**William Faulkner (1897-1962). Fifty Years of Posterity**

Teodor Mateoc[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: The paper intends to re-examine Faulkner’s status as a modernist/regional writer, half a century after his death, and look at the way(s) his work passes the test of time. Faulkner’s literary legacy continues to speak powerfully to the contemporary post-postmodernist reader since his narratives illustrate the interplay of history, ideology and culture and their relation to individual destiny. Class and gender, but mostly race are cultural constructs that reinstate divisions and hierarchies in his Southern communities, but their effects reverberate beyond and acquire universal meaning. His profoundly humanistic vision transcends such barriers and denounces any discrimination that would diminish the status of his black heroes as fulfilled human individuals.

**Keywords:** race, blackness, whiteness, identity, humanism

Now that half a century has passed since William Faulkner passed away, a legitimate question is what is at stake in reading his work today? How does it illuminate the current debates on the notions of race and identity? And how does it highlight contemporary questions about the individual’s relation to larger cultural contexts? These are some of the issues that I want to address in what follows.

From the perspective of cultural criticism, which I intend to adopt here, a reconsideration of Faulkner’s work invites an examination of such terms as identity, otherness, cultural constructions and ideological affiliations, blackness and whiteness and of the way they were given aesthetic form by a mind that was itself the product of a community and of a liberal education wherein the respective notions had been given a particular meaning.

That the historical South, Faulkner’s South, is a distinct region has long been demonstrated*.* Paseism*,* rooted in Europe’s aristocratic traditions and carried on by the conservative Southern Agrarians, the racial issue and protestantism*-* are all endemic features of a cultural region that, before Faulkner, had not too much to boast of in the province of arts.The fact that it took a Civil War to try to preserve that identity at all costs bespeaks the deep-seated belief of the southerners in the illusion that they are a separate race and, consequently, have the right to self-rule and to maintain a feudal institution well into the first decades of modernity. Lastly, that such an attempt failed, explains the feeling of doom and of the tragic that marks Faulkner’s novels of the Old South.

The result of this failure is the obstinate refusal of recent history, like that of Emily Grierson in *A Rose for Emily,* or the turning to a remote past which, re-shaped by memory and by an acute sense of loss and injustice, acquires almost mythical proportions. Sometimes defeated southerners resort to alcohol or to telling stories of what was, like Quentin Compson’ father in *The Sound and the Fury*; others, like Reverend Gail Hightower of *Light in August*, not only finds it impossible to face the present, but turns away from religion, too, into a sort of spiritual void; some others, like Mrs. Compson, cling to the illusion that their old aristocratic condition will be protection enough in front of adverse circumstances, simply because she is a “lady;” others yet, court disaster, live dangerously and eventually find their death, like young Bayard Sartoris who dies in a plane-crash..

But conservative paseism is only one strand in the fabric of Southern ethos and it may not even be the most relevant, because what renders the Southern climate unique is first of all the presence of the euphemistically called the peculiar institution. The fact is that the introduction of slavery into the new world was, as Winthrop Jordan shows, ”an invitation to conflict” (Winthrop 179). The historical moment was, in itself, paradoxical: the first European settlers of America chose freedom over (religious) bondage at home; the first African slaves gave up their freedom for bondage in the New World[[2]](#footnote-3). What followed was a long and arduous debate over the issue of slavery in which supporters and abolitionists used pseudo-scientific, political and religious arguments to make their point.

The Old South failed both in the attempt to remain a conservative society rooted in the structures of feelings and emotions of aristocratic Europe and in the effort to found a unique slave society. From the accompanying frustration and defeat,”the modern southern writer inherited a compelling drama of man and community” (Simpson 50). Such an aspiration to community resided not only in the manners and conventions, ceremony and rituals, but in the goodness and evil, in noble and debased forms of human subjectivity, in everything that engaged human emotions. For communitarian identity, as Benedict Anderson shows, “is not an innate phenomenon but a product culturally and historically fabricated to local specifications by narratives that are more or less cooperative ( literature and history, for example) and more or less conscious”( Kreiling ix). What makes Benedict Anderson’s study of *Imagined Communities* useful for the understanding of southernness in American literature, is that he gives an important place to symbolic, nonartefactual values and realities: love, self-sacrifice, altruism and generosity.

