

# Faulkner at Fifty



Faulkner at Fifty:  
Tutors and Tyros

Edited by

Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Gérald Préher

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Faulkner at Fifty: Tutors and Tyros,  
Edited by Marie Liénard-Yeterian and Gérard Préher

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This volume is dedicated to the memory of

Michel Gresset  
André Bleikasten  
Noel Polk

who paved the way for the new generation of Faulknerians



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## INTRODUCTION

### MARIE LIÉNARD-YETERIAN AND GÉRALD PRÉHER

2012 commemoration ceremonies included strange bedfellows, as the year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of both Marilyn Monroe and William Faulkner. The Faulkner commemoration events were an opportunity for scholars to honor not just the memory of the writer but also the memory of dear departed members of the “Faulkner community” —a community of past readers and lovers of Faulkner’s *oeuvre*. This volume is therefore first and foremost a tribute to the memory of Noel Polk, André Bleikasten and Michel Gresset, our trailblazers and mentors in charting the course of the Faulkner journey.

An anniversary is also an opportunity to revisit our reading practices and interrogate our handling of issues raised by Faulkner’s work and legacy. Recent studies have focused on a “Global Faulkner” with a series of thought-provoking ideas and ground-breaking insights into the Faulknerian “cosmos.”<sup>1</sup> Another line of inquiry has interestingly explored the theme of Faulkner and the Metropolis, and revisited the notion of modernism in relation to the writer’s practice and thematics.<sup>2</sup> The present volume would like to complement these new forays into Faulknerian territory by proposing additional perspectives and readings for the collective reassessment of “Faulkner at fifty.”

We wish to pursue companion goals by both considering further issues and giving a European tonality to some of the axes examined during the *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* conference which was held in Oxford, Mississippi in July 2012 on the theme of “Fifty Years After Faulkner.” Our individual topics have been chosen accordingly, as the *Table of Contents* reveals. However, we share one common inspiration as readers, scholars and teachers who have a multi-layered engagement with Faulkner. The question of the relevance of reading Faulkner arises again today, as it has in other forums, places and times: the interrogation “Why Faulkner?”,

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance *The Faulkner Journal* 26.2 (Fall 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *The Faulkner Journal* 26.1 (Spring 2012).

raised by Stephan Hahn and Robert W. Hamblin's 2001 *Teaching Faulkner: Approaches and Methods* might be actualized by the question we would like to raise in 2014: "Why Faulkner now?"<sup>3</sup>

Unlike in the US where Faulkner's position in the classroom has been challenged<sup>4</sup>, the American writer is still widely revered and canonized in Europe. Faulkner has been part of a European cultural enterprise for quite some time—the token of literary sophistication and the emblem of a writer enmeshed in his paradoxes, whose life remains a kind of puzzle in relation to his work. However, knowledge of Faulkner's name in our classrooms can no longer be safely assumed and we often have to get to Faulkner obliquely (a very southern posture) via the topical issues he, as an artist, addressed more than fifty years ago, in a proleptic—and prophetic—manner.

In the aforementioned volume, Christopher LaLonde notes that "the classroom has the potential to be a betwixt-and-between space enabling both articulation and interrogation to occur..."; he also underlines "the classroom's liminality."<sup>5</sup> As teachers, our responsibility is to unseat the students from their comfortable (passive) role, "to trip them up" as LaLonde writes<sup>6</sup> in order for transformation and interrogation to take place. How can Faulkner and his *oeuvre*—the relentless questioning that he enacts—inspire and guide us today? How can we be both tutors and tyros of his work? How can Faulkner's work be kept current in the classroom—be it in America, Europe or anywhere else? Our common cultural upheavals and shifts might draw the contours of another sketch for a global Faulkner.

In the liminality of the classroom, the questions of identity formation and negotiation at stake in Faulkner's fiction take on additional dimensions because of the diversity of the student body in terms of their reading practices; students show contrasting ways of dealing with the

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<sup>3</sup> Stephan Hahn and Robert W. Hamblin, eds., *Teaching Faulkner: Approaches and Methods* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> In his essay "'No Longer at Ease Here': Faulkner in the New Millennium," Philip M. Weinstein writes: "Faulkner's international reputation has probably never been higher. Yet he is in trouble in the American 'academy'—in the classroom as well as the scholarly journals—and not just because the Modern Language Association has refused (for over a decade) to grant him privileged author status at its annual conference" (*ibid.*, 19). Weinstein adds that Toni Morrison's works (such as *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved*) have replaced Faulkner's works (such as *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*) "on the syllabus of today's American literature course" (*ibid.*, 24).

