

Faulkner and Racism: A Commentary on Arthur F. Kinney's "Faulkner and Racism"

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Anyone seeking to shed light on the vexed subject of the racial convictions expressed by William Faulkner during his life and in his fiction must, I think, confront the central fact that Faulkner's racial attitudes, like his explorations of gender and class, were often contradictory, even violently conflicted at any given moment of his career. True, as Arthur Kinney points out, Faulkner progressed from giving voice both in his life and work to some of the most pernicious racist beliefs about African-Americans that he had inherited from his family and his society to expressing more insight into and sympathy for the plight of southern blacks than almost any other southern white male writer of his time. As a young man in his mid-twenties in New Haven, Connecticut, in the autumn of 1921, for example, he smugly lectured his father about how unworkable the relatively enlightened race relations up north were:

You cant tell me these niggers are as happy and contented as ours are, all this freedom does is to make them miserable because they are not white, so that they hate white people more than ever, and the whites are afraid of them. There's only one sensible way to treat them, like we treat Brad Farmer and Calvin and Uncle George. (Watson 149)

Indeed, Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Flags in the Dust* (first published in 1929 as *Sartoris*), perpetuates rather than examines Southern racial stereotypes and caricatures. As Professor Kinney remarks, African-Americans in this novel "are characterized by the Strother family—a father

*Reference: Arthur F. Kinney, "Faulkner and Racism," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 265-78.

who swindles the people of his parish by gambling on their savings [and] a son who lies about his heroism during World War I" (267). Caspey's short-lived rebellion in the novel against his white masters only serves to parody the shattering effect that aerial service in World War I has had upon the young Bayard Sartoris. No longer content to play the faithful family retainer like Simon Strother, Caspey loafs insolently and retails to his credulous family absurdly fabricated stories about the war in dialect. But his revolt is settled with comic violence by old Bayard with a stick of firewood, and thereafter he relapses into the obedient "nigger" he was before he went overseas. Thereafter, he disappears from the novel. Conceivably, this brief rebellion against white authority represents the unsettling effects which the war had on those black veterans who returned to the society for which they had risked their lives only to find that it still refused to grant them equality, but it is treated far too broadly to be taken seriously. Even Simon's self-importance parodies Sartoris arrogance in that being a Sartoris servant, he sets himself a peg or two higher than the other blacks in the novel. Kinney's assertion, however, that Faulkner also reveals that Simon's daughter Elnora has "surrendered to the white Colonel John Sartoris to produce a mulatto, and bastard, son" (267), presumably Isom, is incorrect. Elnora does not have a child by Colonel Sartoris in Faulkner's third novel, although he went on to make her the colonel's illegitimate daughter in the 1934 short story "There Was A Queen" (727). And Professor Kinney is also right to draw our attention to Faulkner's infamous analogy in the book between Negroes and mules: the omniscient narrator claims that the latter resemble blacks "in their impulses and mental processes" (268).

From this youthful nadir, Faulkner underwent the difficult task of trying to shed his racist inheritance without completely doing so. His progressive evolution when it comes to issues of race is there for all to see in works like *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). And those familiar with Faulkner's biography are well aware of his courageous, embattled attempt in the 1950s to stake out a public compromise position between impatient northern interventionism and southern intransigence in particular over the Civil Rights crisis and in general over the role and place of African-Americans in the predominantly Euro-American modern South and indeed

in the rest of the United States of America. If Faulkner's solution, a liberal version of gradualism, strikes us today as conservative, we would do well to remember that he was privately and publicly vilified by family, friends, and others for advocating it.

In today's environment of generally sympathetic progressive ideological analysis of Faulkner's novels, however, it seems all too easily forgotten that the man who in 1931 published the story "Dry September," one of the strongest critiques of lynch law and mob rule yet offered by a Southern writer, wrote a letter at the same time to the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* that Neil R. McMillen and Noel Polk call "astonishing for the baldness of the racial attitudes it expresses" and "its virtual defense of lynching as an instrument of justice" (McMillen 3). After asserting "there was no need for lynching until after reconstruction days," Faulkner goes on to say, "I have yet to hear . . . of a man of any color and with a record beyond reproach, suffering violence at the hands of men who knew him" (McMillen 4). No student of Faulkner familiar with his horrific and critical representation of the lynching of Lee Goodwin, a white man, in both the original and the published versions of *Sanctuary* (1929, 1931) could fail to be troubled by the lines with which the author concludes his letter: "But there is one curious thing about mobs. Like our juries, they have a way of being right" (McMillen 6).

