftermath of catastrophe, and thus the elegiac note I mention above. On a more personal level, Faulkner's melancholy may also be related to the sense of evanescence, of fading light and passing time, proper to his solitary experience there as a young man in an old continent away from home.

After going "on a tour of the war zone" in late September (Watson 217), Faulkner took a brief trip to England, which, besides being too expensive, he did not find to his taste.²⁸ He therefore was back in Paris on October 17 and stayed there until December 9, actually longer than he wanted due to the trouble he had cashing Liveright's \$200 check—an advance for the publication of *Soldiers' Pay* that he needed to book his passage back home. As a result, the letters corresponding to the second part of Faulkner's stay in Paris from October to December 1925 betray an entirely different mood. Indeed, the letters collected by James G. Watson in *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner's Letters to His Mother and Father, 1918–1925*, are imbued with a mixture of frustration and nostalgia for "home," a word that recurs with poignant frequency. Now Faulkner's fondness for Parisian children, who, he writes "dont seem to mind the cold at all—outdoors all day long.

²⁸Faulkner sent his mother a postcard of the Amiens Cathedral about September 25 (SL 26).

They are awful cute: bundled up so that they can hardly move” mingles with his concern with being able to enjoy his younger brother’s boyhood: “You mustn’t let Jimmy get too big until I come home” (Watson 229, 230). His frustration at not being able to cash in his check sours his enjoyment of Paris: “I have no idea when I will get home . . . What makes me so mad i having to stay in a city, a land I’m tired off [*sic*]” (Watson 230). The bad weather sharpens his melancholy, as emphasized by his more and more frequent allusions to the sporadic rains and to the grayness of the atmosphere around him: “Paris weather is overcast and grey, as a rule” (SL 15); “Still quite chilly and gray—just enough light in the sky to turn these lovely faded green and gray and red roofs into a beautiful faint lavender at sunset” (Blotner 1977, 20); “The rains have begun—like April”; “It still rains—it makes very humid, as we say in France” (Watson 222).

The ambivalence of Faulkner’s experience of Paris emerges in the improbable finale of *Sanctuary*, published half a decade after Faulkner stayed there. Indeed, nothing in the plot, which develops around two spots—on the one hand the apocryphal small town of Jefferson, Mississippi, on the other hand the real-life city of Memphis, Tennessee, about ninety miles further north—announces its ultimate delocalization in the heart of Paris. Yet it is in the Luxembourg Gardens that Temple Drake and her father, the Judge, are shown wandering in the final scene of *Sanctuary*, an ocean away from the fury of rape, prostitution, and murder the novel is fraught with:

It had been a gray day, a gray summer, a gray year. On the street old men wore overcoats, and in the Luxembourg Gardens as Temple and her father passed the women sat knitting in shawls and even the men playing croquet played in coats and capes, and in the sad gloom of the chestnut trees the dry click of balls, the random shouts of children, had that quality of autumn, gallant and evanescent and forlorn. From beyond the circle with its spurious Greek Balustrade, clotted with movement, filled with a gray light the same color and texture as the water which the fountain played into the pool, came a steady crash of music. They went on, passed the pool where the children and an old man in a shabby brown overcoat sailed toy boats, and entered the trees again and found seats. Immediately an old woman came with decrepit promptitude and collected four sous. (316)

This passage may more or less correspond to the beginning of a text Faulkner wrote at the beginning of September and which he was so proud of that he excitedly wrote to his mother about his intense satisfaction with it:

I have just written such a beautiful thing that I am about to bust—2000 words about the Luxembourg gardens and death. It has a thin thread of plot about a young woman, and it is poetry though writ-

ten in prose form. I have worked on it for two whole days and every word is perfect. I haven't slept hardly for two nights, thinking about it, comparing words, accepting and rejecting them, then changing again. But now it is perfect—a jewel. I am going to put it away for a week, then show it to someone for an opinion. So tomorrow I will wake up feeling rotten, I expect. Reaction. But its [sic] worth it, to have done a thing like this. (SL 17).