<sup>5</sup> "The Drama of Teaching *Requiem for a Nun*," *Teaching Faulkner*, 174.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

challenges that they are ready to take on by virtue of an implicit reading contract which has now come under attack in the wake of the advent of electronic books and other digital media. We can no longer assume that they understand these challenges as transformative. In a classroom where interaction with a computer has often replaced face to face (peer to peer) interaction, the heuristics of teaching Faulkner have changed. Instead of proposing readings and protocols of reading, we would like to share a few thoughts on our task as conveyors (*passeurs*) of what we could call a Faulkner culture—a culture in which challenges have to be accepted, appreciated and valued.

Let us consider some of the reasons why we should (must?) keep on reading and bringing Faulkner to our classrooms—and bringing students to Faulkner. Our audience of digital natives enthralled with new forms of bondage might have something to gain by reading Faulkner indeed.

First and foremost, perhaps, Faulkner teaches us to read in a cultural and societal environment that undermines words and their richness or diversity, along with their ability to convey meaning. Faulkner's narration offers a much-needed pedagogy while tutoring us into retrieving neglected reading practices. "The immediate illegibility of formal innovation" in Weinstein's words<sup>7</sup> is an obstacle that readers have to contend with. The very unreadability of the Faulknerian text can be perceived as a symptom of our confusion and helplessness to make sense of the world.<sup>8</sup> One way to make the students engage with the modernist difficulty of Faulkner's work is to show how the lack of a center and authority, and the lack of a sense of chronology, reprise the contemporary experience of being in the world. The question of fragmentation is tied to the heuristics of reconstructing wholeness out of a fragmented, diffracted reality. Faulkner's portemanteau words and idiosyncratic narrative forms resonate with the students' own texting and blogging practices; writing often turns into performative expression in progress, orality pervades the written form. The places of the senses in Faulkner's fiction could lead us to reconsider Walter Ong's take on the *sensorium* and on the overall place of the senses as gateways to knowledge.

Reading thus involves training, practising, and rehearsing our very identity construction. Faulkner's work intrigues its readers because of its capacity to narrate individual behavior and construction in times of deep

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<sup>7</sup> Weinstein, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Teaching *As I Lay Dying* with its recently released film version, for example, is a wonderful foray into the cognitive demands of hermeneutics and meaning—of being, therefore.

cognitive and anthropological changes in the wake of New Information Technology and Social Networks. It bespeaks the desire to write one's world into a coherent story, reading one's life and story for others—for others *to see*, even. Quentin's failure to make sense of himself and others exemplifies the contemporary "human condition" in Malraux's famous words.

Of the list of Faulkner's topics and methods drawn up by Weinstein, which ones would we take up, expand on, and adapt?<sup>9</sup> We would certainly add issues of boundaries and categories to the more traditional modes of inquiry along the lines of race, class and gender. Today's students are quick to underline the subaltern role of women and black characters or their absence in Faulkner's fiction, which leads to invigorating debates about margins, power and agency. Faulkner's fiction is thus reappropriated as a way to discuss forms of ostracizing and acceptance, otherness and belonging, in a context which is theirs: virtual identities are created and exposed online, renegotiated, redefined, denied, sometimes silenced or extolled, articulated or repressed. Another promising axis in an age of "profiles" would indeed consider roles and role playing in Faulkner's fiction which is indeed embedded in and framed by issues of cultural identity: How does one negotiate one's position in one's culture?<sup>10</sup> For instance, Faulkner tutors us into the topical question of negotiating one's subjectivity and identity in a world where the very notion of private and public spaces is completely redefined by social networks and the use of the Internet. However, nowadays, issues of cultural identity have perhaps been superseded by issues of individual (struggling) identity in a rapidly changing world. A world in which the expression of the weight of the community (the communal "we" of the short story "A Rose for Emily" for example) takes on additional meaning and scope. The community of readers and bloggers is characterized by its ability to navigate between the codes of the group, in the careful balance of the play between the "we" and the "they" of the famous short story. The Faulknerian inquiry into the dialectics of the community and the individual therefore resonates with contemporary imperatives to negotiate one's collective story as a member of a group whose identity is based on a communal acceptance which can be withdrawn in sometimes arbitrary and abrupt ways, with devastating consequences. To the traditional issue of what Weinstein calls "Faulkner's

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<sup>9</sup> "His topics (isolation, heartbreak, projects that founder, failed inheritance, wounds that do not heal) and his methods (refusal of conventional formulae of character behavior and authorial purposes)..." (Weinstein, 22).

<sup>10</sup> See Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber's article "'The Sum of Your Ancestry': Cultural Context and *Intruder in the Dust*," *Teaching Faulkner*, 163-170.

signature theme of [...] murderous scapegoating”<sup>11</sup> we could supplement the issue of digital scapegoating and hazing.