In the wake of D. H. Lawrence's maxim about trusting the teller and not the tale, the formalist banishment of the author, and her or his subsequent death under poststructuralism, some may be tempted to bracket Faulkner's life and focus solely on his fiction. Yet, even the novels and short stories of Faulkner's maturity frequently contain relatively enlightened racial views crammed chock-a-block next to arresting images, actions, and language that many readers would be hard pressed not to acknowledge as racist. Perhaps Faulkner's conflicted views on race are most evident where the troubling issue of miscegenation is concerned. Although he wrote with sorrow and regret about the injustice of the sexual exploitation of black female slaves by Southern slaveholders like Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom* and Lucius McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner's fictional characters early and late suggest that, like most white Southerners of his day, he was not so enlightened or liberal as to condone consensual interracial relationships. Not only are Henry Sutpen and Quentin Compson

haunted by the fear of miscegenation but, one suspects, so was some part of Faulkner's divided psyche. And yet he remained capable of analyzing this fear even as it energized his imagination. Thus in *Light in August*, for example, it is by no means clear that any black blood actually runs in Joe Christmas's veins. Nevertheless, Christmas believes that he has mixed parentage, and this belief causes him along with everyone else in the novel to view him and his actions differently than they would had they believed him to be white. As Judith Bryant Wittenberg points out, "the text's predominant concern" is with "race as a linguistic and social construct rather than a biological given, its focus more on the concept of race than on actual race relations" (146).

The white Southern fear, even horror of miscegenation is also alive and well in *Go Down, Moses* where Sophonsiba Beauchamp ignores her brother Hubert's self-serving defense of his liaison with his black cook—"They're free now! They're folks too just like we are" (289)—and sends the servant packing. In pointing out that bachelor Hubert has never had sexual relations with "proper" white women, Faulkner underscores how patriarchal idealization of white women as non-sexual ladies only led to sexual exploitation of more accessible black female slaves and servants in the antebellum and postbellum South as well. Even the frequently heroic Isaac McCaslin, beneficiary of Sam Fathers's tutelage on man's relation to the wilderness, can only look at Roth Edmonds's part-black mistress and their illegitimate child and think to himself, "*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America . . . But not now! Not now!*" (344). Immediately after the woman leaves without taking Roth's guilt money, Ike lies shaking in his cot thinking how "*Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares*" (347).

Although the fear of miscegenation is as evident in *Go Down, Moses* as in *Absalom*, so is an awareness of the tortured injustice of race relations in the South, an awareness that drives Quentin Compson in *Absalom* to say quickly "I dont hate it" when Shreve McCannon asks him why he hates his native region so and then to repeat the phrase to himself five times as if trying to convince himself of its truth (303). Indeed, some aspects of Faulkner's composition of *Go Down, Moses* underscore his growing racial awareness. As Faulkner revised the short stories that make

up the novel, Michael Grimwood observes, he repudiated the formulaic Anglo-American depictions of comic "darkies" inherited from plantation literature that characterized the stories in their original appearance in national magazines such as *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Collier's* (275-77). In place of the racist aspects of Lucas Beauchamp's depiction in these stories, for example, he occasionally presented the readers of his novel with a more complex character that may appear somewhat inconsistent with the comic, even clownish Uncle Remus figure Lucas cuts in the earlier-inscribed but unrevised material. The omniscient narrator of *Go Down, Moses*, however, occasionally seems ambivalent on the subject of race. In describing Sam Fathers, Ike's mentor, as having been betrayed by his mother "who had bequeathed him not only the blood of slaves but even a little of the very blood which had enslaved it; himself his own battleground, the scene of his own vanquishment and the mausoleum of his defeat," the narrator subscribes to a kind of essentialism of race and blood (162). Then again, the narrator also points out several times that the servile and inferior blood of the black race has been made so by years of slavery. And how does Rider's intense love and grief for his dead wife Mannie in "Pantaloons in Black" relate to these observations? Although Professor Kinney is right to suggest that *Go Down, Moses* "shows the consequences to man and culture when the present is built on a past of miscegenation—of the dominance and possession of blacks in which slavery before the War still dictates the values of a culture" (274), it is necessary now and again to emphasize the limits of Faulkner's liberalism.

