

PHILIP M. WEINSTEIN

Introduction

What do we do and why when we think Faulkner? This is the personal (but never just personal) question I asked all of the contributors to ponder as they thought about their essays for this *Companion*. In responding to it, they have aligned their work, roughly, within one of two groups: “the texts in the world” or “the world in the texts.” The five essays that make up Part I explicitly press beyond the art of Faulkner’s texts in order to comment on the larger “world” those texts inhabit, envisaged here as contextual social activities and processes within which Faulkner’s practice may reveal its broader cultural dimensions. These essays sketch out a range of contexts – modernism, postmodernism, the “culture industry,” a canon of twentieth-century European novelists, the noncanonical practice of Latin American fiction of the same period – that permit us to consider Faulkner’s comparative identity. To put the matter differently, these first essays identify several of the current “theaters” in which Faulkner’s texts are most interestingly performed.

The three essays that constitute Part II operate otherwise, probing more deeply into the textual behavior of three of Faulkner’s canonical masterpieces – *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* These essays attend in detail to a discrete text’s formal moves, but they go beyond New Critical procedures in their insistent focus on “the world in the texts,” especially the larger social problematics of race,

2 PHILIP WEINSTEIN

gender, and subject formation. A fourth Faulknerian text – *Go Down, Moses* – receives sustained attention as well, in the essays of Patrick O'Donnell and Warwick Wadlington. Finally, this introduction and Wadlington's conclusion, conceived more as "metacommentaries" on the practice of Faulknerian commentary, move outside the alignment of either group. Taken together, all ten essays aspire to be a composite (though necessarily incomplete) "profession" of Faulkner studies today, by circulating around the following concerns:

1. What is at stake in reading Faulkner? How does the apparently private act of reading function in the broader dynamic of cultural reproduction and revision?

2. What (from the perspective of the 1990s) does it mean to call Faulkner a modernist? What (largely European) alignment of forms and concerns is thus asserted? How is this alignment reaccented when we contrast Faulknerian practice with other fictional practices of the same period?

3. What would constitute a postmodernist interpretive lens, and how would such a lens map Faulkner's work in ways that differ crucially from the New Critical celebration of Faulkner that was founded on modernist premises and remained canonical in U.S. criticism from the 1950s well into the 1980s?

4. How would a postmodernist axis of priorities remap the relation of Faulkner's high-culture achievement to the burgeoning forms of popular culture – movies, magazine stories, best-selling novels – within which it made its way and negotiated its accommodations?

5. How does Faulkner's work explore the construction of human subjectivity (that personal space of thinking, feeling, and doing that – with whatever qualifications – we insist on as the domain of our private identity and that fiction has long taken as its special province)? How do Faulkner's texts produce the "traffic" between this interior resource and the larger culture's incessant demands on the individual?

6. In what ways does Faulkner's fiction – the passionate work of a white American male of the early twentieth century

Introduction

3

– participate in, and shed light on, his own culture's differential structures of race and gender? Going beyond the facile critical alternatives of blindness to, or rebuke of, these differential structures, how might we read the fissures within his work determined by the pressures of race and gender so as to deepen our understanding of his culture's normative procedures and of his complex insertion within them?

7. Within what larger, nonliterary cultural narratives is Faulkner's practice tacitly embedded? How might his work look when understood within racial/historical perspectives not his own?

Richard Moreland's opening essay identifies at the outset some of the issues that circulate more indirectly through all the subsequent ones. Moreland candidly inquires into the relations among the three central activities he himself performs when he is thinking Faulkner: reading, writing, and teaching. He then seeks, speculatively rather than insistently, to reconceive these activities as dimensions of texts themselves: the "readerly" text of realism (a text that passes on to us the world substantially constituted as we already seem to know it), the "writerly" text of modernism (a text that seems radically to refuse the commonly perceived world of the status quo), and the "participatory" text of postmodernism (a text that recognizes our complicity in the cultural arrangements – however ironic our stance – that we both identify within and import into the texts to which we attend). Moreland tellingly analyzes the ways in which Faulkner's work generally – and *Light in August* specifically – activates with fluid unpredictability all three novelistic stances. "The world of [Faulkner's] work," he writes, "does not feel natural, comfortable, or recognizable in the cultural way that realist work feels to many readers. It does not effectively contain its society's self-criticisms and discontents, or reduce those conflicts to terms an individual character, narrator, or reader can resolve." In other words, although both the "real" and its critique are

