

## Faulkner and Racial Mythology<sup>1</sup>

ARTHUR F. KINNEY

"Born the year after the custom of racial segregation and the popular minstrel image of blacks as Jim Crow were encoded in the legal texts as 'separate but equal' (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896)," Bernard W. Bell writes, William "Faulkner, a native son of Mississippi, was torn psychologically between the curse and blessing of his Southern heritage. He felt compelled in his quest for personal wholeness and a unified artistic vision to come to terms with 'the Negro,' in the Southern white psyche as, in [Ralph] Ellison's words, 'a malignant stereotype (the bad nigger) on the one hand and a benign stereotype (the good nigger) on the other.'" He goes on to remark, "Faulkner's characters range from the stereotypical Sambo and tragic mulatto to the rebellious marginal man when treating miscegenation and the struggle of 'the Negro' to affirm a biracial, bicultural identity—the complex sociopsychological state that W. E. B. DuBois called 'double consciousness'—as an Afro-American. The fear and courage, guilt and innocence, shame and pride, of mixed blood and interracial marriage, as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* illustrate, involve the social and cultural issues of heritage as well as the sociopsychological myths of white supremacy and Negro inferiority." These are, in America, home-bred myths, with little or no connection to the mythology of classical Greece and Rome which have, over the centuries, worn thin and tolerable with usage, so that they seem to us more like models or metaphors than (as they were and are) primitive, shaping truths of belief and passion in Western civilization. Rather, these two American myths of race—white supremacy and black inferiority—retain a living presence and power that is still, though far more subterranean even than it was throughout Faulkner's lifetime, present in American culture.

Bell notes that "Etymologically, 'negro' is derived from the Latin *niger* and the Spanish *negro*, both signifying the color black. The term was first used around 1441 by the Spanish and Portuguese to designate African slaves from below the Sahara, thus tying color to race and blackness to slavery and degradation. Although such eighteenth-century organizations as the Free African Society and the African Methodist Episcopal Church rejected the term in naming themselves, 'negro' was still the preferred racial classification at the turn of the twentieth century. In response to a campaign by the NAACP in 1930, the *New York Times* and other media began to capitalize the term, which in the 1960s was displaced by 'Black,' 'African,' 'African American.'" These are not merely verbal displacements, of course; initiated by the black race, they are meant to bring dignity to color and heritage to the fore, underscoring the melting pot of the United States by which no one is native to the country and the land but the Indians, now styled "Native Americans"; "African American," in fact, was a deliberate analogy to "Asian American," to make this point clear in its parallelism.

For many years now, Bell has been our leading scholar on the Afro-American novel, tracing its development through the glass, darkly, of DuBois' potent and powerful concept of the strained black consciousness, at once personal and proud and also necessarily social—personally or racially, and socially or stereotypically, defined: a double bind that has led to a number of stock behavioral patterns that have themselves become secondary racial myths in America: Jim Crow, Sambo, Mammy; they are seen as primitive, Satanic, mean, sexually insatiable, or as loving, maternal, loyal, and servile. Bell notes this too. "The concept and sign of 'the Negro,' 'nigger,' or 'Sambo' in American racial discourse and in Faulkner's novels," he notes, "obscure, devalue, or mythicize the humanity and individuality of Afro-Americans, imaginatively reconstructing or deconstructing them as stereotype, type, or archetype: an oversimplified, reductive popular mental image or judgment of a group; a representative character that embodies a substantial number of significant elements of a group; and a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore, and is, therefore, believed to evoke profound emotions because it touches the unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses."<sup>2</sup> He

has in mind the responses I have already cited, but his genealogy of primary and secondary American racial myths concerning blacks implies deeper and more difficult questions: must a Southern American writer like Faulkner write about blacks in order to portray his society? can he do so without drawing on mythic stereotypes because they are always at play in the culture he describes? and, most difficult of all, can any white writer, even one so superbly gifted and so seriously committed as Faulkner, escape his own racial heritage and consciousness—can he, that is, ever really write about, or even conceive, what it means to be black?