Moreover, the Faulknerian inquiry into what it means to be disenfranchised guides us into exploring how being disenfranchised has taken on not just a political meaning but an economic one as well. New forms of bondage have been developing along with new forms of power and submission. Faulkner tutors us into articulating our alienation from home in a world where questions of one’s native values are triggered in urgent and powerful ways. As Natasha Trethewey points out in a recent interview, the word “native” first refers to “someone born into the condition of servitude, a thrall.”<sup>12</sup> To look at one’s native dimension is therefore to discover and grasp what binds us. In addition, Faulkner’s work indirectly compels us to deal with the deliberate erasure of some other person’s history or the rewriting of other (his)stories.

In a world that is also characterized by a sense of fracture and rupture of the underpinnings of economic justice and ecological balance, “something awry” to use Weinstein’s image<sup>13</sup>, has indeed taken place in our time in a grotesque rehearsal of the crisis shaping Faulkner’s tale of gloom and doom. Such on-going “imagination of disaster” (*imaginaire du désastre*), to apply Maurice Blanchot’s image to another context, pervades recent work by contemporary writers (sometimes labeled “Faulknerian”) such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* which can be read as a parable of contemporary America instead of simply a post-apocalyptic world. The power of the novel is precisely tied to our shock at recognizing ourselves in the fictional mirror.<sup>14</sup> Such questionings underlie other compelling work done by contemporary gothic fiction and film (in particular with the figures of the vampire and the zombie)<sup>15</sup> and very recent Science Fiction.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Weinstein, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Trethewey indicates: “I was finishing *Native Guard* and looking in the *OED* at the word ‘native,’ and I was surprised that the first definition was not what I expected—not someone who’s a native of Mississippi, or a native plant. What came first was ‘someone born into the condition of servitude, a thrall’; so the word ‘native’ in my title *Native Guard* gave me the word ‘thrall’ in my next book.” “‘The Larger Stage of These United States’: Creativity Conversation with Natasha Trethewey and Rosemary Magee,” *The Southern Quarterly* 50.4 (Summer 2013): 23.

<sup>13</sup> Weinstein, 20.

<sup>14</sup> See Léo Daguet and Marie Liénard-Yeterian, “*La Route de Cormac McCarthy: Une apocalypse de l’horreur*,” *Etudes* 4186 (juin 2013): 797-808.

<sup>15</sup> See Tim Burton’s film *Dark Shadows* (2012) and Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014), for example. For a further exploration of these issues, see

Students are quick to recognize this and acquiesce; they should get credit for their honesty in handling a mode of the Faulknerian “unworkable” as Weinstein suggestively writes.

Lastly, reading Faulkner has something to say about our very modern experience as city dwellers. The recent issue of *The Faulkner Journal* devoted to the topic of “Faulkner and the Metropolis” proposes groundbreaking insights into Faulkner’s handling of the urban experience (and of cosmopolitanism). Our contemporary imaginary world pervaded by the city experience as movement, flux, and rapid change might find common ground with the Faulknerian work’s own encounter with the metropolis. As Peter Lurie suggests, “We might assert simply that his writing’s formal complexity—its insistence on fragmentation, point of view, subjectivism, verbal density or stylization, and interior monologue—bears the traces of cosmopolitan and metropolitan literary practices into Faulkner’s rural and small town realm.”<sup>17</sup>

If “Faulkner tells the twentieth-century story, in myriad ways, of the lost homeland, the disenfranchised white son,”<sup>18</sup> what is the twenty-first century story? A story of displacement? A story of crisis? A story of bondage?<sup>19</sup> Faulkner is indeed a “diagnostic novelist.”<sup>20</sup> What kind of diagnostic novelist would he be today? Would he tell about the demise of

Agnieszka Soltysik and Marie Liénard-Yeterian, eds., upcoming 2014 issue of *Gothic Studies*.

<sup>16</sup> See for example *Science Fiction Studies* 39.138 (November 2012).

<sup>17</sup> In his introduction to the special issue “Faulkner and the Metropolis,” *The Faulkner Journal* 26.1 (Spring 2012): 12.

<sup>18</sup> Weinstein, 24.

