Connotations
Vol. 15.1-3 (2005/2006)

Unscrambling Surprises

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"A sense of place was everything to William Faulkner," is the way Jay Parini begins his new biography of Faulkner (2004) entitled *One Matchless Time*; "and more than any other American novelist in the twentieth century, he understood how to mine the details of place, including its human history, for literary effects. His novels, from the outset, are obsessed with what T. S. Eliot once referred to as 'significant soil,' but the outward details of place quickly become inner details as Faulkner examined the soul of his characters. […] Place, for Faulkner, becomes a spiritual location from which he examines a truth deeper than anything like mere locality. Faulkner saw himself as taking part in a great process, moving through history and, in an intriguing way, creating a counterhistory to his own."[1]

Faulkner was just one week shy of his thirty-eighth birthday when less than two miles from his home in Oxford, Mississippi, at what was known as the "three corners," at the intersection of Route 30 and Camp Ground Road, the last full ritual lynching of a black man in Mississippi—and perhaps in all the American South—took place. The victim was Elwood Higginbotham, a black man arrested and tried for the murder of a white landowner named Glen Roberts. On a warm, moonlit night in Oxford, knots of men gathered about 7.30 p.m. on the four corners of the town square surrounding the courthouse and then moved on to the local jail across the street to remove Higginbotham by force while a hung jury was still discussing his guilt. Many of the men drove trucks which carried weapons; their faces where smudged with dirt so that they might not be easily identified. They took Higginbotham to Three Corners, removed his trousers, emasculated him, and then hanged him. They did not burn his body deliberately;

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rather, they left it for the neighborhood—a black residential neighborhood of densely placed tin-roofed shacks—so that he could be a terrifying visible witness to any of the black community who might even think of retaliation. There was none. And then, some time later, apparently, the white citizens of Oxford in a kind of unplanned epidemic, erased the incident from their minds and from the town's history.

Exactly three decades later—during the month of January 1995—I was attempting to trace race relations in Oxford because Faulkner had used so many actual incidents in his novels and stories. I was tracing the foundation for the McCaslin family in particular, and I was fairly certain I had located the central model for L. C. Q. McCaslin in Washington Price, a native of Wake County, North Carolina, who had settled in Lafayette County—the basis for Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County—in 1837. His house was still standing, although it had been moved, and was reckoned by a local authority to be the best remaining example, in appearance and feeling, of an 1840s Mississippi plantation. The property was by far the largest in the area—5,000 acres—valued at $6,000 along with farm implements valued at $4,000, and it produced, according to the Department of Archives and History at Jackson, Mississippi, 4,000 bushels of corn and 115 bales of cotton annually with the help of slave labor. Moreover, Price and his heirs paid off generations of blacks—named Boles—who were always omitted from Price family wills as the McCaslins omit the Beauchamps. Two natives of Oxford had led me to this observation, and I felt I was correct that they had much to do with Faulkner mining details of place, as Parini says, in writing the various episodes of *Go Down, Moses* published in 1942, especially when others in Oxford who protected any hint of a miscegenous past were quick, and anxious, to deny my suggestion about the possible relationships of the Price and Boles families. I had long learned, from perhaps half a dozen residencies in Mississippi, that confirmation and denial was the right formula for unearthing some of Faulkner's inspirations, and I was not surprised.

I was surprised, though, to learn of the lynching of Elwood Higginbotham, for no one—not my closest confidants or informants—had even hinted at such a possibility, although "Pantaloon in Black" in *Go Down, Moses* is about just such a lynching and is perhaps the most powerful episode, as it is surely the most daring, in the entire novel. I can recall how I first heard; it was from Faulkner's nephew Jimmy, who had called me on the phone and set up a private rendezvous in a remote corner of the Holiday Inn. What he wanted to tell me, without being cited, was that at the age of eight, bored with a school play, he had wandered about the Courthouse lawn and seen the unusual gathering of men and trucks surrounding the courthouse. Unseen, he hopped on a truck and rode out to the lynching which he witnessed as an unbearable sight he had not shared with others. The men who discovered him told him fiercely to tell no one what he saw, and he hadn't, for decades. Clearly, he now wanted to get it off his chest, and since we had become good friends, and I would not remain long in the South, he could tell me. And so he did.