This final question seems so tricky, so charged, and so complex that we probably dismiss it by changing the terms and so passing off the responsibility, by saying (or at least thinking) that the burden of responsibility is Faulkner's if he chooses to write about blacks as a white man in Mississippi, that it is his choice and his problem. Perhaps we could even have gotten away with such a response forty years ago. But aware now as we are of reader-response theory and reading dynamics, that too has become a myth of another sort; we are now aware that any literary text, if it functions as it should, is complicit with the reader: by providing us with racial definitions, Faulkner asks us to get involved, to confront them and evaluate them too.

Now this is easy in Faulkner's first novel of Yoknapatawpha, *Flags in the Dust*, in a now-notorious passage in which Faulkner explicitly calls for "Some Cincinnatus of the cotton fields [to] contemplate the lowly destiny, some Homer [who] should sing the saga," rather like a Greek or Norse heroic myth, but here "of the mule and of his place in the south," that lazy creature which "with its trace-galled flanks and flopping, lifeless ears, and its half-closed eyes drowsing venomously behind pale lids, apparently asleep with the monotony of its own motion" and an animal which is both "Outcast and pariah" and "Ugly, untiring, and perverse," is thus a creature which thereby resembles "(the nigger who drives him) whose impulses and mental processes most closely resemble his."<sup>3</sup> As I have remarked, this seems open and obvious to us now, and we might wonder why it was not distasteful to Faulkner in 1929. The answer, I think, is because it displays, briefly but openly, a cultural myth which universally in the South connected mules and

blacks in the word *mulatto* for those of mixed racial ancestry. Originally a necessary racial term to handle the increasing population of slaves and, later, freed blacks, it was etymologically based on the similarity of color between man and mule, as well as similarity of function and—most awful to contemplate—similarity in their desired sterility. By Faulkner's time, however, the heavily-laden word *mulatto* had become virtually value-free: neutral, normal. It is, in its way, linked to another American racial myth, this time deliberate in its duplicity: the false etymology of the term *miscegenation* that Sidney Kaplan has revealed was part of the anti-abolitionist movement in the Presidential campaign of 1864 when two newspapermen on the *New York World*, David Goodman Croly, the managing editor, and George Wakeman, a young reporter, wrote a pamphlet of 72 pages entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*, beginning with this bit of fiction almost at once turned myth: that *miscegenation* was a word derived from the Latin *miscere*, to mix, and *genus*, race, or, even more precisely, from the Greek *melaleukation* (a combination of the Greek *melas*, black, and *leukos*, white): now outrageous, then something highly credible.<sup>4</sup> Both terms, I think, helped first to make racial myth palatable, understandable, and eventually something that could be accommodated, because the fact of interbreeding in the South was so obvious and so uncomfortable. And since every discernible action and object in our society must, by our rules of language, have a name, over the decades the name of the act of interbreeding, *miscegenation*, and the name of the result, *mulatto*, became commonplace. At least they became commonplace for white Southerners in America; it is clear from the writings of Richard Wright, also from Mississippi and only slightly younger than Faulkner, that they were not commonly accepted among blacks.

Still, it is not clear to me that, however unconscious Faulkner and his first editor Ben Wasson were about the black-mule comparison in *Sartoris*, that unconscious stretches include the portrait of Elnora in the same novel. In both versions, *Flags in the Dust* and *Sartoris*, it is clearly implied, although never explicit or emphasized, that she is the interracial child of Old Bayard Sartoris and a black servant. Nothing is made of this because she, along with her family, are part of the larger Sartoris family

and seem content to serve them. It would go unnoticed now, too, except that Elnora is given a sort of hymn to sing to distract her that is pointedly, in the fiction, meant to be choric, insightful, thematic. It goes like this:

*Sinner riz fum de moaner's bench  
Sinner jump to de penance bench;  
When de preacher ax'im whut de reason why,  
Say, "Preacher got de women-Lea' de same ez I."  
Oh, Lawd, oh, Lawd!  
Dat's whut de matter wid de church today.<sup>5</sup>*