That “beautiful” piece gathers all the elements Faulkner had been eagerly recording in his letters (the pool, the toy boats, the croquet games, the balustrade, the marbles, the band, the trench coats, the dying chestnut trees²⁹), hence conjuring up a sense of verisimilitude as the gardens are accurately recognizable, if not familiar, thanks to a few distinctive elements, both for the eyes and for the ears. The post-WWI overall impression of decrepitude, which Faulkner experienced firsthand when visiting the war zone, is highlighted through words like “shabby,” “decrepit”; Paris is poor and obviously coping with little. The prevailing impression of melancholy that pervades the scene is mostly related to the many touches of gray it is scattered with, starting with the solemn tone (and ternary rhythm) of the paragraph's opening sentence. But paradoxically, at the end of *Sanctuary*, the grayness of the cold autumn day (coats are already indispensable) somehow comes as a relief: its retrospective contamination of both the scene's immediate and more distanced pasts has the effect of a longed-for, almost monochromatic, lull. Indeed, the grayness also stands in sharp contrast with the gaudy violence and Southern heat that underlies most of the novel. As the novel comes to a close, the grayness engulfs the months covered by the plot and all that's been irremediably lost to them.³⁰ The overall grayness thus improbably conveys the return of a form of peace. Now Temple and her father can take a seat and watch what's going on around them, in a posture echoing the writer's.³¹

This is, however, not quite accurate since Faulkner has Temple “yawn,” be it “behind her hand” (317), at the very spectacle that drew him to the Luxembourg Gardens every single day of his stay in Paris. Likewise, as suggested by the last look the reader takes at Temple's reflection as she

²⁹“Lots of trees are dying here, the elms about the Place d'Etoile [sic] and some of the old chestnut trees in the Luxembourg” (SL 16).

³⁰The inventory of what is being lost in *Sanctuary* is impressive: Temple's ravishing; Tommy's and Goodwin's deaths; the South's or Jefferson's “honor” due to the trial's travesty of justice; even Temple's own fleeting personal and erotic autonomy that she had sought in her erratic “running” across the Ole Miss campus and in her outings with “town boys.” Peter Lurie articulated his own version of these tonal contrasts and of the close of the novel's lyricism in the first chapter of *Vision's Immanence*, which is devoted to *Sanctuary*.

³¹Let this be the occasion for me to express my deep gratitude to an exceptional reader and an outstandingly generous editor. Thank you, Peter, for sharing both your vast knowledge and sharp insights on Faulkner and his work, and for advising me, so gracefully, on how to rewrite my very affective *cri du coeur* into an academic paper.

herself contemplates her “face in miniature sullen and discontent and sad” (317) in her compact mirror, it is only a semblance of peace acquired at great cost. As suggested by the novel’s last vision of “the sky lying prone and vanquished in the embrace of the season of rain and death” (317), in a last of swathe of now unspoken grayness, it is a peace that is redolent of defeat and sadness rather than victory. In the last analysis, though the hat Temple wears is “smart” and “new” and her father is restored in his role as a protector, the images of dissolution that pervade the last two paragraphs probably subdue the novel’s unrelenting violence and tame it through painterly strokes rather than annul it. While Temple, her gloominess and ennui merely “dissolve” out of the novel, the musings of the Gardens’ “dead tranquil queens in stained marble” (317) remain unperturbed.

As he gathered images and sensations in and around the Luxembourg Gardens, Faulkner wrote steadily throughout his stay in Paris: As Watson notes, “By the middle of November he had finished six short stories, half of a novel called *Elmer*, which is partly set in Paris, and the opening chapter of *Mosquitoes*” (217). “Still writing,” he tells Maud Falkner on Oct. 21; “I have a fine collection to bring home with me” (222). Even more significantly, Faulkner also absorbed a great diversity of observations and experiences that would inform and inspire his later writing: “I have plenty of notes and data to last me a long time: all I need now is to settle down at home comfortable again and bang my typewriter” (218).