When you learn something like this, that the others in the town upon whom you rely deny, you go to the records. I went to the library of the Oxford *Eagle* to look in the newspapers for September and October, 1935, but all those issues, strangely, unlike the other complete files, were missing. I went to the Lafayette County Records Office. Those issues of the newspaper were missing there, too, and there seemed to be no local record at all of any such event. The same was true in the archives of Ole Miss, located in town across the railroad tracks and a rich repository of historical material. I finally found confirmation in the only place I know it to be—in the state archives in Jackson, Mississippi. Jimmy Faulkner had remembered everything correctly, and it was registered, indeed, as the last formal ritual lynching in the state's history.

Back, then, to Parini: if you are a writer, drawing from your own region and its special history what is most important and most representative, how would you handle this material if you handled it at all? My own fairly educated sense of the way Faulkner thought and wrote

is that he would not, indeed could not, avoid making this part of the Yoknapatawpha saga. Elwood Higginbotham clearly surfaces as Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948—what is thought of as Faulkner's civil rights novel—where Lucas is (falsely) accused of killing a white man but, rather sentimentally, he is saved by an elderly white woman and a white boy and his black companion, who believe he is innocent and, by digging up a grave, are able to prove it. The whole idea of turning a terrifying racial event into a sentimental novel was acceptable in 1948—so much so, in fact, that Hollywood filmed its version in Oxford and, except for four stars, used the citizens of Oxford for their cast. What I want to suggest is that Faulkner tackled the story much earlier—at least much earlier in the history of race relations if not in years—with "Pantaloon in Black." *Collier's* magazine found the short story Faulkner's strongest fiction they had seen—and refused to print it.[2] But by now Faulkner was obsessed with writing about racial relations and, I think, rather desperate to make his feelings known. I say "rather desperate," because—this is the first surprise—the point of view he takes for the initial narration is the black man Rider—the pantaloon of the title. The word is taken from the commedia dell'arte; it is the stock character of a foolish old man who is taken advantage of; but Rider, who is a stunningly strong mill worker, is only twenty-four years old. That is the second surprise—unless, of course, Rider is not the main character. Immediately following the title, here is the first paragraph; it describes Rider burying his young wife of six months who had died from no known cause at all:

> He stood in the worn, faded clean overalls which Mannie herself had washed only a week ago, and heard the first clod strike the pine box. Soon he had one of the shovels himself, which in his hands (he was better than six feet and weighed better than two hundred pounds) resembled the toy shovel a child plays with at the shore, its half cubic foot of flung dirt no more than the light gout of sand the child's shovel would have flung. Another member of his sawmill gang touched his arm and said, "Lemme have hit, Rider." He didn't even falter. He released one hand in midstroke and flung it backward, striking the other across the chest, jolting him back a step, and restored the hand to the moving shovel, flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition, not

> built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself, until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. Then he straightened up and with one hand flung the shovel quivering upright in the mound like a javelin and turned and began to walk away, walking on even when an old woman came out of the meagre clump of his kin and friends and a few old people who had known him and his dead wife both since they were born, and grasped his forearm. She was his aunt. She had raised him. He could not remember his parents at all.
>
> "What you gwine?" she said.
>
> "Ah'm goan home," he said.
>
> "You dont wants ter go back dar by yoself," she said. "You needs to eat. You come on home and eat."
>
> "Ah'm goan home," he repeated, walking out from under her hand, his forearm like iron, as if the weight on it were no more than that of a fly, the other members of the mill gang whose head he was giving way quietly to let him pass.[3]

This is an intensely scrambled passage. It is a portrait of profound, almost wordless grief—a grief that is "overpowering," according to Parini (258)—and the tight concentration on the shovel, the dirt, and the burial is surely Rider's (he has no last name). But Rider would not compare himself to a child at the beach; he would not know what a javelin was, much less use the term analogously; and he would not see the "shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight"—nor, I suspect, but this is closer to Rider's perspective, would he give them "a profound meaning and fatal to touch." All that is pure Faulkner; and it is, moreover, a white man trying hard to think black.

Rider trudges on home, thinking of when he met Mannie, of how he settled down and rented a house that he worked on—he "refloored the porch and rebuilt and roofed the kitchen" with his wife (137); on the dirty road home, he thinks he sees his wife's footprints beneath others. He gave up women and dice and whiskey to bring home all his money to Mannie, and he tended a fire he began their wedding night while she took the money to the plantation commissary for the week's food and supplies. We are, here, completely inside Rider's

perspective. The details are no less lyrical, but the analogies have disappeared. This sense of Rider, of seeing as Rider sees, thinking as Rider thinks, continues to expand. "They would eat once again without haste or hurry after five days—the sidemeat, the greens, the cornbread, the buttermilk from the well-house, the cake which she baked every Saturday now that she had a stove to bake in" (138-39). And then it all changes.