That is clearly a gospel tune based in the architecture of a black gospel church and ritual and even with the slight change of "Say" to "Says" for the later *Flags in the Dust*, edited by the white Virginian Douglas Day, the language is distinctly dialectical, subgrammatical, inferior to white speech in the novels. The question that this passage poses and that makes it much more difficult than the encomium to the mule is that here we are to see folk wisdom from the primitive race, closer to the land and to the truth than their superior white employers. Elnora thus sets off—is she thereby meant to modify or even excuse her cheating husband and braggart, lazy son?—other portraits in the bulk of the novel and anticipates in good measure one of the final scenes where the white protagonist Bayard approaches a black cabin at the margins of Yoknapatawpha and there finds some solace on Christmas Day that he is unable to find among members of his own race:

A fire burned on the broken hearth, amid ashes and charred wood-ends and a litter of cooking-vessels. Bayard shut the door behind him on the bright cold, and warmth and rich, stale rankness enveloped him like a drug. A woman bent over the hearth, replied to his greeting diffidently. Three pickanninies became utterly still in a corner and watched him with rolling eyes. One of them was a girl, in greasy nondescript garments, her wool twisted into tight knots of soiled wisps of colored cloth. The second one might have been either or anything. The third one was practically helpless in a garment made from a man's suit of woolen underclothes. It was too small to walk and it crawled about the floor in a sort of intent purposelessness, a glazed path running from either nostril to its chin, as though snails had crawled there.

The woman placed a chair before the fire with a dark, effacing gesture. Bayard seated himself and thrust his chilled feet to the fire. "Had your Christmas dram yet, aunty?" he asked.

"Naw, suh. Ain't got none dis year," she answered from somewhere behind him. He swung the sack toward her voice.

"Help yourself. Plenty there." The three children squatted against the wall, watching him steadily, without movement and without sound. "Christmas come yet, chillen?" he asked them. But they only stared at him with the watchful gravity of animals until the woman returned and spoke to them in a chiding tone.

"Show de white folks yo' Sandy Claus," she prompted. "Thanky, suh," she added, putting a tin plate on his knees and setting a cracked china cup on the hearth at his feet. "Show 'im," she repeated. "You want folks to think Sandy Claus don't know whar you lives at?"

The children moved then and from the shadow behind them, where they had hidden them when he entered, they produced a small tin automobile, a string of colored wooden beads, a small mirror and a huge stick of peppermint candy to which trash adhered and which they immediately fell to licking solemnly, turn and turn about. The woman filled the cup from the coffee pot set among the embers, and she uncovered an iron skillet and forked a thick slab of sizzling meat on his plate, and raked a grayish object from the ashes and broke it in two and dusted it off and put that too on the plate. Bayard ate his side meat and hoecake and drank the thin, tasteless liquid. The children now played quietly with their Christmas, but from time to time he found them watching him steadily and covertly. The man entered with his pail of milk.

"Ole 'oman give you a snack?" he asked. (289-91)

The question for me is this: why is this scene here? Its simplicity, its refusal to ask questions (Bayard has just recklessly had a car accident in which his grandfather has died from a heart attack and he is on the run from home), and its sense of good manners and warm welcome are clear enough; the black family is contrasted with the sterile white MacCallum family he has just left, and their family spirit is at odds with the troubled Sartoris household. The stereotypical description, however, manages at the same time it provides these ideas and values to circumscribe the behavior and atmosphere—circumscribe it in racially mythic ways. Bayard never loses his central position as protagonist or as the chief focus of Faulkner and the reader. Does this mean, then, that the blacks are so much scene-painting, a fictional device to define Bayard's character and position as a runaway? Further, we might ask, if Faulkner's description is limited to the mythic, why does he give us this scene? And how presumptuous of him is it to bring to this scene the same detailed reportage that characterizes the Sartoris household

which is based on that of his own family? How much does he know? How reliable is this portrait? The answer here, and I suspect he knew it at least unconsciously to justify the scene at all, is that he does know a black cabin as long as a white man is in it. But he does not, in the end, give us that black cabin; he gives us the white's mythic perspective of that cabin based on a sense of class as well as race. *Sartoris*, and later *Flags in the Dust*, are both revealing works: and, paradoxically, they are revealing both for their honesty and for the myths that they reinstate.

