Connotations
Vol. 5.1 (1995/96)

Author's Commentary*

ARTHUR F. KINNEY

In responding to my essay on "Faulkner and Racism" (*Connotations* 3:3), Philip Cohen notes that "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 anticipates or reflects ideas and values that parallel our own." This crucial warning is shared by the authors of two other responses in *Connotations* 4:3, Pamela Knights and John Cooley; we all agree that Faulkner's attempts to deal with the racial issues of Yoknapatawpha, as with those in historic Mississippi, "a liberal version of gradualism," nevertheless caused him to be "privately and publicly vilified by family, friends, and others for advocating it." We agree that what might seem to us a knee-jerk reaction was a difficult one for the Mississippi born Faulkner. Nor were his views always consistent. "Even the novels and short stories of Faulkner's maturity," Cohen continues, "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." How, now, we deal with this is our common concern and our common project.

Cooley in this connection is pessimistic. Citing the work of Levi-Strauss, he argues that "it is impossible to 'know' very different people, individually or collectively except by carefully observing differences

*Reference: Arthur F. Kinney, "Faulkner and Racism," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 265-78; Pamela Knights, "Faulkner's Racism: A Response to Arthur F. Kinney," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 283-99; John Cooley, "Faulkner, Race, Fidelity," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 300-12; Philip Cohen, "Faulkner and Racism: A Commentary on Arthur F. Kinney's 'Faulkner and Racism,'" *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 112-22.

from one's own culture, which retains a normative relationship to the other . . . . Even if [Faulkner] had abandoned his own society to live for a time among black Mississippians, it is inevitable he would still have viewed African Americans across a racial divide." Consequently, Cooley extends my observations to include other peoples (American Indians) and other works by Faulkner to show how the ideas of cultural primitivism helped Faulkner to locate and manage such differences as those he discerned. Knights is even more trenchant; she first cites the black Southern writer Alice Walker—caught between not fully knowing and needing to know and understand. "I stand in the backyard [of a white antebellum home] gazing up at the windows, then stand at the windows inside looking down into the backyard [toward a "rotting sharefarmer shack" where she was reared], and between the me that is on the ground and the me that is at the windows, History is caught." This is the History that Faulkner deliberately chose to write about, his obsessive focus suggesting a similar need to know. But his understanding, like Walker's, was also limited, as Knights points out, further citing Toni Morrison's sense of the distance between white writer and black as one of "the gaze," of a perspective slightly awry even when fixed on its subject; a "white construction" of black people, in Faulkner's instance, that, Knights argues, now needs its own translations—and our awareness of silences as well as differences of what is spoken awry; of what is not spoken at all.

Cohen points out in an illustration of my own essay what Knights has in mind: he says that my interpretation of the Easter Sunday service in the last section of *The Sound and the Fury* as well as the Rev. Shegog's sermon, which I comment accepts a white (rather than a black) biblical legacy, is too restrictedly a "black perspective" and, moreover, fails to acknowledge the long, hard struggle of the black church which was "an undeniable source of strength, support, and resistance" during the days of slavery, war, and reconstruction. Anyone who has read about the history of black religion in the United States must agree with the positive force of black religion, which not only preached salvation but constantly was called upon to practice it. This is one of Faulkner's most moving passages, perhaps because he was so aware of Cohen's point, and, unfortunately, one of my silences. It is moving because, as Cohen points

out, so many diverse and contradictory attitudes are revealed in key scenes of Faulkner's work: "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 own risk." (Cohen's other useful correction in my essay—the later work "There Was a Queen," that identifies Elnora as Colonel Sartoris's illegitimate daughter, a point not made as I said in the earlier novel *Flags in the Dust/Sartoris*—may refer to the fact that between the two works (1929; 1934) Faulkner learned of the mulatto line started by his great-grandfather whose life was the basis of the Colonel; time, too, complicates matters.) Similarly, Cohen's reference to Judith Bryant Wittenberg's statement that the "predominant concern" of *Light in August* 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," may dismiss too easily the strong biological urgings of the energetically mature Joe Christmas and the aging Joanna Burden, facing menopause even as she attempts to secure education for the (black) children she herself was never able to bear. The pressures on Faulkner's characters, as on Faulkner, then, are cultural, biological, personal; demanding, unavoidable, conflicting. All four of us agree (as I had hoped readers would) with the centrality and urgency of Faulkner's work as it opens up with power and poetry historic and cultural issues confronting and pressuring the creative imagination that any responsible critic, too, must face.

Not only that: I think these responses have gotten somewhere, somewhere important. "Cultural primitivism" is a method which sheds light as well as limitation in its applications; language must be tested more searchingly; resolution may not be possible, but is not the *sine qua non* of our reading; perhaps a deeper awareness of intentional or unintentional irony is (Cohen) or the distortion of form or syntax (Knight). Let me return to the "mule passage" in *Flags in the Dust*. Sidney Kaplan has located and paraphrased a 72-page pamphlet written by two anti-abolitionists in the Presidential campaign of 1864 which first (satirically) coined the word *miscegenation* to identify the newly growing American population of mixed bloodlines: *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*, in which they also coined *mulatto* in analogy to *mule*, based on the

similarity of color, function, lack of ancestral line, and—most awful to contemplate—similarity in their desired sterility. Following Cohen, perhaps Faulkner's reference to some Cincinnatus (not Homer or Vergil) singing an epic song about the mule is meant ironically—is his own attempt to parody this traditional Southern belief and attitude as, elsewhere in the novel, as Cohen and Knights both indicate, Caspey serves to parody the white race and the Sartoris family. If so, this is parody by insinuation, to a degree—a matter partaking of form and silence both.