The historical experience of the southern quest for community emerged as a powerful presence in much of the Southern writing of the 1920s, culminating in the work of its most famous native son, William Faulkner. In *Faulkner's Career: An Internal Literary History* (1979), Gary Lee Stonum distinguishes between “two subjectivities implicated in a writing career”. “Author” is the name he gives to the subject produced by the writing; “writer” denotes the subject who produces the writing. “Both are”, Stonum adds, “abstractions from the historical person William Faulkner” (Stonum 18).

Five decades of criticism have invested Faulkner, ‘the author’, with authority on many topics: race relations, the history of the Old Southwest, the future of democracy and of the human race, the meaning of Christianity, or the role of the artist in society. William Faulkner, ‘the writer’ had few or partially formed judgments on many of these issues, and, more often than not, was reluctant to express or debate most of them. But ever since Malcolm Cowley’s *The Portable Faulkner (1946) -* a book that decisively established Faulkner’s literary fame-, to his death, Faulkner had to accept, albeit reluctantly, the role of writer who is historically situated. Reluctantly, because Faulkner the ‘writer’ would rather simply be an artist “like some of the Elizabethans who did not sign their books and so were left serene and markless” (Gwyn 285). Although Faulkner ‘the writer’ could not avoid the pressures of his public position, Faulkner, ‘the author’ surpasses it in a fictional reflection that is considered to summarize the moral and aesthetic order of the South. He embodies what Fred Hobson, echoing D. Davidson, calls an “autochthonous ideal” of southern cultural consciousness: “… a condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with his social and cultural environments, was nearly unconscious of it as a ‘special’ environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain”. (Hobson 80)

William Faulkner’s literary career stretches over 38 years, from 1926, when he published his first novel, *Soldier’s Pay* [[3]](#footnote-4) to 1962, when his last work, *The Reivers* appeared. In between, William Cuthbert Falkner[[4]](#footnote-5) authored other 16 novels[[5]](#footnote-6) and several volumes of short stories: *These Thirteen (1931)*; *Doctor Martino and Other Stories* (1934); *Knight’s Gambit* (1949); *Collected Stories* (1950*); Big Woods* (1955). In 1979, Joseph L. Blotner, Faulkner’s great biographer, edited a volume of *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*.

Of his non-fictional writings, one volume appeared three years before his death*: Faulkner in the University,* eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, Random House, NY, 1959. Other three were published posthumously: *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner*, 1926-1962, eds. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, Random House, NY 1968; *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph. H. Blotner, Random House, NY, 1977; *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner’s Letters to His Mother and Father*, 1818-1925, ed. James G. Watson, Norton, NY,1992.

For most critics, and certainly most readers, Faulkner’s fame rests upon his novels of the Old South, although other titles were awarded prestigious literary prizes: *Collected Stories*, the National Book Award*, A Fable* (1954) and *The Reivers*, the Pulitzer Prize. Otherwise, Faulkner recognition at home was slow to come, despite previous attention from such French writers as Andre Malraux and Jean Paul Sartre. The first significant criticism in the US is linked to the names of George Marion O’ Donell, Conrad Aiken (1939) or Alfred. Kazin (1942), but it was only in 1946, after Cowley published *The Portable Faulkner,* that the writer got full recognition and the work was suddenly acknowledged not only as the best to have yet come from the South but considered on a par with the great European modernists.