> But when he put his hand on the gate it seemed to him suddenly that there was nothing beyond it. The house had never been his anyway, but now even the new planks and sills and shingles, the hearth and stove and bed, were all a part of the memory of somebody else, so that he stopped in the half-open gate and said aloud, as though he had gone to sleep in one place and then waked suddenly to find himself in another: "Whut's An doin' hyar?" before he went on. (139)

The sense of disorientation is not race-specific, of course, but here it seems exactly right; we have *become* Rider. His dog greets him, enters the house with him, and then stops.

> Then the dog left him. The light pressure went off his flank; he heard the click and hiss of its claws […]. But it stopped just outside the front door, where he could see it now, and the upfling of its head as the howl began, and then he saw her too. She was standing in the kitchen door, looking at him. He didn't move. […] "Mannie," he said. "Hit's awright. Ah aint afraid." Then he took a step toward her, slow, not even raising his hand yet, and stopped. Then he took another step. But this time as soon as he moved she began to fade. He stopped at once, not breathing again, motionless, willing his eyes to see that she had stopped too. But she had not stopped. […] She was going fast now, he could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle, of the blood and bones and flesh too strong, invincible for life, having learned at least once with his own eyes how tough, even in sudden and violent death, […] the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive, actually was.
>
> Then she was gone. (140-41)

The apparition is as powerful as any ghost can be—Rider wills his wife back, if only for a moment, before the vision fades. Mannie does not leave his consciousness. He takes down dishes, sets the table for

two, pulls up two chairs, and begins to talk to her, ladling out cold food from the stove. All the critics I know, including myself, find this an especially commanding moment in which Faulkner succeeds in making all of us see and feel what Rider sees and feels. His abrupt departure at this point and his aimless wandering—to the deserted mill where only the fireman is present, but where his muscular body begins the next day's shift with unprecedented energy and might; his dismissal of his aunt who brings him food and the God she asks him to address; then a trip for moonshine of the rawest sort where he overpays; and finally to a dicegame at night where a white man, throwing dice, cheats all the players, who are black, with two sets of dice. Angry at the way he sees the whites exploiting blacks at every turn since he left his home with Mannie, Rider attacks the white diceman and kills him, and goes back home to await the revenge of the diceman's family. Since we see many of these events from Rider's limited perspective, they take on a kind of enlarged insight that is unmatched anywhere else in Faulkner's fiction. And yet—if we pull back, and this surprised me at first—we see how limited this view is, how racially based. What Rider has seen is a "ha'nt," the rising of the dead in spirit form that was said to be a supernatural belief of blacks. Their ability at mental labor, their special masculinity, their independence from any support or consolation, their love of cheap moonshine and dice, their ability to get drunk and then pick fights: all these are racial stereotypes. What no critical reader has seen that I have read is that this is a white man's black man, that for all his yearning—which I believe is real—Faulkner has been unable to see things from a truly individualized black viewpoint, apart from a white man's stereotypes. Even Rider's crime confirms the expected.

> [T]he white man's hand sprang open and the second pair of dice clattered onto the floor beside the first two and the white man wrenched free and sprang up and back and reached the hand backward toward the pocket where the pistol was.
>
> The razor hung between his shoulder-blades from a loop of cotton string round his neck inside his shirt. The same motion of the hand which brought the razor forward over his shoulder flipped the blade open and freed it from

> the cord, […] his thumb pressing the handle into his closing fingers, so that in the second before the half-drawn pistol exploded he actually struck at the white man's throat not with the blade but with a sweeping blow of his fist, […]. (153-54)

Quite apart from the stereotypical razor and the slit throat, there is something here of the admiration of the sheer artistry involved in the physical action and the neat use of the knife that is not the perspective of a man with too much moonshine, or a man angry at exploitation and seeking vengeance, or even a man deliberately suicidal, by killing a white man knowing that he will be caught and lynched. It is more of a social pattern than a successful psychology. That was not Faulkner's intention. He does admire Rider, and I think he feels passionately for his subjected position; I think it is an outgrowth of that dreadful Higginbotham incident in 1935 that so scarred the town of Oxford that all it could do, down to the last black person, was eradicate the memory of it.