<sup>19</sup> New forms of enslavement have appeared on an unprecedented scale through the handling of labor in a capitalistic world which has led to widespread forms of human trafficking. Recent scholarship has touched on these issues. See for example Rebecca E. Biron “It’s a Living: Hit Men in the Mexican Narco War,” *PMLA* Vol.127.4 (October 2012): 820-834. See also the recent movie *The Counselor* (with a powerful script written by Cormac McCarthy) and its presentation of drug cartels as synecdoches for new forms of bondage. In fiction, see James Lee Burke’s *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* and the dialogues between the ghost of General John Bell Hood and Dave Robichoux, in particular when Dave describes contemporary forms of evil: “The times you lived in were different, General. This afternoon I watched a film that showed young women being beaten and tortured, perhaps even killed, by sadists and degenerates. This stuff is sold in stores and shown in public theaters. The sonsofbitches who make it are seldom arrested unless they get nailed in a mail sting”; the General admits: “I’m not quite sure I follow all your allusions...” James Lee Burke, *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* (London: Orion, 1993), 317.

<sup>20</sup> Weinstein, 21.



patriarchy and its order? New roles for fathers? New definitions of masculinity? The “drama of father and sons out of touch or at each other’s throats,” to use Weinstein’s powerful image, is more relevant than ever and has, like in Faulkner’s time, both a private/individual/familial and a public/collective/ (inter)national dimension. What he called the “Compton paralysis”<sup>21</sup> can be construed today as the helplessness felt by individuals in the increasingly complex world described above. Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha might thus offer another trope for considering the lack of agency felt by some disempowered individuals in the face of corporate greed, or the fatal competition of relentless powers in the arena of financial empires which “contain” (*contenir*) forms of raw violence, as Jean-Pierre Dupuy indicates, but are no less violent.<sup>22</sup> The twenty-first century is thus showing how Faulkner’s fiction can be dislodged from its traditional moorings, dislocated and put in movement, transformed and tutored into new meanings and significance.

As Linda Wagner-Martin points out in her introduction to *William Faulkner: Six Decades of Criticism*, “William Faulkner is the twentieth century novelist to be reckoned with: he must be studied, his greatness must be acknowledged, his influence must be allowed.”<sup>23</sup> The articles that make up this volume follow Wagner-Martin’s triadic goal in her own collection. Divided into three parts, this collection first focuses on ways of teaching Faulkner and then endeavors to show how the Mississippi writer made use of his knowledge of other writers to give shape to his craft and later help others. The last section puts Faulkner into perspective by bringing together new ways of reading his works and new voices that echo his.

The essays that make up the “Teaching Faulkner” section present means of making Faulkner available to students. Ineke Bockting shows how cognitive science can be brought into play to overcome the difficulty of teaching *The Sound and the Fury*. She explains that by encouraging the students to feel empathy for Benjy, they realize what his world revolves around. Once they have gone beyond the feeling, they can grasp the full meaning of the novel. Frédérique Spill’s contribution focuses on her

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<sup>21</sup> Weinstein, 24.

<sup>22</sup> The recent movie by Martin Scorsese *The Wolf of Wall Street* tells, in the grotesque mode, the tall-tale of unspeakable violence made trivial, normal and desired in a perverse twist of the American ideals of self-fulfilment, achievement and success. The story of how a dream can turn into a nightmare....

<sup>23</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *William Faulkner: Six Decades of Criticism* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), viii.

experience of analyzing “Dry September” with her students. Through a close reading of each section through the prisms of class, gender and race, Spill offers various keys to open the doors the story keeps closing. Each subsequent reading, she contends, takes the reading experience further by challenging previous (mis)conceptions. Likewise, Lara Delage-Toriel suggests how useful it is to encourage students to formulate their own opinion about the text she had assigned them: *Sanctuary*. Although she admits that *Sanctuary* can be a difficult read for students whose native language is not English, she argues that it is more accessible than any other Faulkner work. She offers stimulating questions about the text and confirms that the act of reading should be an act of questioning, for the words, once on the page, are still moving in many ways, in many directions, thus making it possible for any reader to be moved on their own terms. After presenting the publication history of Faulkner’s work in the Czech Republic, Hana Ulmanová introduces her own pedagogical approach to the texts. Like Ineke Bockting, she resorts to psychology, but her goal is to show her students how modernism came into being. Once they have grasped the concept, it is easier to explain why the plots are not presented chronologically and why this gives them force. She then discusses the interplay of race and performance in *Light in August*, explaining that identity is an individual construct defined both by the inside and the outside. Using tragedy as a starting point to analyze not *Sanctuary*, as might be expected, but *Absalom, Absalom!*, Ulmanová focuses on the fall of the South through the characterization of Thomas Sutpen, which she also connects to the Czech context with which her students are familiar. She concludes her essay by reflecting on the importance of recent visits from scholars of the American South who, like her colleagues and herself, intend to make Faulkner as important in the Czech Republic as he is in the rest of the world.