By that year, Faulkner had chartered most of his Yoknapatawpha territory, whose “sole owner and proprietor” he declared himself at the end of *Absalom, Absalom*! (1936) and had published most of his finest fiction. The unique saga of the South had begun with *Sartoris (1929),* a shortened version of his 1928 novel, *Flags in the Dust,* continued with *The Sound and the Fury (1929), As I Lay Dying (1930), Sanctuary (1931), Light in August (1932), Absalom, Absalom! (1936), The Unvanquished (1938), The Hamlet (1940)* and *Go Down, Moses (1942).* These novels, together with *Intruder in the Dust (1948)* can be seen as the hard core of Faulkner’s work; they are most directly concerned with race and are most illustrative for both his method and his meditations on what Robert Penn Warren called “the moral reality beneath the crust of history”. (Warren 2)

Historically, William Faulkner’s South is a long chronicle of, discovery, conquest and settlement marred by what Ihab Hassan once called in *Radical Innocence*, the formative sins of the nation: the rape of the land, the extermination of the Indians and the enslavement of the Blacks. It is also a region that had experienced its dark times: the traumatic experience of the Civil War and the corruption and mercantilism brought about by the carpet-baggers during the following twelve years of the Reconstruction.

Fictionally, Faulkner’s South is shaped as much by the imaginative power of its chronicler as by the substance of the factual; it is a world controlled by meaning as well as by facts. The result of this process of rhetorical re-invention is the Yoknapatawpha County and its capital, the town of Jefferson as fictional surrogates for the Lafayette County, Miss. and Oxford, respectively.

The human typology, it has been noticed, is amazingly diverse: the old Indian kings; the rich white plantators: Sartoris, Compson, Sutpen, Mc Caslin or De Spain; the black slaves, the mulattoes, the poor white trash, the alienated intellectuals acting sometimes as Faulkner’s raissoneurs - Gavin Stevens, Gail Hightower, or Charles Mallison- the northern outsiders, the unscrupulous upstarts, the Snopeses, aristocratic ladies and simple country girls, governors, generals, soldiers. This is the South where Faulkner looked for “homogeneity” and “solidarity” as values to be defended against the North:

We alone in the United States are a homogeneous people (…). So we are not really

resisting what the outland calls……progress and enlightenment. We are defending

not actually our politics beliefs or even our way of life, but simply our homogeneity

(…) Only a few of us know that only from homogeneity comes anything of a people

or for people of durable and lasting value- the literature, the art, the science, the

minimum of government and police which is the meaning of freedom and liberty, and

perhaps more valuable of all a national character worth anything in a crisis (Faulkner,

Intruder 100).

The voice that utters this belief is that of Gavin Stevens, the white lawyer and County Attorney, with degrees from Harvard and Heidelberg. His speech sounds more like discursive prose, though, and if it may reflect the author’s convictions, the concept of ‘homogeneity’ is problematic in Faulkner’s fictional South*.*

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980*), Stephen Greenblattholds that

we define our identities always in relation to what we are not, and therefore what we

are not (our Falstaffs) must be demonized and objectified as ‘others’. The mad, the

unruly and the alien are internalized ‘others’ which help us to consolidate our

identities: their existence is allowed only as evidence of the rightness of established

power (Greenblatt, qtd. in Selden 107).

In Faulkner’s South ‘the Other’ has a black face and this helps not only to consolidate white identity but also to validate slavery that ran counter the very founding principles of the nation and has ever since left the heritage of guilt to haunt white consciousnesses.

In what concerns the tradition of black portraiture, Faulkner’s literary heritage is not very impressive and with the possible exception of Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ,1885; *Puddn’head Wilson*, 1889) and Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1852), it presents a rather stereotypical image of the black character.(An early example is, of course, H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ,1852 where Tom, the slave, is meant to be a symbol of Christian forbearance and his mistreatment to arouse sympathy from white readers.

Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels can be looked at as structured on three levels, or underlined by three sets of binary oppositions: *spatial:* South vs. North; *temporal:* present vs. past; and *praxiological*, i.e. the realm of actual racial encounters. Briefly stated, the relation with the past is ambiguous; on one hand, the past is the repository of the myths of the Southern Pantheon: the Cavalier South with its aristocratic code of behaviour, the sense of honour, the veneration of woman, the benevolent masters and the acquiescent slaves living in harmony on the plantation. On the other hand, the southern past is tainted with the sin of slavery and incest as Ike MacCaslin finds out when reading the ledgers of the plantation and, consequently, repudiates his heritage.

On the praxiological level, the blacks and whites are playing out cultural roles which are laden with inherited phobias, stereotypes and intolerance that give tragism to present tension and render future solutions problematic.

The configuration of black portraiture in William Faulkner’s fiction exhibits different types of racial encounters and, at the same time, bears witness to the author’s growing understanding and complexity of treatment in the rendering of black characters. Ralph Ellisonin *Shadow and Act* was among the first to notice that Faulkner “has been more willing perhaps than any other artist to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides”(Ellison 41). The ambivalent attitude that Faulkner manifests has the source in the southern climate of consciousness in which the stereotyping of the blacks is either benign (‘good nigger’) or malignant (‘bad nigger’). The fact that both types are to be found with Faulkner may be indicative of his avoiding moral implication, of taking sides.

The concept of power takes particular critical force in the narrative discourses of protest, especially those of racial forms of protest. If those in power control history, even when the marginal and the ex-centric attempt to subvert that power, they still remain within its sphere. Their rhetoric may be oppositional but actually ex-centric black rebels (Lucas Beauchamp, Joe Christmas,) participate in two contradictory discourses: the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality; and one of submission and inadequacy.

The American white consciousness operates with a cultural framework that is made up of certain cultural features: intense individualism; economic self-interest; mastery over nature; the use of the doctrine of evolution and progress for evidence of the western status as the natural outcome; possession of Christianity as a status-endowing religion that seem to be essential for the definition of American whiteness. As G. E. Kent states:

even alienated white writers cannot push aside these cultural drives sufficiently to

come into the court of racial imagination with ‘clean’ minds. They create a

mythicization of the designated stranger and Blackness, a proliferation of racial myth

and ritual, and a use of the designated stranger and Blackness for the validation of

whiteness (Kent 166)

He concedes, however, that even if William Faulkner was still part of that American white consciousness, he surpassed it to a larger extent than most other southern writers that addressed the racial issue.

Faulkner himself had argued, in his speeches, that the Black will qualify for integration only when he will adopt the manners and values of the white culture. In *A Word to Virginians*, a speech delivered at the University of Virginia, Faulkner holds that the black “is competent for equality only in the ratio of his white blood.” He must learn “to act not even as well as any white man, but to act as well as the best of white men”(Kent 174).In Europe, the confrontation was mostly theoretical and abstract as the opportunities for direct contact were relatively infrequent. In America, on the other hand, where the whites were more insecure psychologically, the confrontation is direct and violent. As a result, the racial division was soon institutionalized and sanctioned both by religion and by the learned theories and scientific discoveries of the day. Such learning would provide various arguments to support slavery, be theyhistorica*l*: bondage is a necessary stage in the course of human progress; paternalis*t*: blacks are not yet prepared for freedom (Faulkner makes a similar point in *The Bear* by showing Fonsiba, poverty-stricken after having run away with an idealistic Northerner to Arkansas); or biological: innate physical traits make the black inferior to the whites.

This is then the climate of opinion that supported Faulkner’s general heritage of racial consciousness. His ability to imagine “what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar” (Morrison 15) is the test of his artistic power. His rhetoric and the cultural background of his work testify both to that power and its limitations.

Rhetorically, Faulkner’s work illustrates an important feature that Virginia Woolf mentioned as typical for the modernist prose: the symbiosis between the poeticand *the epic*. The poetic character of the novel comes as the natural outcome of a long process of internalizing the prosody, understood as a compositional principle that takes over the function of representation and structuring of reality. Such a style contributes to the semantic organization of discourse, to the transformation of the metonymical process which, in the opinion of Roman Jakobson, is a characteristic of prose, into a metaphorical process.