But what I find surprising at this point is that I think Faulkner saw his limitations, too, saw that he did not get inside the deep anger and frustration and repression and fear that Elwood Higginbotham had felt, or the feelings that Rider might have, beyond the way in which whites saw or heard or thought about black behavior. And he saw that he should have too, as a cultural historian, as one who meant to understand the races so as to understand his own South, the little postage-stamp of the world that he spent a lifetime trying to comprehend and record. Apparently he saw that he had failed. For the story continues for another six pages—and these pages are about whites, about a sheriff's deputy "who had been officially in charge of the business" of finding Rider "hanging from the bellrope in a negro schoolhouse about two miles from the sawmill," being with the coroner when he "had pronounced the verdict of death at the hands of a person or persons unknown and surrendered the body to the next of kin all within five minutes" (154), although it is clear enough that the Birdsong family has taken revenge on the death of their kin. It is the

white deputy whose every action and thought we follow now, not Rider's. But notice how Faulkner puts it:

> [T]he sheriff's deputy who had been officially in charge of the business was telling his wife about it. They were in the kitchen. His wife was cooking supper. The deputy had been out of bed and in motion ever since the jail delivery shortly before midnight of yesterday […], and he was spent now from lack of sleep and hurried food at hurried and curious hours and, sitting in a chair beside the stove, a little hysterical, too. (154)

It is, in nearly every detail, parallel to Rider. Faulkner goes on,

> "Them damn niggers," he said. "I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they aint human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and thy can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. Now you take this one today—"
>
> "I wish you would," his wife said harshly. She was a stout woman […] who looked not harried at all but composed in fact, only choleric. Also, she had attended a club rook-party that afternoon and had won the first, the fifty-cent, prize until another member had insisted on a recount of the scores and the ultimate throwing out of one entire game. […]
>
> […] The wife turned from the stove, carrying a dish. […] The deputy raised his voice to carry the increased distance: "His wife dies on him. All right. But does he grieve? He's the biggest and busiest man at the funeral. Grabs a shovel before they even got the box into the grave they tell me, and starts throwing dirt onto her faster than a slip scraper could have done it. […]
>
> "So he comes back to work, the first man on the job, when McAndrews and everybody else expected him to take the day off since even a nigger couldn't want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have had sense to take a day off when he would still get paid for it too. But not him." (154-56)

The fact that the deputy's wife was caught cheating at cards of course resonates with the crooked diceman, something the deputy conveniently overlooks, although Faulkner does not. Clearly he wants whites

culpable throughout the story. That seems obvious. What seems to me far more subtle is that the deputy is not just voicing bewilderment—the recognition that his white culture has taught him that black men are not really human, when everything he lists suggests the humanity that characterizes Rider and that, moreover, seems to bond the two men. The deputy is arguing with himself. He does not want to be black. He wants to understand. He is not black. He is compassionate. His obsession with Rider—with what Rider stands for, with his secret bond with Rider (something Faulkner may have in some unvoiced way taken from Conrad, for they may be secret sharers) is what drives the narrative and the dialogue. Perhaps surprisingly, the deputy sounds something like Faulkner. He is the authorial persona, trying to tease out the significance of the portrait he has just drawn of Rider. Is there something, after all, that rises above the stereotypical moonshine and dicegame and razor? It is as if Faulkner looked at what he had written and thought, this merely extends what divides us; it doesn't allow progress. My portrait of Rider has actually gone nowhere at all, unless I can convince myself, and my readers, that there is a common bond of humanity between a repressed black and a mystified white, see some way to connect the two. In this way, he shares the deputy's obsession. He also confesses his limitations.

There is a radical difference between the fate of Higginbotham and the fate of Rider. The whole town, it would seem, turned out to lynch Higginbotham; only the Birdsongs, who seem arguably more personally justified, go after Rider. The Birdsongs do not commit a ritual lynching; it is not even public, but within the schoolhouse. It is more like a private vendetta. Is this an attempt to make lynching more palatable? Is it an authorial strategy to get more people to read the story because it seems to have a cultural rather than an historical basis? Is it an attempt to allegorize history? Or is it an attempt to resituate the event so as to get a simpler, clearer vision of it?

These are real questions, and I think Faulkner is very much aware that they are. But then the story takes another surprising turn. The

deputy and Mayhew, the sheriff, hearing of the murder, go to Rider's house to find him.