Cambridge University Press

0521421675 - The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner - Edited by Philip M. Weinstein

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4 PHILIP WEINSTEIN

compellingly produced in Faulkner's practice – we read of a cultural landscape both easily recognizable and disturbingly charged with social ills – his texts at the same time undermine any simple commitment to reform. They thus leave in their reader a sense of malaise – “a critical dissatisfaction with what the culture in general or any of us as individuals alone already knows how to say.” This pervasive resistance on the part of Faulkner's texts to effective diagnosis and cure Moreland happily terms a “critique of critique.”

Patrick O'Donnell also probes the sense of unresolvable impasse that characterizes Faulkner's modernist major phase: his experimental texts between *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). O'Donnell draws on two conflicting dimensions of European modernism in general: the writer's urge to escape the contaminating practices of the world he has inherited, by way of a monumental and formally stunning (antirealistic) replacement of that world (Joyce's *Dublin*, Proust's *Combray*, among others); this urge followed by his concomitant ironic awareness that the refused historical world always returns, however repressed, to haunt its brilliant replacement. O'Donnell sees this tension writ large in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner's tragic modernist masterpiece. He then explores *Go Down, Moses* (1942) as an implicitly postmodern, transitional text in Faulkner's career, in which this double bind of modernism (the transcendent urge, its subsequent betrayal) yields to a more contingent and resilient vision of ongoing histories, black and white, female and male, that quietly elude the either/or dynamic of Faulkner's tragic modernism. As O'Donnell puts it, “To return to Quentin's metaphor of the interconnected pools, these ‘post-modern’ moments frequently appear in the form of a ripple effect – a movement along the surface of the text far removed from the nascent occurrence that initiated the series, yet one that profoundly puts into question the fatality of events and their aftermath often seen as characteristic of Faulkner's fiction.”

Introduction

5

Finally, in this opening triad of contextual essays, John Matthews subtly analyzes the impact of larger market pressures on Faulkner's artistic practice. Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer to theorize the emergence of the "culture industry" (the unparalleled development in the United States of mass-produced and mass-consumed art forms during the mid-twentieth century), Matthews examines closely some of the vicissitudes of Faulkner's Hollywood writings during the 1930s. His argument resembles Moreland's and O'Donnell's in its refusal of a simple binary opposition that would pit the Olympian detachment of the high-modernist masterpiece, on the one hand, against the ideologically contaminated practices of mass culture, on the other. (This stereotypical opposition organizes our most widely shared narrative of the "great writer" – such as Fitzgerald or Faulkner – ensnared by "Hollywood commercialism.") Attending to the transformative history of "Turnabout," one of Faulkner's rare stories actually to be made into a film, Matthews shows that Faulkner's much revised script neither slavishly submitted to commercial pressures nor sublimely transcended them. Rather, it managed, by reflecting wittily on its own manner of rehearsing social coordinates, to distinguish its uncoerced behavior from the "culture industry" norms it necessarily encoded. Matthews pursues this argument as part of a larger project of reconceiving the ways in which the aesthetic practice of high modernism encounters mass-market cultural forms spawned by twentieth-century modernization. We have wanted too often to polarize this encounter. We are just learning – thanks to essays like this one – to chart a more complex dynamic of submission and resistance.

The next two essays seek to assess Faulkner's work, first, within a twentieth-century European novelistic perspective and, second, as culturally illuminated by the related practice of a Chicano writer (Américo Paredes) exactly contemporary with Faulkner. In the first of these two pieces, André Bleikasten shrewdly interrogates the current critical convic-

Cambridge University Press

0521421675 - The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner - Edited by Philip M. Weinstein

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[More information](#)