Cohen speaks of the recently discovered letter by Faulkner in 1931 which—uninvited—proposes that lynching is often an acceptable and useful form of justice; and, further, that this was written contemporaneously with the publication of a short story, against lynching, "Dry September." The coincidence is baffling. We might address this at least in part, by a concern with audience: Faulkner might find it *possible* to say something in a story published by the *American Mercury* that would be self-defeating in the Memphis *Commercial-Appeal;* or, following *Sartoris,* the newspaper letter might be an outrageous parody of a Southern anti-abolitionist, its extreme statements meant to show the foolishness of the position. (It might also, as one of my colleagues has suggested, be the result of an unguarded, drunken moment, like the famous interview I cite with Russell Warren Howe, but of course then all the more important for that.) But it also might, as I think Knights would propose, be a signal that should return us to "Dry September," and its more subtle and perfected, less occasional, commentary. Doing that, I find the short story not centrally about lynching at all, but about the frustrations of Minnie Cooper, whose sexual life, like Joanna Burden's, seems to have passed her by and made her subject to the town's mockery. Her fictional rape—for I for one don't believe Willie Mayen would have found (or risked) interest in her—surrounds the abduction of Willie and is at least one referent of the story's title: "Dry September" is a story of class and gender, of the plight of the aging white woman in a society that places no premium on spinsters. Surely that is an explicit theme in the story. But Knights argues that whereas my essay concentrates largely on theme, it "could be extended to include the ideology implicit in other aspects of the texts: the radical distortions of form or the strains of syntax." If

we do that here—if we see that Faulkner's focus on the social victimization of (and pity we might have for) Minnie Cooper is an indirect condemnation of lynching, then we can see how he might also be using "Dry September" to address racial victimization to his fellow Southerners. The very McLendon who strikes his wife is the McLendon who attacked Willie Mayen.

What we might do, in short, and follow the lead of these responses to my essay, is attempt to find in Faulkner's work those fictional strategies that address the problem of race indirectly (through distorted form or syntax) or by omission (through silence) as a way of learning how cultural pressures materially shape the artistic product and, perhaps, reverberate through the artistic imagination. I am struck, for example, that when Faulkner wishes to give us a picture of a black family which, though poor and distant from Bayard Sartoris, nevertheless welcomes him on Christmas Day near the end of *Flags in the Dust/Sartoris*, Faulkner is enabled to picture a black family life because he does so through the white man's eyes which he knows, and uses Bayard to describe their family life through the racial stereotypes that call attention to Bayard's shortcomings. In much the same way, he gives us a black church service—which in the 1920s he would not have known by witness; I still find very few whites at such services in Oxford now—through Benjy's eyes and through the reactions of a Dilsey based on a Mammy he knew well. What Toni Morrison calls "the gaze" or, later, "white constructedness," may not be just a matter of limitation but also a matter of authorial choice. Not one or the other—but both. We should not be content to see it only as an attitude or limitation but also as a dynamic tool or technique to analyze.

Knights is right, of course, that I stop with *Go Down, Moses*. I did so because I think the weight of ancestral miscegenation on both Faulkner's paternal and maternal sides was the burden that finally forced the powerful analyses of this in that novel and in *Absalom, Absalom!* (although there is no way of knowing for sure); and I also think that later works, in a sense, avoid the powerful problems that miscegenation engenders. *Intruder in the Dust* may be an exception—it makes racial discrimination bearable by subjecting it to the fore of a murder mystery; if so Faulkner won that gambit because the town of Oxford, the model

for Jefferson, allowed Hollywood to film the novel there—but still this novel lacks the pain and agony of the earlier work. And *The Reivers* paints Ned Beauchamp as black Sambo: what a falling-off is there unless, again, this is meant like the passage on the mule to paint attitudes Grandfather would have had and which would constitute the only story he would, in the 1920s, want to pass on to his heirs in acculturating them.

In saying this, I do not want to find ways to explain Faulkner that will seem to excuse him; none of us does. But I think Knights is right in her suggestion, and Cooley and Cohen right in their examples, to direct us to reread Faulkner as a cultural heir himself struggling with that very culture. He chose not to leave Mississippi (at least until the last two or three years when living near Jill was better than living away from her, and with Estelle). Then the conflict will tell us even more, and go some way to explain why even Toni Morrison herself felt attracted to start with a white writer from the American South. Nor is the matter limited to Faulkner. The same day the editors of *Connotations* sent me an advance copy of Philip Cohen's response, the local mailman delivered our free Amherst weekly newspaper. A lead story tells about my neighbor Carl Vigeland, a freelance writer who has made two trips to Mississippi this year to research a thirty-year-old murder case in Hattiesburg where a black man involved in helping other blacks to register to vote was killed when his house was firebombed, allegedly by members of the Ku Klux Klan who even today have not been convicted despite previous indictments. "The human story is so compelling that it's beginning to take over my life in a way I still haven't been able to grasp," Vigeland is quoted as saying. The racial issues Faulkner's works raise are also too compelling—and too vital—to ignore.

University of Massachusetts, Amherst;
New York University

Sidney Kaplan's essay, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864" appeared in the *Journal of Negro History* 34:3 (June 1949) and is reprinted in part in my forthcoming *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family*.