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William Faulkner : le père du texte

Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, September 27-28, 2019

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William Faulkner : le père du texte

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Link to conference program:

<https://faulkneramiens.wordpress.com/schedule-programme/>

- 1 The international conference “The Father of the Text’: Continuities and Ruptures of Faulkner’s Legacy in Contemporary Literatures” was organized by Frédérique Spill and Solveig Dunkel from EA4295 CORPUS (Université de Picardie Jules Verne). It took place in Amiens on September 27-28, 2019. The title of the conference, borrowed from the 1999 essay “Le père du texte” by Pierre Michon, set the tone: the purpose of those two days of discussion was to examine the various forms taken by William Faulkner’s impressive legacy. In her introduction to the conference, Frédérique Spill mentioned the considerable impact Faulkner has had on many readers, sometimes encouraging them to become writers themselves. Despite Faulkner’s alleged desire to be “voided from history” (*Letter to Malcolm Cowley*, 126), he is one of the “fathers” of American literature and an indelible feature of the Southern heritage. The focus of the conference was primarily on his literary heirs – both those who explicitly recognized his influence, and those who repeatedly rejected it – but a few panelists also highlighted the author’s relation to visual arts, from drawing to film. Faulkner’s influence has been tremendous in the American South but it has spread beyond borders as well. The conference attracted an impressive international panel, with speakers from the United States, Japan, Germany, England and France, which is a good illustration of both the continuous relevance of Faulkner’s works and his worldwide appeal. The speakers ranged from renowned scholars in the field to PhD candidates.

September 27, 2019

- 2 The conference was preceded by a heartfelt homage to those who contributed to the popularity of Faulknerian studies in France: André Bleikasten, François Pitavy, Michel Gresset and Nicole Moulinoux.

Keynote Address 1

- 3 **Randall Wilhelm** (Anderson University, USA) opened the conference with the first keynote address, “Rupturing the Plantation South: Silhouettes and Slavery in the Work of William Faulkner and Kara Walker.” He argued that both Faulkner and Walker are deeply aware of the symbolic importance of the silhouette, which he called “a fantasy of a race-blind America.” Silhouettes, despite their blackness, *speaks* white. Wilhelm first analyzed the racialized use of silhouettes in Faulkner’s illustrations for his play *Marionettes*, in which Pierrot – Faulkner’s alter ego – is pictured as a little black man. Silhouetting is later adapted in Faulkner’s works as a narrative strategy and a space of both masking and unmasking. Wilhelm then discussed Kara Walker’s provocative appropriation of the silhouette as an entry point to murder, sexual abuse and depravity in plantations. In her works, silhouetting allows for new forms of body merging between black and white. Walker’s use of silhouettes as a denunciation of the appropriation of black female bodies by white men shed new light on Faulkner’s novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* or on the more conservative *The Unvanquished*. This thought-provoking paper gave rise to a lively discussion around occurrences of silhouettes in other works, Faulkner’s move from the visual to the literary, and the potential of an analysis of queer contact zones in his works.

Panel 1: Haunting Violence in the Faulknerian Heritage

- 4 The first panel was opened by **Jacques Pothier**’s (University of Versailles Saint-Quentin, France) paper “Figures of Violence: Overpowering Fathers and Faulkner’s ‘Father-Text’.” He drew parallels between Faulkner and the works of the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo and the French author Franck Bouysse. Pothier argued that Faulkner’s works, especially *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, provided Rulfo and Bouysse with thematic and narrative strategies, enabling them to focus their attention on the victims of patriarchal, classist systems. Both Rulfo and Bouysse set their stories (*Pedro Paramo* and *Né d’aucune femme*) in rural settings where violence and dysfunctional fathers prevail. Pothier concluded that Faulknerian-inspired narrative techniques, such as shifting perspectives and sophisticated timelines, allow the reader to share the fate of the weak and the disenfranchised as they recover an improbable dignity, as in Camus’s *The Stranger*.
- 5 **Solveig Dunkel** (University of Picardie-Jules Verne, France) followed up with a paper titled “William Faulkner and Toni Morrison’s Verbose Corpses,” in which she discussed the past’s hold onto the present in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Morrison’s *Beloved* through a reflection on female bodies and spectral voices. She highlighted the influence of the characterization of Addie Bundren upon *Beloved*: both are “highly vocable ghosts” (Morrison xi) whose haunting absent presences shape and transform the novels. Dunkel argued that those two female bodies intrude on the narrative and