6 PHILIP WEINSTEIN

tion that the significance of a writer's work is determined in the last instance by his cultural insertion. Noting that Faulkner's novels have for more than a half century reached and moved a huge European readership whose knowledge of the American South is restricted to what they learn from his pages, Bleikasten speculates that Faulkner's work possesses an aesthetic power that survives translation and crosses cultural borders with impunity. He then gathers together the rare European novelists – a dozen in all – whose work has achieved, in his view, an equivalent mastery and reach. Modernists all, these writers nevertheless lack the unifying commitment to realism that permits us to join nineteenth-century writers as divergent as Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and James. With fine discrimination Bleikasten shows how Faulknerian practice maintains a creative tension between a poetic/experimental impulse and a mimetic/representational impulse. Faulkner thus produces novels that draw powerfully on fiction's primitive resource – storytelling itself – while all along calling into question the authority of the stories they do not cease to unfold. Bleikasten concludes with a modernist pairing as compelling as it is unexpected: Kafka and Faulkner, both “children” of Dostoevsky, compassionate masters of the uncanny, of mesmerizing tales that are simultaneously transparent and opaque.

Ramón Saldívar's comparative frame is equally modernist, but his project could hardly differ more from Bleikasten's. Rather than attend to the dimensions of Faulkner's artistic mastery, Saldívar is intent on the unmanageable inflection of class, race, and ethnicity on subject formation within Faulkner's protagonists. The representation of the subject-in-culture is Saldívar's focus, and he turns to Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Faulkner's paradigm case. Saldívar brings to the Haiti portion of Sutpen's career a cluster of concerns that reveal as never before the specifically cultural components of subject formation. Using colonial and postcolonial theory, he charts the fatal differences – for Sutpen – between (1) a coloni-

Introduction

7

al culture (Haiti) whose identity terms exceed (and thus escape) the binary opposition of black and white and (2) a master–slave culture (the antebellum American South) whose identity terms are suffocatingly inscribed on a black–white opposition. Eulalia Bon “is” one kind of person in the former culture, another kind in the latter, and Saldívar adroitly discusses *Absalom, Absalom!* as a text that discloses subjectivity to be multiply constructed even as it tells the story of a man (Sutpen) incapable of this awareness. Finally, Saldívar juxtaposes this Faulkner commentary against a continuously pertinent reading of conflicted identity formation in Paredes’s Chicano novel *George Washington Gómez*, concluding that the antirealistic forms of modernism allow both texts – through the suggestively different but equally failed life histories they narrate – to debunk any totalizing myth of origin or end.

The three essays in Part II – “The World in the Texts” – focus, respectively, on *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* – canonical masterpieces according to virtually any account of Faulkner’s work. But Cheryl Lester’s scrutiny of *The Sound and the Fury* proceeds outside the terms of canonical reverence. Not that Lester is urging us to revoke *The Sound and the Fury*’s canonical status. Rather, she wants to bring into visibility an ongoing historical event that Faulkner’s novel simultaneously registers and represses: the Great Migration of blacks from the South that began around 1915 and continued into the 1960s (i.e., throughout Faulkner’s career). Lester focuses on *The Sound and the Fury*’s self-conflicted engagement with a historical phenomenon its author could neither ignore nor understand. The white South’s emotional and economic “purchase” on Southern blacks was irreparably self-conflicted; white subject formation depended intricately on black silhouettes and reciprocities. Systemic violence against blacks lived side by side with intimate transference projections on them. Lester argues that Faulkner – like some of his memorable protagonists

8 PHILIP WEINSTEIN

(e.g., Horace, Quentin) – could not compass, emotionally and intellectually, the phenomenon staring him in the face. He could narrate this steady exodus of blacks from their homeland only by inverting both its direction and its racial focus. On this reading, Quentin Compson (alert throughout his deathday to every nuance of black behavior in Cambridge) experiences an exile displaced detail by detail from its black origin. Lester goes on to collect the various other “absences” in the text around the overdetermined figure of Caddy – sister, mistress, mother, mammy – concluding that *The Sound and the Fury* (like its writer) could encounter this historical event only in the form of loss and dispossession. A text usually celebrated for its achieved psychological intensity is here seen as shaped decisively by its racial positioning, and the historical testimony it offers becomes eloquent in its very evasions.