The second section, devoted to “Mentor and Mentees,” includes two essays on Faulkner’s work as a screenwriter and the complex relationship the writer had with cinema as both industry and artistic language. Marie Liénard-Yeterian, who has already published a book on Faulkner and cinema in French<sup>24</sup>, focuses on Faulkner’s friendship with Howard Hawks before discussing the various dimensions of their fruitful collaboration. Bruce F. Kavin provides learned readers with an update of his 1977 book *Faulkner and Film*. He concentrates on adaptations of Faulkner works that have been released since the publication of his ground-breaking study, up to the

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<sup>24</sup> *Faulkner et le cinéma* (Paris: Michel Houdiard Editeur, 2010).

most recent film version of *As I Lay Dying* directed by James Falco<sup>25</sup>, and assesses their success or failure in providing a fair treatment of Faulkner's style. His article is followed by a detailed bibliography of the publications that have come out on Faulkner and film that will undeniably be useful to anyone looking into that field. The next three contributions deal more specifically with literary mentorship. In her thoroughly researched essay, Suzanne Bray traces the intertextual references to be found in Faulkner's detective fiction, focusing particularly on *Knight's Gambit*; she perceives various influences on his work, the most important being that of Virginian author Melville Davisson Post through his Abner stories and publications in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Bray also notes a number of connections between Faulkner, Dorothy L. Sayers and E.C. Bentley, which make it possible to see how the Mississippian integrated his knowledge of classic crime fiction and theory into his own writing. Jacques Pothier's contribution centers on the Latin American and Spanish influences on Faulkner, assessing the presence of the baroque in his work and the various excesses of language that make his style so singular. Pothier underlines the significance of convoluted sentences in the shaping of character traits—he shows that the complexities of the world in which they inhabit are mirrored in the language that is used to describe it. What can be found on the margin should thus always be used to analyze the center. Knowing what Faulkner learned from Latin America and Spain enables the reader to see how his craft evolved and how Yoknapatawpha was constructed. Unlike Bray and Pothier, Gérald Préher does not tackle outside influences on Faulkner but Faulkner's influence on Joan Williams, a writer he meant to shape as an artist produces a sculpture. Using the extensive correspondence between Faulkner and Williams as a starting point, Préher shows how much Faulkner was involved at the beginning of Williams's career—advising her on how to plot a story and create characters. Analyzing Williams's debut novel, *The Morning and the Evening*, Préher goes on to present the writer's borrowings from her mentor in her depiction of an idiot character.

The four essays in the last section put Faulkner's fiction into perspective. François Pitavy analyzes "Golden Land," a short story Faulkner wrote during his years in Hollywood, emphasizing the writer's critical stance on the American spirit. Pitavy reads the story as both a tale

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<sup>25</sup> In France, a website was designed especially to accompany the film. Frédérique Spill gave an in-depth interview on the adaptation, which can help teachers in their endeavor to analyze it together with the novel. See <<http://www.zerodeconduite.net/asilaydying/entretien.html>> (accessed on February 14, 2014).

about the West and a reflection on corruption in Hollywood. Focusing primarily on *Absalom, Absalom!*, Nicole Moulinoux demonstrates that reading Faulkner in the twenty-first century is even more stimulating than it was when his books first came out because scholarly work has made it possible to perceive more facets of his “little Postage Stamp of Native Soil”. Using old and new criticism, Moulinoux confirms the points made by the authors of the essays: Faulkner’s texts are forever on the move, they might resist the reader at first, but ultimately some form of meaning emerges and it becomes clear that the ideas they present are relevant to any era. Françoise Buisson concurs with Moulinoux in her reading of Faulkner and Pierre Bergounioux. By choosing a contemporary writer who has often discussed Faulkner and acknowledged his influence, she shows that Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha has universal qualities—the humanity of its people speaks beyond the boundaries of the region. The final essay, by Beatrix Pernelle, reads Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* through the eyes of a Melville scholar. Using Derrida’s theories, she underlines Faulkner’s debt to Melville’s *Moby Dick* and provides a detailed reading of both works that leads her to see *The Sound and the Fury* as “a pre-modern novel”.

This collection brings together new readings of Faulkner that are meant to show that the circle of his “friends” is forever growing and that his influence will remain at work on both sides of the Atlantic. His legacy will surely last, for no matter where and when he is read, the message remains the same: “To uplift man’s heart; the same for all of us: for the ones who are trying to be artists, the ones who are trying to write simple entertainment, the ones who write to shock, and the ones who are simply escaping themselves and their own private anguishes.”<sup>26</sup>

Our goal in this volume was not so much to do comparative work<sup>27</sup> as to track down actual Faulknerian resonances, legacies and connections with and in other texts—to establish a Faulkner “lineage” to use an image cherished by the author. Such an exploration helps us grasp the meaning of what Homi Bhabha called “the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense cultural locations”<sup>28</sup> that

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<sup>26</sup> William Faulkner, “Foreword to *The Faulkner Reader*” (1954), *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, ed., James B. Meriwether (1965; New York: The Modern Library, 2004), 181.