All this is necessary background, I believe, for the far better-known novel that follows: *The Sound and the Fury*. Here Faulkner manages to give us a more varied portrait of a black servant woman in Dilsey—but that is because she is seen in the white man's house and especially, given her color, in the white man's kitchen. He grew up knowing Dilseys, and it is said she is primarily based on his own Mammy, Callie or Caroline Barr. (It may not be irrelevant to note that when Callie died, at an indeterminate age of perhaps 100, that Faulkner insisted on preaching her eulogy and burying her himself, and refusing to let her black people do either, although she is in the black section of the Oxford town cemetery. Even her gravestone reads "Her white children bless her" with no mention of her black kin.) I have argued elsewhere in detail how, in every observation of dress, speech, and behavior and attitude, Dilsey is the stereotypical, mythical—Bell would say archetypal—black Mammy and how this severely restricts her function in the novel as a moral norm or as a hope for the Compson family she serves or the emerging twentieth-century South of which she is a part. Her appearance surrounds a scene similar to that Bayard experiences in a black cabin—this time a white 33-year-old man suffering from Downs Syndrome in a black church on Easter rather than Christmas Sunday. What he sees is a monkey-faced black preacher who runs about under Christmas decorations made of crepe paper, a man whose message in tongues becomes more and more primitive, more fully and ritually black, and dwells on the crucifixion of Christ as the bleeding and dying figure that, rather than the risen Christ, makes most sense to his congregation. This scene, like the scene of Bayard in the cabin with the nameless black family is given to us not objectively (as critics too often claim) but from a white author's eyes.

"Brethren and sisteren," it said again. The preacher removed his arm and he began to walk back and forth before the desk, his hands clasped behind him, a meager figure, hunched over upon itself like that of one long immured in striving with the implacable earth, "I got the recollection and the blood of the Lamb!" He tramped steadily back and forth beneath the twisted paper and the Christmas bell, hunched, his hands clasped behind him. He was like a worn small rock whelmed by the successive waves of his voice. With his body he seemed to feed the voice that, succubus like, had fleshed its teeth in him. And the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words, so that when he came to rest against the reading desk, his monkey face lifted and his whole attitude that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made it of no moment, a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from them, and a woman's single soprano: "Yes. Jesus!"<sup>6</sup>

Yet here, I think, the scene works in a way that the scene in *Sartoris* does not; here, with the white perspective implicitly from and on Benjy, we are prepared for the rest of his day: his serenity here looks forward to the serenity he achieves in his own graveyard ritual at the close of the novel: "each in its ordered place" refers not only to "post and tree, window and doorway," the town square or to Sunday morning, but to race as well (321).

Two years later, in 1931, Faulkner published one of his most powerful stories of racial myth and racial violence. "Dry September" tells the story of Will Mayes, a black night watchman at the Jefferson ice plant who is accused of sexually violating a white spinster, Minnie Cooper, clearly a lonely and frustrated woman embarrassed by her plainness, who remains his only accuser. On such slim evidence, four white men, three of them angry, await the black man after dark, ambushing him from their car and taking him to the woods to lynch him.

They didn't move until vague noises began to grow out of the darkness ahead; then they got out and waited tensely in the breathless dark. There was another sound: a blow, a hissing expulsion of breath and McLendon cursing in undertone. They stood a moment longer, then they ran forward. They ran in a stumbling clump, as though they were fleeing something. "Kill him, kill the son," a voice whispered. McLendon flung them back.

"Not here," he said. "Get him into the car," "Kill him, kill the black son!" the voice murmured. They dragged the Negro to the car. The barber had waited



beside the car. He could feel himself sweating and he knew he was going to be sick at the stomach.

"What is it captains?" the Negro said. "I aint done nothing. 'Fore God, Mr John." Someone produced handcuffs. They worked busily about the Negro as though he were a post, quiet, intent, getting in one another's way. He submitted to the handcuffs, looking swiftly and constantly from dim face to dim face. "Who's here, captains?" he said, leaning to peer into the faces until they could feel his breath and smell his sweaty reek. He spoke a name or two. "What you all say I done, Mr John?"