are the impetus for textual production. Paradoxically, it is through corpses that the unspeakable can be voiced, be it the rejection of motherhood or the trauma of slavery and infanticide. She concluded her paper by emphasizing the different functions of the ghosts in each novel: if Addie's individual voice is eventually contained in her coffin and in her one chapter, *Beloved* pervades the whole story and comes to embody the suffering of "sixty million and more" (*ibid.* 1).

- 6 **Juliane Schallau** (Potsdam University, Germany) focused on the perpetrators, rather than the victims. In her paper, "Texts of the Sons: William Faulkner, Günter Grass, and the Narration of Guilt," she analyzed the relationships between the sons of violent fathers and the crimes committed by slaveholders and Nazis, and the necessary experience of guilt. She drew a parallel between Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and Grass' Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*: both try to escape time and their burdened pasts by rejecting clocks, confusing time with the instrument that measures it. They choose opposite strategies: Oskar decrees that he will not grow up but remain a child, whereas Quentin embraces suicide. Yet, they both fail to forget time, causing them to be frustrated, which highlights their impotence. They are unable to acknowledge guilt: Oskar cannot include himself in the "they" that are the Nazis, and Quentin famously asserts he does not hate the South at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Schallau concluded by stating that guilt is a temporal problem from which they cannot escape: it is the persistence of unacknowledged guilt that makes time unbearable.
- 7 The topic of the relationship between sons and violent fathers was carried on in **Astrid Maes's** (University of Picardie Jules Verne, France) paper, "Founding Fathers and Half-brothers: Navigating Family Bonds in Mixed-race Nations" in which she compared Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and the short story "Sons of the Conquistador" by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. She interpreted the stories as being rewritings of "foundational fictions," as defined by Doris Sommer, where the motif of interracial families prompts a reflection on racial mixing. Two sons, one white, one interracial, embody the dual legacy of an ambivalent father figure. If communication between the brothers is effective and highly productive in linguistic terms, the father constantly mediates the brotherly relationship and, in the end, his sins condemn the sons and the nation they represent as well. The two stories offer different reflections on racial mixing through their depiction of the last living heir in these dysfunctional interracial families: Jim Bond in *Absalom, Absalom!* and Martín 2 in Fuentes's story. Maes concluded her paper by suggesting that Edouard Glissant's concept of "créolisation" could explain the final confusion that the narrators experience towards racial mixing and provide an escape from strict racial categorization and mutual exclusion.
- 8 This panel prompted various questions about the presence of ghosts in Latin American literature and their similarities to Faulkner's ghosts; Benjy Compson's peculiar relation to time; the power of the individual to act on past mistakes; or the implications of thinking about nations in terms of families, to mention but a few.

Roundtable: "Faulkner Studies Now: International and Inter-Textual Perspectives"

- 9 The roundtable of the afternoon was introduced by Peter Lurie (Richmond University, USA) who celebrated the appeal of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, so unique to North Mississippi, yet made accessible to everyone by the author's elaborate prose.