Race equally determines Judith Bryant Wittenberg’s thorough discussion of *Light in August*, but not in the form of a historical event that white Southerners were determined not to see. Rather, Wittenberg demonstrates race to be invisible in another sense. That is, and this is searingly true of *Light in August*, race may function as a wholly constructed, conceptual phenomenon; melanin may have nothing to do with it. In this most race-obsessed of Faulkner’s novels there are virtually no “black” blacks, only whites tormented by the thought that they may be, or be involved with, blacks unaware. Pursuing her analysis through a Lacanian understanding of the symbolic order (the word world we pass our lives within) as *prior to* the “things themselves” to which words ostensibly refer, Wittenberg reveals the gossamer but indestructible fabric of lies, rumors, beliefs, and sayings – of *words* – that cushion every character’s thought and action in this novel. “Wordsymbols” do irreparable damage in *Light in August*, and Wittenberg argues that the novel is intricately complicit with the verbally generated acts of misprision and violence that it simultaneously analyzes – and in analyzing indicts. In making this latter argument she joins those other

Introduction

9

critics in the *Companion* who propose a Faulkner inescapably invested in, even though critical of, his culture's most disturbing racial and gendered practices.

Carolyn Porter's commentary on *Absalom, Absalom!* joins Ramón Saldívar's in providing some of the most provocative analysis of subject formation this much discussed text has yet received. Porter notes that Faulkner's early work is maternity-obsessed (especially *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*), whereas *Light in August* is the transitional text about the fathers (McEachern, Hines, Burden) that heralds the meditation on the institution of patriarchy itself in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Pressing hard on those pages that narrate the child Sutpen's passage from being turned away at the planter's door to his accession to a "design," Porter identifies an intricate structure of speech and silence, of self-interrogation and intercession of the Other. The damaged child, potentially revolutionary, makes his way past his psychic wound and eventually "hears" the voice he requires – objective, impersonal, final – to sanction his design. Drawing on Lacan's model of subject formation, Porter argues that the negotiation of the Oedipal crisis supports not only patriarchy but Western theories of kingship and Christian theology as well. That is, the rebellious subject/son, seeking acknowledgment and hearing only the divine father's silence, finds his way into the mediated law (spoken by others) on the other side of that paternal silence. He joins the father rather than slaying him, ensuring that, even though actual sons and fathers succeed each other and die off in time, the *structure* of the father – what Lacan calls the "Symbolic Father" – retains its privileged authority. It is this authority, in the form of an alienated discourse, that modulates the son's accession into the symbolic order of the father. *Absalom, Absalom!* attests powerfully to the racial and gender-caused carnage that accompanies this accession. Indeed, the title of Porter's essay – "(Un)Making the Father" – points to the diagnostic energy Faulkner mounted in deconstructing, detail by detail, the "becoming" of patriarchy.

10 PHILIP WEINSTEIN

Warwick Wadlington's concluding essay recapitulates many of the dominant concerns already discussed. Like Moreland's opening essay, this last one is unusually informal and candid in its manner of engaging its reader. Wadlington sees Faulkner addressing (both as achieved diagnosis and as unwitting complicity) one of the cardinal ills of our century: the unshakable desire to think of the private sphere as radically different from the public sphere. He interrogates this desire on several levels, beginning with a reader's conviction that one's own private reading of Faulkner has little in common with the "institution" of Faulkner (the range of transactions – this *Companion* being a good example – that attend to Faulkner in public ways). Wadlington shows that the private act of reading is inevitably inflected by the stance of others: none of us is born knowing how to read, each of us enacts a scene of sustained cultural training when we unselfconsciously attend to or disregard certain aspects of a text as we go about the moment-by-moment business of reading. Likewise, the domain of the private marks our experience of the public. We do not encounter "some monolithic phantom abstraction like The Public, The Economic System, or The Culture." Rather, we absorb these realities through the agencies of particular people, filtered by their particular subjectivities. Wadlington draws on this fusion of the private and the public not only to launch a theory of "discerning reading" but also to claim that Faulkner's texts enact the same dynamic in their encounter with difference, their temptation to demonize difference (racial difference, gender difference) as inalterably Other. He then reads *Go Down, Moses* as about Ike McCaslin's doomed attempt to transcend private ownership without incurring indebtedness to others. For the most important projects we conceive are unrealizable without the troublemaking yet empowering participation of others. I might well close this portion of the Introduction by reminding you, the reader, that only by depending on my fellow contributors have I been able to access my own thought here, just as you may find your way into your