McLendon jerked the car door open. "Get in!" he said.

The Negro did not move. "What you all going to do with me, Mr John? I aint done nothing. White folks, captains, I aint done nothing: I swear 'fore God." He called another name.

"Get in!" McLendon said. He struck the Negro. The others expelled their breath in a dry hissing and struck him with random blows and he whirled and cursed them, and swept his manacled hands across their faces and slashed the barber upon the mouth, and the barber struck him also. "Get him in there," McLendon said. They pushed at him. He ceased struggling and got in and sat quietly as the others took their places. He sat between the barber and the soldier, drawing his limbs in so as not to touch them, his eyes going swiftly and constantly from face to face. Butch clung to the running board. The car moved on.<sup>7</sup>

As with many climactic scenes in Faulkner—the death of young John Sartoris; the rape of Temple Drake—we do not witness the actual lynching of Will Mayes. Instead we see its consequences, with Minnie Cooper. Suddenly a person of note and concern in Jefferson, friends (who are unnamed) take her to the cinema to ease her mind, but the responsibility of Will Mayes' death, carrying her secret to his grave, brings a fit of madness on her, and her friends take her home accompanied by her uncontrollable laughter.

They removed the pink voile and the sheer underthings and the stockings, and put her to bed, and cracked ice for her temples, and sent for the doctor. He was hard to locate, so they ministered to her with hushed ejaculations, renewing the ice and fanning her. While the ice was fresh and cold she stopped laughing and lay still for a time, moaning only a little. But soon the laughing welled again and her voice rose screaming (181-82).

Her madness is brought on by a closed society that welcomes and refuses to question her story inspired by the myth of the primitive black man,

the uncontrollable stud. For a brief moment, at least, she becomes the white Southern belle, on a pedestal and wildly desirable. The story ends with McLendon's own more subdued state of madness, himself a victim too of this myth of superior black masculinity, shown in his brutal treatment of his wife. Then he

... went on through the house ripping off his shirt, and on the dark, screened porch at the rear he stood and mopped his head and shoulders with the shirt and flung it away. He took the pistol from his hip and laid it on the table beside the bed, and sat on the bed and removed his shoes, and rose and slipped his trousers off. He was sweating again already, and he stooped and hunted furiously for the shirt. At last he found it and wiped his body again, and with his body pressed against the dusty screen, he stood panting. There was no movement, no sound, not even an insect. The dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars (183),

as elsewhere, earlier, it does for Bayard Sartoris. Both Minnie and McLendon are last seen in bedrooms sweating—she surrounded by friends, he alone as befits their gendered portraits. It is clear they both have a sense of guilt; but it is also clear Minnie will not confess to the fabrication and McLendon will not be punished.

This might seem a solution for Faulkner, since here he is able to portray racial myth accurately and with an appropriate sense of the black's innocence, seen from the outside, in gesture and in speech, and the whites' guilt seen more from within. This anatomy of a lynching—fast, swift, irrevocable justice without benefit of trial—also seems thoroughly condemned. This might seem a solution for Faulkner except, as it happens, he was simultaneously writing about lynching more publicly and locally, and in very different terms.

It began, innocuously enough, with an innocent letter published on February 2, 1931, not in the Oxford, Mississippi, *Eagle* but in the more distant Memphis, Tennessee, *Commercial Appeal*. The author of the letter, known only as W. H. James, of Starkville, Mississippi, was overwhelmed with gratitude and wanted to express it.

Now that the good women of Mississippi have organized themselves in a body to eradicate or fight the evils of lynching, we as colored people should feel more hopeful than ever. I am sure that they will have the prayers of all

of my people, who seem to suffer most from this inhuman crime, which as they say is striking at the very foundations of our most sacred institutions,

James wrote, continuing,

How strange it seems that history never gave a record of a single lynching until after the days of reconstruction.

We are today for the most part as humble and submissive as we were then.