Critics on both the left and the right have had difficulty dealing with Faulkner's often simultaneous adherence and resistance to the white supremacist racial doctrines of his day, with the unceasing dialectic of progressive and conservative racial discourses that constitutes his work. (One notable exception is Eric Sundquist's *Faulkner: The House Divided* which is attentive to the ambivalence in racial matters that characterizes Faulkner's life and fiction.) Sympathetic critical assessments of Faulkner in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s issued primarily from a blending of liberal formalist ideological sources such as the Southern New Critics Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren with their ties to the short-lived conservative Fugitive and Agrarian movements. Unlike these assessments which often stressed Faulkner's transcendent tragic vision or wisdom

on racial matters, the temptation in our own age of progressive cultural and ideological criticism is to view Faulkner's own comments and fictional representations, when they deviate from current ideals and practice as either the reprehensible, politically incorrect expression of a wide gamut of racist beliefs and ideas or as—and this is more likely to be the case—ironic, subtle negative critiques of an oppressive social order. Critics of the latter persuasion, as Frederick Crews observes, “are militantly committed to uncovering Faulkner’s sympathies with the blacks, women, and other subaltern figures who were ‘marginalized’ by the racist and patriarchal Southern order” (126). We have thus moved from Agrarian-influenced conservative readings of Faulkner with all their talk of community, transcendent humanism, and tragic Christianity to poststructuralist readings of Faulkner as the ideological writer par excellence at home on the barricades of every cause from the 1960s to the present.

But why should reading and writing about and especially teaching Faulkner's work in the 1990s be characterized by this tendency to beatify or demonize a constantly conflicted and evolving writer by our contemporary standards? At stake here, among other issues, is our ability to investigate and talk about a particular period of the past as something not only similar to but also different from our own time. Faulkner was neither an anachronistic progressive nor a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary but both. Romantic and Modernist hagiolatry of the creative writer aside, it seems excessively stringent to expect Faulkner's fiction not to display traces of the racist ideology of his culture. After white male Southerners regained political power in the period following Reconstruction, of course, they quickly began a program of systematic legal and illegal disenfranchisement of blacks that included much of the separate and drastically inferior Jim Crow legislation that the Supreme Court's opinion on *Plessy v. Ferguson* ratified in 1896. Consequently, the racial situation in the South was worse, in some ways, than it had been during the antebellum period. This increased hardship and exploitation then led to the Great Migration of black families to northern urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit, and New York during the first half of the century. The fiction of Faulkner's most white hot creative period, 1929-1942, passes through other alembics as well, such as Southern xenophobia, various discourses of eugenics,

and the fear of race suicide by miscegenation that characterized white America in the 1920s and 1930s.

Perhaps another key point for understanding Faulkner's racial attitudes is to recognize that the widely-held negative and racist stereotypes of blacks in 19th century American culture and society became positive but still racist stereotypes of blacks in the early 20th century. This transformation was spurred, in great part, by the influence of Freud and the modern disenchantment, even disgust, with civilization, rationality, and bourgeois Euro-American values. If the discourse of primitivism was deployed negatively in antebellum America to support the suppression of African-American desire for freedom and equality by portraying blacks as children, the men as brutal rapists, and the women as promiscuous sluts, it was then used positively to celebrate blacks in an equally constrained way that did not extend to recognizing African-American political and social goals. In modern fiction such as *Dark Laughter* (1925) by Sherwood Anderson, one of Faulkner's mentors, and some of Faulkner's earlier work, we find the modern stereotype of the African-American, whether comic or tragic, as irrational, emotionally uncomplicated, and sexually liberated child juxtaposed with the neurosis, repression, and despair that characterizes white middle-class life. As Michael Grimwood has pointed out, those writers who drew upon the "cult of the primitive" in their fiction by idealizing "unrepressed personalities, in effect, simply transformed the same old figure from an object of ridicule to an object of admiration" (244). Thus in *Flags in the Dust* Faulkner counterpoints a desperately poor and relatively simple but nevertheless harmonious black family with the tragedy of young Bayard Sartoris's rootlessness and despair in order to heighten the emotional impact of the latter. The positive black stereotype represented with gritty realism by the black family with whom Bayard stays on Christmas Eve and throughout the next day before leaving his home and region forever is similar to what one finds in the conclusions of both *Soldiers' Pay* (1926) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). After this poor family takes Bayard in, feeds him, and gives him a place to sleep, one of their number drives him to the train station on Christmas Day, the only day of the year that the sharecropper can pause in his labor.

Faulkner's fiction not only expresses this inherited tradition, it increasingly complicates and occasionally repudiates it even though his most complex representations of blacks are generally reserved for male characters like Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* and Lucas again in *Intruder in the Dust*. Most readers of *Go Down, Moses* will remember Lucas's agonized cry after wrestling for a pistol with Zack Edmonds over whether or not the latter has the right to appropriate Lucas's wife Molly: "How to God . . . can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And even if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise he won't?" (58). Even if Faulkner's mature fiction often seems more insightful and sympathetic to the plight of the black man in the modern South than that of the black woman—Molly here seems a prize to be fought over by men in an unacknowledged patriarchal system of exchange—he still deserves credit as a white author for investigating what manhood and psychological equilibrium was possible for a black man in a white culture where his slightest assertion of masculinity was fiercely put down. Notably, Faulkner's treatment of African-American sexuality does not generally underscore promiscuity, a major element of the primitivist stereotype whether viewed sympathetically or critically: witness, for example, the monogamous relationships of Lucas and Molly and Rider and Mannie in *Go Down, Moses*.