<sup>27</sup> Unlike for instance the article by Catarina Edinger titled “‘Words That Don’t Fit’: *As I Lay Dying* and Graciliano Ramos’s *Barren Lives*,” *Teaching Faulkner*, 73-83.

<sup>28</sup> *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 299.

characterize the national spaces through their exposure to, or “rubbing against” (*frottement*), to use Montaigne’s famous image in his *Essays*, the contemporary cosmos which is no longer quite our own.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Montaigne invites the reader to “rub his brain against the other’s brain” (*frotter sa cervelle à celle d’autrui*).



**PART I:**  
**TEACHING FAULKNER**





TEACHING THE UNTEACHABLE:  
WILLIAM FAULKNER'S  
*THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

INEKE BOCKTING

When I thought of the title for this article, I had only one idea in mind as far as the term *unteachable* is concerned: that the writing itself is too difficult for students to follow and too hard to comprehend and thus the text impossible to teach. As for the content, I did not think that it could be unteachable. But several people alerted me to this second issue, which is also evoked in scholarly work on the teaching of Faulkner in general, and *The Sound and the Fury* in particular.

In the journal *Teaching Faulkner*, published by the *Center for Faulkner Studies* at Southeast Missouri State University<sup>1</sup>, for instance, one teacher advises those who “face resistance to Faulkner from administrators, community members or groups, parents, or other teachers because of his use of sex and violence and racial language” that they can “find suitable literature by Faulkner that does not contain these issues.”<sup>2</sup> That, of course, would eliminate the subject of this investigation right there and then. Similarly, Chris Bradley writes, “some teachers will no doubt wonder about problems in dealing with mature subject matter in the novel,” but adds “each teacher, I think, knows the community in which he or she teaches and can steer discussion away from potentially troublesome topics.”<sup>3</sup> In the MLA publication *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury*, Anthony Barthelemy, on the other hand, confronts “the potentially hostile questions about race and racism in Faulkner's fiction” and shares with his readers, in the words of Veronica Makowsky,

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<sup>1</sup> This journal came out of the “Teaching Faulkner” sessions of the Annual *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference* at the University of Mississippi in Oxford held since 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Richard S. Turner, “Teaching William Faulkner in High School Advanced Placement Classrooms,” *Teaching Faulkner* 21 (Fall 2003): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Bradley, “Activities for Teaching *The Sound and the Fury* to High School Students,” *Teaching Faulkner* 8 (Fall 1995): 2.

“his strategies for dealing with Faulkner’s use of the word ‘nigger.’”<sup>4</sup>

A lot depends, I think, on the age of the students. If *The Sound and the Fury* is often taught in high school in the United States, in France we cannot normally expect the student’s level of English to be good enough until the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year of university, when they are mature enough, also, to be confronted with “mature subject matter” and have learned the basic principles of narratology, so that they can be supposed to be able to distinguish between the author, the narrator and the speaking characters where issues like the usage of the word *nigger* are concerned. Thus they are less likely to accuse Faulkner of the racism of his characters.

But the journal *Teaching Faulkner*, mentioned before, has a bearing on my primary question, the difficulty of the text, as well. Some “teaching tips” found here are fascinating, although difficult to execute with the large groups of third-year students I teach, as well with as the limited time I have. Judy Gear, from San Diego, California, for instance, writes:

Have each student, in advance, write four short memories of his or her childhood (one page each, one side of paper only). During class, pass out scissors and large construction paper and ask students to cut up their four stories into random lengths, mix up the segments, then paste them on a large paper. Have students exchange stories; read some aloud. Students will note how, in each case, they can hear the four separate tales and understand them. Relate to Faulkner’s handling of time and action.<sup>5</sup>

Several other teachers of *The Sound and the Fury* recommend role-play<sup>6</sup>, art work or creative writing exercises. Judy Gear, for instance, suggests illustrating with poster paint and from four different points of view, a scene chosen from Benjy’s or Quentin’s sections, then cutting up the painting and rearranging it “into some new, symbolic shape.” These artworks are then taped to the wall and discussed.<sup>7</sup> She also asks her students to link up scenes from Benjy’s or Quentin’s sections with artwork of Faulkner’s period, often French art, because she reminds them “that

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<sup>4</sup> Veronica Makowsky, “An Advance Review: MLA Volume on Faulkner,” *Teaching Faulkner* 9 (Spring 1996): 1.