The good women felt that something needed to be done. I have list[e]ned long for them and now they are here and with the backing of some of our good men I am sure they will succeed, because when they are determined they know no defeat. I believe that the good lady, Mrs. J. Morgan Spencer, who heads this organization, would be an ideal one for governor. I do not feel embarrassed to say this, for I feel that we have some friends who will protect us against the crime which has been perpetrated against so many of us without even a possible chance to prove our innocence or guilt. But through the efforts of these good ladies, when we flee for protection to the strong arm of the law, we won't be met with the rope and torch.<sup>8</sup>

That is the letter in its entirety and it is difficult to know what taboo was broken, what racial myth was sufficiently challenged that with no other known instigation, Faulkner responded in the Sunday *Commercial Appeal* of February 15 with a letter seven times as long. Perhaps it was the thought of nominating Mrs. Spencer as governor of Mississippi. Perhaps it was simply the outspokenness of a black (or, in polite terms, "colored" person) questioning the basis of white practices of justice. The ostensible, public cause was the mistaken notion of history by a black.

Faulkner opens his lengthy reply by correcting mistaken impressions.

History gives no record of lynching prior to reconstruction days for several reasons.

The slave-holders and slaves of the pre-Civil War time, out of whose relations lynchings did, or could, take place, were not representative of either people, any more than the Sicilian expatriates and shopping women in Chicago stores, out of whose accidental coinciding the murder of innocent bystanders (or fleers) occurs, are representative of European emigrants or American women and children, or of the General Cooks and the George Rogers Clarks who made Chicago possible.

Secondly, there was no need for lynching until after reconstruction days.

Thirdly, the people of the black race who get lynched are not representative of the black race, just as the people who lynch them are not representative of the white race.

No balanced man can, I believe, hold any moral brief for lynching. Yet we in America have seen, ever since we set up to guide our own integral destiny, miscarriage of elementary justice on all hands. Like all new lands, not yet aware of our own strength, we have been the prey of opportunist and demagogues; of men whose sole claim to rule us was that they had not a clean shirt to their backs. So is it strange that at times we take violently back into our own hands that justice which we watched go astray in the blundering hands of those into which we put it voluntarily? I don't say that we do not blunder with our "home-made" justice. We do, but he who was victim of our blundering, also blundered. I have yet to hear, outside of a novel or a story, of a man of any color and with a record beyond reproach, suffering violence at the hands of men who knew him. (4)

A bit later, Faulkner writes,

Lynching is an American trait, characteristic. It is the black man's misfortune that he suffers it, just as it is his misfortune that he suffers the following instances of white folks' sentimentality.

Let James go to his county tax collector, who will tell him (his county being fairly representative of Mississippi hill country as distinct from the delta) that there is more white-owned land sold up for taxes than colored-owned, though the delinquent list be the same. There may be reason for this[,] white man's reason: as, for instance, it will be proved that the colored man had never had title to the land at all, having used, as they do, two or even three separate names in making trades or borrowing money from the government loan associations, and so having used the land tax-free for a year and made a crop and moved on. Thus: Joe Johnson arranges with a white man and a bank to buy a piece of land. He is about to make a good crop; he is a hard worker; maybe he runs the neighborhood blacksmith shop; he is getting ahead. Then one day the cashier of the bank and the Farm Loan secretary compare notes and they find that a certain John Jones has borrowed 5700 on land identical in description with that in the temporary possession of one Joe Johnson. There's nothing to do. Joe Johnson, or John Jones, tricked two white men. "Oh, well," the white men, the cashier and the secretary say, "he's a good man. He may make out." And he not only may and will, but he perhaps does make a good crop by hard work. But he has first committed one felony in person and a second one by proxy in permitting to compound it one of that unwitting race which holds with the Bible that justice is a matter of violent and immediate retribution on the person of the sinner: a sentimentalist. (5)

Following other similar instances—in which one breaking of faith deserves another—Faulkner concludes the letter this way:

I hold no brief for lynching. No balanced man will deny that mob violence serves nothing, just as he will not deny that a lot of our natural and logical jurisprudence serves nothing either. It just happens that we—mobber and mobbee—live in this age. We will muddle through, and die in our beds, the deserving and the fortunate among us. Of course, with the population what it is, there are some of us that won't. Some will die rich, and some will die on cross-ties soaked with gasoline, to make a holiday. But there is one curious thing about mobs. Like our juries, they have a way of being right. (5-6)

This is an astonishing document, startling me each time I read it, as it startled the two scholars, Neil R. McMillen and Noel Polk, who found it in the lynching files compiled by Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1994. "We are hard pressed to understand Faulkner's letter, since it stands so completely in accord with contemporary racial attitudes in white Mississippi and the South generally, and runs so completely counter to the sensibility and the sympathies that write so profoundly about racial problems in his fiction" (p. 6). But my point is precisely that that divide is not really there. Racial myth perseveres, is difficult to abolish, because it serves fundamental social needs which, through myth, are transformed into beliefs and so made accessible and acceptable. The particular case of Will Mayes is wrong because he committed no wrong action while the cases of lynching are usually right because they punish actions and not mere accusations. But I think that is only part of it. A deeper, more necessary part of it is that in the instance of "Dry September" the subject is not so much the lynching of an innocent black man—what might seem to us to be the central event and the major concern—but the metaphor for telling us about the extreme frustrations, in a closed and regimented society, of a poor white woman like Minnie Cooper to whom fate did not deal an especially kind or *customary* hand. Myth is most powerful when it is not recognized. I do not see, then, any great disjunction between the story and the letter, nor any irony. Nor did Faulkner.

I do not think Faulkner was aloof to racial intolerance encapsulated in and prolonged and protected by myth, nor hardened to it. Quite the opposite: I think all of the illustrations from his writing I have presented here show his deeply troubled (and deeply personal) struggles with racial myth. Conditioned by another culture, we are too quick to judge and

too deaf to hear his own contested and divided response, although it erupts visibly in his earliest work, with the black family Christmas, Elnora's choric song, and the Reverend Shegog's transcendence through his view of the blood of sacrifice. It is especially there with the treatment of Will Mayes as a dramatic indictment of his own regulated society. But when myth imprisons us in belief and behavior, we lose sight that it is myth and not fact, myth and not history, myth and not truth.

Let me conclude by suggesting that what I have sketched here has a kind of culmination in *Light in August*. That novel focuses sharply and unrelentingly on the "double consciousness" DuBois claimed makes what Bell calls the "marginal man." Joe Christmas is both white and black in his behavior—as judged by mythic cultural standards—regardless of his blood and, in a town which cannot afford to tolerate exceptional behavior—here of a black taking on the role of a white—he is punished. Percy Grimm is another McLendon and Joanna Burden functions as another Minnie Cooper in this novel: the society must close ranks on expending swift and absolute justice on a black man who is accused—and only accused—of violating a white woman (that she dies nearly decapitated only proves that, by the rules of myth, a black man attacked her). Grimm is never once mentioned until the bottom of p. 449 of a 507-page novel—something that has raised critical bewilderment, apology, or attack—but to the Faulkner I have been discussing, and to the work we have been examining, it comes as no surprise: in a culture such as the South of Faulkner's fiction he is always already there and will always come when developments in the culture require him. Myth prompts such actions as Percy Grimm's sudden slaying of Joe Christmas to secure the myths themselves. Faulkner describes Grimm as one who

had been born in the town and had lived there all his life save for the periods of the slimmer encampments [ the State national guard]. He was too young to have been in the European War, though it was not until 1921 or '22 that he realised that he would never forgive his parents for that fact. ...It was the new civilian-military act which saved him. He was like a man who had been for a long time in a swamp, in the dark. Then suddenly his life opened definite and clear. On each national holiday that had any martial flavor whatever he dressed in his captain's uniform and came down town. And those who saw him remembered him again on the day of the fight with the exsoldier as

glittering, with his marksman's badge (he was a fine shot) and his bars, grave, erect, he walked among the civilians with about him an air half belligerent and half the selfconscious pride of a boy.