William Faulkner continues a rhetorical tradition that has always been a characteristic of Southern writing. Judged in the context of its spatial limitation (Yoknapatawpha) and its frozen time, his style allows the narrator a distancing space from the narrated events.The polyphonic structure of the Faulknerian novel is an attempt at encompassing the extraordinary diversity of the American South. In his obsessive concern with history, the author uses a grammar of uncertainty. Omniscient narration, that would give weight to authorial perspective (as is the case with the fourth part of *The Sound and the Fury*) is replaced by a multi-layered narration where the author borrows the voice of four narrators (*The Sound and the Fury)*, or even five (*Absalom, Absalom!)*. In such cases and elsewhere (*Light in August; Go Down, Moses)* the narrative oscillates between the perspective of the omniscient narrator and the limited omniscience of different other narrators.

Faulkner’s narrators are not totally reliable; uncertainty is present even at the basic, lexical level: words and phrases such as: “apparently”, “maybe”, “it was believed”, “people thought,” ”not only…but” etc. question the reality of the story and projects it into the realm of the possible and of myth. Such narrative perspectives ask that the reader infer meaning by corroborating evidence, by comparing the different versions that may enlarge upon, or restrict the initial understanding of the event. The presence of the omniscient narrator is, more often than not, minimal; sometimes, consequential events (as, for example, the raping of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary,* or the lynching of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*), are briefly alluded to, not actually narrated.

Equally inconclusive are Faulkner’s statements on race. As they appear in his public speeches and interviews, they speak in favour of integration and equal treatment and support the idea of Civil Rights for blacks. But As far as the fictional treatment of the issue is concerned, his position is much more ambiguous. He is not an iconoclast but neither is he a mere echo of his age and its cultural establishment.

What is obvious in a general evaluation of Faulkner’s black portraiture is that blacks are always invested with meaning and value only from the perspective of the white observer. There are relatively few instances when black heroes are given centrality in his fiction. Even when this is the case (*Light in August; Intruder in the Dust;* the story/ chapter *Pantaloon in Black* in *Go Down, Moses*), the judgments passed on them are those of the whites. They represent collective judgments, attitudes and fears that are grounded in the realm of the possible and less in actual reality. Joe Christmas’s black blood, for example, is only a possibility; the threat of miscegenation is also expressed only in terms of future possibility and yet it is the ground for Thomas Sutpen’s rejection of his mulatto son, Charles Bon; In *Intruder in the Dust*, nobody stops to consider Lucas Beauchamp’s involvement in the killing of Vinson Gowrie and all are eager to lynch him so as to give vent to deep-seated frustrations and prejudices against “the nigger.”

In conclusion, Faulkner’s stories of racial encounters betray a sense of moral indignation and a willingness to understand blackness in an effort to understand the insidious ways in which the workings of a restrictive cultural context can distort and pervert human nature. By bringing to public attention such stories of a traumatic period in American history, William Faulkner engages in a dialogue with the past, with his contemporaries and with posterity, not to express some final truth about white or black human beings, but to explore, ultimately, the potential and the possibilities of our unfinished humanity.

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2. Slavery officially begins in America in 1619, when twenty blacks landed at Jamestown, Virginia. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution will abolish it in 1865. For more, see Kenneth G. Goode*, From Africa to the United States and Then… A Concise Afro-American History,* Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenwiew, 1969 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. His very first published work is a volume of verse, *The Marble Faun* (1924); a second volume of poems will be *A Green Bough (*1933). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The original family name; the writer himself added the ‘u’ in 1919. See, *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. Philip M. Weinstein, Cambridge University Press, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Elmer*, taking Joyce’s ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’ as a model, is the only literary fragment of significant length that he left behind. See Daniel J. Singal.*William Faulkner. The Making of a Modernist.* Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press (73) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)