<sup>5</sup> Judy Gear, “Teaching Tip *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Teaching Faulkner* 1 (Spring 1992): 3.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Thomas Bonner, Jr., “A Role Playing Exercise to Introduce Students to Strategies in the Reading of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Teaching Faulkner* 1 (Spring 1992): 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Judy Gear, “Ideas for Teaching *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Teaching Faulkner* 15 (Fall 1999): 10.

Faulkner spent some time in Paris during the 1920s.”<sup>8</sup> Chris Bradley, as another example, has his students “draw caricatures of at least three or four major characters in the book” and asks them to “construct a table-top village or a detailed map of Jefferson, Mississippi or of the Compson homestead.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, he gives his students writing assignments such as the following:

Imagine you are Benjy. Employing Faulkner’s techniques, write a description of being committed to the asylum in Jackson after Mrs. Compson’s death. Maintain an appropriate and consistent style.<sup>10</sup>

An important question for teachers, meanwhile, is whether students should be given any direct information on the novel before starting it or not. In *Approaches to Teaching Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury*, the essays tend, as Veronica Makowsky puts it, “to divide along this question: to prepare or not to prepare students for their first encounter with *The Sound and the Fury*.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many contributors to this volume give students genealogies and chronologies, as well as articles that offer methods and interpretations, while others, such as John T. Matthews, on the contrary, allow for “the thrill of the outraged amazement that the first page produces in the first-time reader.”<sup>12</sup> This is, in principle, the method that I prefer using, with the understanding that I like to frame this “thrill” somewhat. I guess it is the content of this rather vague word “somewhat” that is my subject here.

After assigning to the students the first ten pages of the novel, which can function as some sort of introduction to it, my teaching approach starts with endeavoring to give an answer to the question that is caused by the “outraged amazement”—with or without accompanying “thrill”—that John Matthews mentions. Indeed, teaching the novel to English majors in Holland, Norway and France, I have always been asked the same thing: why does Faulkner make the story so hard to read, why is the choice of words so bizarre, the syntax so convoluted and the situation in time and space so complex. To this question I have, over the years, come to answer: because he wants to create empathy with the characters. He wants you to

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<sup>8</sup> Judy Gear, “Suggestions for Teaching *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Teaching Faulkner* 20 (Fall 2002): 10.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Bradley, “Activities for Teaching *The Sound and the Fury* to High School Students,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Veronica Makowsky, “An Advance Review: MLA Volume on Faulkner,” 1.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

be as desperate as they are—that is why I avoid explaining anything beforehand; he wants you to feel as deserted, as lost as they do. In fact, he is testing your *Theory of Mind* and soliciting it to the fullest, expanding it beyond its everyday use.

Here I take time to give students a clear understanding of the term *Theory of Mind* or *empathy*. I tell them that in psychology a distinction is made between two types of empathy: a passive and an active one. The first concerns the ability to recognize that the other is a human being capable of the same feelings that I have, while the second type is of a more complex nature as it presupposes an active putting oneself into the shoes of the other and viewing the world from the position of this other. While the passive type must be seen in close relation to sympathy, which presumes that one's emotions are shared by the other, it is the active type that I will call empathy: a concern for the other's experience and emotions that presupposes what Kaja Silverman calls a "heteropathic identification," versus the "idiopathic" orientation of sympathy, where the self is point of reference.<sup>13</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of neuroscience at Cambridge University, defines this active, or heteropathic, empathy as the human capacity to, first, "identify what someone else is thinking or feeling"—which he calls *cognitive empathy* or *Theory of Mind*—and then "to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion," a capacity to which he refers as *emotional empathy*.<sup>14</sup>

The stepping into the shoes of someone else that empathy represents is not an unusual phenomenon<sup>15</sup>; we all learn it to a certain extent in our early youth and ideally extend it throughout our lives as we meet a variety of different people. Faulkner's text is just more challenging in this respect than what our everyday experience can teach us, asking us to feel empathy for people we are not likely to meet in our everyday life.

I explain to the students then that empathy is studied very seriously these days, using the most sophisticated *Multi Voxel Pattern Analysis* of

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<sup>13</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 26.