As his letters and essays along with his fiction suggest, Faulkner knew Southern masculine attitudes on race quite well from the inside. Increasingly, he struggled with his racist patrimony, and his work reflects this continual and continuous struggle. Consequently, the various representations of race in his macabre, melodramatic, and violent work often seem like an uneasy balancing act that rarely stays at a point of equilibrium for long. The difficulty which a reversal of Faulkner's culture's belief in white supremacy has in dealing with this tightrope act is only one of many reasons why he remains so difficult an author to teach. Professor Kinney comments on Granny's "intractable racism" in the stories that form *The Unvanquished* (1937) and how in "the larger narration, Bayard's fixation on Granny's heroism and generosity erases the fact that she plays the role of a plantation overseer when there is no plantation left" (269). The question readers of *The Unvanquished* must decide is

whether Faulkner is constructing an ironic critique of Granny's racial prejudices or merely overlooking it as he champions her heroism. Enmeshed in the Southern culture he wrote about, Faulkner seems simultaneously complicit and critical of its various ideological manifestations. I am not talking here about the problematic interpretive gambit of identifying the words and beliefs of some of Faulkner's characters with those of the author himself as did so many critics in the 1950s and 1960s. We would do well to remember that uneasy tension and contradiction are defining characteristics of almost all aspects of Faulkner's work and that we simplify it at our risk. In so simplifying his books into either progressive or reactionary fictions, we do a disservice to the man who wrote the books, to the people who read them, and to any notion of history that involves recognizing the difference of the past from our own time.

I wish to conclude by looking at a well-known lightning rod for critical discussions of race in Faulkner's fiction: his representation of the faithful Compson family retainer Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*. Professor Kinney offers an anti-heroic reading of the black servant and substitute mother for the Compson siblings that dissents from Cleanth Brooks's enormously influential reading of her as a stoic, unsentimental Christian who, unlike her white charges, sees the world from the perspective of eternity (Brooks 343-46). One plausible implication of Kinney's contrarian view, a view shared by many black readers of the novel, is that this conception of Dilsey as a heroic martyr tells us more about Southern New Critical racial views than it does about Faulkner's beliefs. Professor Kinney, who calls the preacher Shegog's remarkable Easter Sunday sermon the story of "the white man's cultural heritage" (266), however, might be more sympathetic to Faulkner's depiction of black Christianity in the novel. During the years of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, the black church was also an undeniable source of strength, support, and resistance to many, regardless of our modern perception of black Christians as so many Uncle Toms collaborating in their own oppression.

Professor Kinney labels Faulkner's Dilsey as dignified and respected but based, nevertheless, on the stereotype of the mammy, noting that "She invokes pity but insufficient terror" (266). His argument has merit,

especially given Faulkner's almost complete desexualization of Dilsey. In evaluating Faulkner's portrait of Dilsey, we might also take note of the portraits of blacks that other white writers were producing at the time. Whenever I teach *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, I have my students take a look at Roark Bradford's successful *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun* (1928) which Marc Connelly then dramatized for Broadway with similar success as *Green Pastures* (1931). Indeed, the two men were jointly awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the play. Faulkner's friendship with Bradford dates from his New Orleans days in the mid-1920s, and he first met Connelly in New York in the latter part of 1931 while basking in the notoriety that the publication of *Sanctuary* had generated. In Bradford's *Ol' Man Adam*, the black experience in America is retailed for white consumption through a series of condescendingly comic retellings of Old Testament stories in dialect. Drawing on every black stereotype imaginable, the book presents biblical characters as black denizens of the Mississippi delta in chapters with titles such as "Samson, Strong Boy." In noting "the racial attitudes [Faulkner] had to overcome to present Dilsey Gibson with some measure of dignity and respect" (267) as well as pointing to the stereotypical aspects of Dilsey's characterization, Professor Kinney, it seems to me, has his finger on the difficulties involved in talking about race in Faulkner.

It is both easy and fashionable in literary criticism nowadays either to wave the bloody flag of moral and ideological superiority over an earlier writer's work or to show how such work really reflects ideas and values that parallel our own. Nevertheless, one criterion for evaluating an author's work is, for me, simply how much resistance it offers to the prejudices of its time and place. Furthermore, it seems fair to judge writers by the moral as well as formal and intellectual standards set by their best work. Judged by the moral sympathy and the desire for social justice one finds in his best fiction and without overlooking the difficulties he had in imagining fully and convincingly the inner lives of black men, let alone that of black women, Faulkner remains an American writer to be reckoned with in the 1990s.

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