He was not a member of the American Legion, but that was his parents' fault and not his . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Just as sentimental white men allow blacks to cheat them with land and loans and so justify lynching, Grimm's slaying of Joe Christmas is predictably, *necessarily* brutal:

he ran straight to the kitchen and into the doorway, already firing, almost before he could have seen the table overturned . . . . Grimm emptied the automatic's magazine into the table; later someone covered all five shots with a handkerchief.

But the Player was not done yet. When the others reached the kitchen they saw the table flung aside now and Grimm stooping over the body. When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell," he said. (464)

Like McLendon, his mythic consciousness causes him to annihilate a sexual danger prescribed in communal belief without aid of trial.

Still Grimm is not the only interpreter of racial myth here. The most cerebral man in town matches myths with the most physical: according to Gavin Stevens, the myth of blood and of blood consciousness drove Joe Christmas.

"It was not alone all those thirty years which [his victim] did not know, but all those successions of thirty years before that which had put that stain either on his white blood or his black blood, whichever you will, and which killed him. But he must have run with believing for a while; anyway, with hope. But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the black blood drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister, which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and all reality, into the embrace of a chimaera, a blind faith in something read in a printed Book. Then I believe that the white blood deserted him for

the moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment and make him turn upon that on which he had postulated his hope of salvation. It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kill the minister. He merely struck him with the pistol and ran on and crouched behind that table and defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years. He crouched behind that overturned table and let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand." (448-49)

Thus in 1932 Faulkner, through the Phi Beta Kappa scholar and European-trained lawyer Gavin Stevens, confirms his own letter to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* of the previous year by means of the false etymology coined by two anti-abolitionists in 1864. Real myths are perdurable.

I am not saying Faulkner was racist in any easy meaning of that term. I am saying that in his fiction, and often in his life, racial myth was deeply engrained in his thought even when he attempted to exorcise it. His struggles to confront racism and allay it in *Light in August* would continue—in his hard look at the consequences of miscegenation in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (in 1942), in his powerful portrait of Rider in "Pantaloon in Black" in 1942 and in his return to the mulatto Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948. But myths, once formulated to support a culture and once constituent of it, are difficult to eradicate. Near the end of his life, when pressed by the newspaper reporter Russell Warren Howe at an uncustomarily unguarded moment, Faulkner confessed he would kill blacks in the street if they rose up too suddenly for his culture to give them complete equality; nearer the end of his life, in *The Reivers*, putatively a happy tale of childhood for his own grandchildren, Faulkner gives us in Ned one of his most stereotypical portraits of black Sambo.

Myths are perdurable; they die hard if they die at all. I think Faulkner's great legacy is his openness, his unflinching if at times naive honesty. He wanted to capture his own little postage stamp of the world by immortalizing his own Lafayette County in northeastern Mississippi, not far from the Battle of Shiloh and nearer yet to the Battle of Brice's



Crossroads. That he did so indelibly is recorded in the ways in part in which myth appears, bidden and unbidden, in the chronicles of Yoknapatawpha. Among other gifts he has given us a true dimension of myth in American life, with all its glory and ignominy. It remains, even now, a true and accurate measure of his unflinching, his spectacular and instructive, artistry.

University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
New York University

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay, delivered first as a talk at the Cologne symposium, follows my earlier essay in *Connotations* and the discussion that ensued, ending with *Connotations* 5.1.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard W. Bell, "William Faulkner's 'Shining Star': Lucas Beauchamp as a Marginal Man," *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990) 225-26.

<sup>3</sup>William Faulkner, *Flags in the Dust*, ed. Douglas Day (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 313-14.

<sup>4</sup>Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *Journal of Negro History* 34:3 (June 1949) as reprinted in *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (New York: New American Library Signet Book, 1953) 44.

<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage International, 1990) 294-95.

<sup>7</sup>William Faulkner, "Dry September," *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) 177-78.

<sup>8</sup>Reprinted in full in Neil R. McMillen and Noel Polk, "Faulkner on Lynching," *The Faulkner Journal* 8:1 (Fall 1992; published Fall 1994) 3-4.

<sup>9</sup>William Faulkner, *Light in August: The Corrected Text* (New York: Vintage International, 1985) 450-51.