<sup>14</sup> See Simon Baron-Cohen, Alan M. Leslie and Uta Frith, "Does the Autistic Child have a 'Theory of Mind'?" *Cognition* 21(1985): 12.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, in his majestic work *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Vintage, 1980), expresses it, in computer terms, as follows: "I can fire up my subsystem for a good friend and virtually feel myself in his shoes, running through thoughts which he might have, activating symbols in sequences which reflect his thinking patterns more accurately than my own" (386).

different brain areas.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, neurologists and neuro-psychiatrists, these days, are making great advantages in the study of the neurological stratum of empathy. They have discovered that it involves the small muscles of the face, which mimic the facial expressions of others, and certain cells in the center of our brain—the amygdala—that are known as the so-called *mirror-neurons*.<sup>17</sup>

In connection with many other parts of the brain, these mirror neurons make it possible for us to “feel” the feelings of others. So this research is also creating a more profound knowledge of what can disturb the development of empathy, mainly structural abnormalities and chemical dysfunctioning of the brain areas involved. This concerns neurological and psychiatric afflictions, such as autism and psychopathy, but also problems with the minute musculature of the face as a result of facial scars<sup>18</sup>, even Botox treatment and the overlong usage of pacifiers in children, which all

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance J.D. Haynes *et al.*, “Decoding Mental States from Brain Activity in Humans,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 7.7 (2006): 523-534.

<sup>17</sup> The Italian neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese is the one who first used the term *mirror-neurons* to refer to cells in the brain of a monkey that reacted to another monkey’s action by mirroring its brain activity. From this observation, Gallese arrived at a new model of intersubjectivity. See for instance Vittorio Gallese and Alvin Goldman, “Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind-Reading,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2.12 (December 1998): 493-501; V. Gallese, “The ‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis from Mirror Neurons to Empathy,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8.5-7 (2001): 33-50; V. Gallese, “The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity,” *Psychopathology* 36 (2003): 171-180; or, D. Freedberg and V. Gallese, “Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11.5 (May 2007): 107-203. The approach finds its philosophical roots in the work of Merleau-Ponty, especially in the embodied approach to knowledge. As Karin Badt, who recently interviewed Gallese for the *Huffington Post*, reports: “for the French thinker Merleau-Ponty—taking inspiration himself from Husserl, Sartre and Bergson—one can only know the world through the body. In anything we are doing—whether walking on the beach or speaking to someone or studying a monkey—one is a body responding to another body. The relation is perpetually circular: a reciprocity of body to body. That is our phenomenological relation to the world, you can’t get around it.” (Karin Badt, “Mirror Neurons and Why We Love Cinema: A Conversation with Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra in Parma,” *Huff Post SCIENCE* (June 28, 2013), <[huffingtonpost.com/news/vittorio-gallese](http://huffingtonpost.com/news/vittorio-gallese)>. Accessed on September 12, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> My article “If History had been Different: Empathy and Compassion in Larry Brown’s *Dirty Work*” discusses this aspect in a Vietnam veteran whose face has been totally destroyed. (<[univ\\_lehavre.fr/article\\_hors\\_theme\\_1\\_empathy\\_and-compassion\\_2](http://univ_lehavre.fr/article_hors_theme_1_empathy_and-compassion_2)>, accessed on September 19, 2013).

prevent the small muscles of the face to perform their mimicking tasks.<sup>19</sup> On the experience side of things, social isolation, that is, a diminished possibility of children to meet a variety of other people, may also result in a less developed “mind-reading ability,” to take over the term that Lisa Zunshine uses in her book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*.<sup>20</sup> The same may be the case if a child is reared by parents that are particularly “cold,” that is, parents who have trouble showing emotions that the small facial muscles of their children can copy.

It is here that cognitive philosophy and cognitive approaches to literature come in. Indeed, I explain to the students that the brain scans mentioned before have shown how the small muscles of our face, so important for the creation of empathy, not only work when we perceive the feelings of others but even when we only imagine perceiving them. Thus imagined others can take the place of real ones as far as the development of empathy is concerned—something that was already known to Abraham Lincoln when he called Harriet Beecher Stowe “the little lady who started this great war [the American Civil War].”

But, as the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued, it is extremely curious, and disheartening, that just when we have sophisticated scientific methods to show how reading texts calls for the creation of empathy in the same way as direct experience does, and we thus have scientific proof of the importance of literature—something Lincoln surely never imagined—humanities departments, especially in Europe, are being dismantled for lack of economic priority. In her work *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Nussbaum clearly takes a position, setting out to defend these departments, which she sees as crucial for the teaching of the ability to imaginatively understand what she calls “the predicament of another person.”<sup>21</sup> This, obviously, is where the creative capacities of a great writer like Faulkner come in, especially his ability to

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<sup>19</sup> Paula M. Niedenthal *et al.* found that at the age of 6 to 7 children who used pacifiers were less good at imitating facial expressions while at the age of 19 they were less emphatic. See Paula M. Niedenthal, *et al.* “Negative Relations between Pacifiers and Emotional Competence,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 5 (October 2012): 387-394.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 47. See also Patrick Colm Hogan, especially chapter 6, “The Reader: How Literature Makes Us Feel.”

<sup>21</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 7.