> "Not that we expected to do any good, as he had probably passed Jackson, Tennessee, about daylight; and besides, the simplest way to find him would be just to stay close behind them Birdsong boys. Of course there wouldn't be nothing hardly worth bringing back to town after they did find him, but it would close the case." (156-57)

We are back now with vigilante justice, with the encapsulated horrors of whites pursuing blacks. But then:

> "So it's just by the merest chance that we go by his house. I don't even remember why we went now, but we did; and there he is. Sitting behind the barred front door with a open razor on one knee and a loaded shotgun on the other? No. He was […] laying in the back yard asleep in the broad sun […]." (157)

The horror dissipates. Rider is human and innocent (or sleeping off the moonshine) and not dangerous at all; a 'good nigger.'

> "And we wake him and he sets up and says, 'Awright, white folks. Ah done it. Jest dont lock me up,' and Mayhew says, 'Mr Birdsong's kinfolk aint going to lock you up neither. You'll have plenty of fresh air when they get hold of you,' and he says, 'Ah done it. Jest dont lock me up' […]." (157)

The story becomes a story of freedom. What Rider wants is to be free of pain and grief and worry and loneliness. He isn't worried about justice. He's worried about repression.

What we have now, I think, is not sentimentality once more—or the revelation of common humanity; what we have is a much deeper, and perhaps more insightful, understanding of Elwood Higginbotham, but told in a story so distant and so distinct from Higginbotham's that Faulkner is able to make a telling case without raising old ghosts and old prejudices. What was it like, after all, being Elwood Higginbotham renting a white man's land, surrounded by a white man's crops and when once you try for a bit of independence, a bit of freedom, a bit of saying this farm land is what I am planting, not you, you are chased

down, locked up, and then strung up? It may be oblique, but it got Faulkner a far larger readership, and perhaps a much more thoughtful readership, than a more direct, if fictionalized account.

Faulkner's story ends when, imprisoned, Rider pulls up his cot bolted to the floor and uses it to smash down the door of his cell—an astonishing show of strength—and gaining his necessary liberty, he is finally run down by the Birdsongs, just as Mayhew and the deputy knew he would be. Having peered into Higginbotham's situation from a different set of circumstances, what fiction can do, Faulkner approaches the historical situation half-way.

But why, then, call a sympathetic (if at first incomprehensible and unavailable) character like Rider, who seems so accessible, so human, so understandable, a pantaloon? Why make him a comic, derided figure of stock Italian farce, the black-faced figure he had drawn in college and beyond for literary magazines? Such a vast oversimplification would seem to have nothing at all to do with this story, nor with the frightful event that lies behind it. Unless, of course, one is attempting to show how wrong easy and stereotypical assumptions can be; how easy it is to ridicule someone you do not understand and how disastrous such ridicule is. It is an exaggerated form, but not an unrelated form, to 'a brute' or 'the negro.' No real human being is ever merely a category, a stereotype, even in the approximate representation of fiction.

Collier's refusal to publish the story was followed with similar rejections from *The American Magazine*, *Redbook*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* (which nevertheless did publish a shorter version of "The Bear" and of "Go Down, Moses," later to appear in the book); it was ultimately published in the October 1940 issue of *Harper*'s. All three stories were reworked as chapters in *Go Down, Moses*, a collection of related stories which Faulkner insisted was a novel, in 1942. There "Pantaloon in Black" was the third chapter, after the initial "Was," chronologically the earliest story, and "The Fire and the Hearth," which sweeps from the early years of Lucas Beauchamp's marriage in 1897 to 1942. The trilogy of hunting stories follows: "The Old People,"

"The Bear," "Delta Autumn." The order appears chronological, with "Pantaloon" coming before the long McCaslin segment, before the time covered by the McCaslin hunting stories. That is, it is Faulkner's present-day Yoknapatawpha, and only six years after Elwood Higginbotham's lynching. The placement in the novel makes it seem earlier, so our final unscrambling is a chronological one. Along with a real pantaloon incident, Lucas Beauchamp attempting to salt his fields with false gold that nearly costs him his long-standing marriage in "The Fire and the Hearth," "Pantaloon in Black" is a darker, more contemporary story. The story of Now in *Go Down, Moses* is the story of a black who wanted freedom, a lonely man who wanted his wife, and a family who took justice into their own hands and lynched their enemy before he could stand trial, before he had even been assigned a lawyer. Faulkner found a way to release his own apparent obsession, despite his own need to understand blacks better, to make that need dramatic, unavoidable, secure in his history and inescapable for his readers. The real pantaloons are named Birdsong.

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NOTES

[1]Jay Parini, *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) 1.

[2]Parini 245.

[3]William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1942) 135-36. All references are to this first edition.