Let me conclude this essay on a personal note, with a few words about what I seem to know best—my own predilection for Faulkner. I read *Light in August* when I was twenty-one; it was then part of my curriculum as a third-year student at La Sorbonne. I therefore read the book and studied it, mostly on my own with the help of Bleikasten’s *Parcours de Faulkner*, as part of my university assignments. This is when it happened: I got burned. All I had read up to that point suddenly paled in comparison with the flames of Johanna’s Burden’s house and that August light, sometimes glaringly vivid, sometimes as soft as the dust under Lena’s feet. Likewise, everything I would read in the future would be measured against the burning sensation of that Mississippian summer. I entered the Yoknapatawpha County as a reader and a student at the same time as Lena crossed the Mississippi border as a character, on her way from Alabama, in search of Lucas Burch—the father of the baby she’s pregnant with. But, unlike Lena, I would never entirely leave the place again; unlike Lucas Burch for Lena, Faulkner was not meant to be a short-lived partiality for me.

This is when I understood I had fallen under the spell of Faulkner’s writing. At this point in the novel, the reader has ridden a few miles with Lena across the dazzling heat, sharing her present sense of expectation while being allowed, through the miracle of the narrator’s play with focalization, a few glimpses into her recent past and the circumstances that brought her there:

After a while she began to hear the wagon. She heard it for some time. Then it came into sight, mounting the hill. The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound into a spool. So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape. "That far within my hearing before my seeing," Lena thinks. (7–8)

I guess I am able to verbalize today what merely, but forcefully, conquered me then, extending my reflection to the Faulkner I know now, more than twenty-four years later—now that I have, in turn, taught Faulkner's *Light in August* for the first time. What never fails to strike me in Faulkner's writing—and here in particular—is the way his syntax, which defines its singular pace through repetition and recurring similes, imitates how slowly phenomena are perceived. In this instance, sight takes over the sense of hearing, which returns with a vengeance once the object has been identified by eyes in order to characterize it while, at the same time, relinquishing its initial designation as far as possible. In some cases, as with Benjy or with Vardaman, there is no such initial designation of the thing described. What do I mean? Although there is no doubt that Lena is familiar with the object she perceives—in this instance: an approaching mule-driven wagon—this object escapes simple denomination; it would rather remain an "it," an unstressed syllable, a mere pronoun either used as a personal pronoun or as an object pronoun, which in its radical indeterminacy and extreme nakedness, may be one of the fetish words of Faulkner's writing. What else? The compelling use of synesthesia, the heat, the smell of pines, and the silence of a summer afternoon all being conjured up in the minimalist tension of a few words attached to one another: "the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon." The conflicting combination of movement and stasis, which exemplifies so well what reading Faulkner is—a continuous succession of stops and goes.³² The narrator's attention to

³²In his remarkable (and remarkably French, for the closeness of its reading, at the almost entire sacrifice of secondary sources) "The Landscape in *Light in August*," Pitavy refers to the novel's "deceptive mobility" (266) and "hypnosis" (269), highlighting that Faulkner scenery in *Light*

small, sometimes very small things, “a heaven of details” (Sollers 645): a creaking noise, a wagon turned into a mere fleck (“a shabby bead”) in the increasing distance; the tight concordance of signifiers and the sound they make: “The sharp and brittle crack and clatter,” solidified by the use of alliterations, assonances, and monosyllables; the fact that an unflagging lexical fecundity should make up for the failings of language, forever reinventing it: *ungreased, pinewiney*. And, still, Benjy’s echo in the combination of sound and insignificance: “the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning,” or the faint memory of the spools with which the young Benjy played, in the shape of a winding road. There is no getting tired of so fertile an inventiveness; of such a stunning embrace of the sensory world; of such beauty.

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in August is “always inhabited, one way or another, seen by a character or related to his consciousness: one cannot visualize the road without Lena gazing at it, backrolling behind the anonymous wagon she rides, the street without Christmas, a prisoner in it, the Burden house without the old maid or the memory of her presence. It is thus not surprising that the landscape should have a strange resemblance with the characters inhabiting it, and be endowed with both their unreality and their haunting presence” (“Landscape” 265).

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