- 10 **Susan Scott Parish's** (University of Michigan, USA) paper "Getting Familiar" opened the roundtable. She started her reflection on material legacy with a concrete example from "The Bear," where letters are unknowingly transmitted in the "burlap lump." She then highlighted the environmental degradation experienced by Faulkner in his time of industrialization, growing nuclear power and species extinction. The environmental trauma is understood today as a symptom of modern experience and part of the Anthropocene. Scott Parish put Faulkner in the eco-materialist tradition alongside Dewey, Whitehead and Bergson, as Faulkner was concerned with the state humankind would find itself in the near future, and therefore he experimented with new narrative forms to communicate this awareness, from the flood featured in "Old Man" to the depiction of the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses*. She concluded by analyzing how the reader is initiated into the woods in "The Bear" through the use of meandering sentences and ambiguous pronouns. To enter the wilderness with Ike, the reader has to relinquish linear inheritance in favor of familiarity.
- 11 **Ahmed Honeini's** (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK) paper, "Faulkner Across the Pond: Studying, Researching, and Teaching 'the Bard of Oxford' in Britain" proposed an overview of Faulknerian studies in the United Kingdom. He started by regretting that Faulkner is often absent from undergraduate programs in the UK: he is rarely taught alongside European modernists and is often relegated to the Southern Gothic school. To promote Faulknerian studies in the UK, Honeini founded the Faulkner Studies in the UK Research Network that he also directs; the Network organized several colloquia around Faulkner. Honeini presented his research's interests, mainly the Faulknerian obsession with death and mortality. Honeini is interested in exploring the traumas that death creates and how Faulkner's heroes are eventually brought to "saying yes to death." He concluded his talk with a personal, hopeful account of teaching Faulkner.
- 12 **Mary Knighton** (Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan) carried on with her paper entitled "Before and After Nagano, 1955: Reproducing Faulkner's Impotent Father." She started with Faulkner's visit to Japan in 1955, where he acted as both an emissary of the victorious United States and the representant of another defeated country, the South. The success of Faulkner's works in Japan took place in the specific context of the post-war period when Japan was forced to open to the world. This period saw the birth of the truly modern Japanese novel and a transition from Chinese to European and American influences. Knighton suggested that Faulkner inspired Japanese writers such as the *buraku* Nakagami Kenki to represent flawed human consciousness and to give voice to those who have been silenced because of their race or class. She argued that writers and filmmakers in Japan have taken inspiration from Faulknerian impotent fathers as a possible generative force: their outrage is a threat to society's status quo, but also a possibility to imagine a different kind of kinship, beyond the imperial, paternalistic family system.
- 13 **Frédérique Spill** (University of Picardy Jules Verne, France) followed up with her paper "France's Lasting Love Affair with Faulkner" where she examined the reasons behind the surprising presence of Faulkner in the French literary canon. She dated this "love affair" to Faulkner's stay in Paris in 1925. Soon after the publication of Faulkner's masterpieces in the United States, he was translated into French, through the impetus of Maurice Edgard Coindreau. Faulkner inspired many French philosophers, from Sartre in the 1940s to Claude Romano more recently, as well as internationally

renowned critics such as André Bleikasten. French writers, Claude Simon and Edouard Glissant among them, have felt the need to become essayists for Faulkner's sake. Spill concluded her talk by offering close readings of *Sanctuary* and *Light in August*, in order to explain the fascination exerted by Faulkner's remarkable prose on so many French intellectuals, including herself. This very personal approach to the writer's works struck a chord with the audience, whose presence at the conference spoke of their own love for Faulkner.

- 14 In his paper "Heirs-at-Large: Precarity and Salvage in the Post-Plantation Souths of Faulkner and Jesmyn Ward," **John T. Matthews** (Boston University, USA) concluded the roundtable with an in-depth reflection on the ongoing influence of slave economics. Matthews started with Faulkner's direct engagement with racial problematics in *Light in August*, which highlights by contrast its absence in *As I Lay Dying* or *The Sound and the Fury*. He argued that the absence of race in those books is symptomatic of a modern South intent on forgetting slavery, despite its still continuing to dictate the black and female conditions, as well as the cotton economy. New Capitalist Studies have shown the ongoing impact of post-plantation economics, which is depicted in contemporary literature such as Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. An analysis of Ward's book led Matthews to the concept of salvaging as a symbolic condition: as the representation of a persistent yet unacknowledged history of abuse, but also as a creative response, when repurposing is necessary for survival. The similarities between *Salvage the Bones* and *As I Lay Dying* eventually shed new light on the Bundrens' series of trials: the comparison highlights white obliviousness to the slave past, as the Bundrens are only concerned with their own misfortunes.

September 28, 2019

Panel 2: Intellectual and Topographical Heritages: Dialogues and Ruptures with Faulkner's Geographies

- 15 **Stéphanie Eyrolles Suchet** (Independent researcher) opened the second panel with her paper "Estrangement in Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe novels," where she discussed Richard Ford's unwilling debt to Faulkner and the South. After his first novel, set in the South, Ford attempted to escape the label of "Southern writer" by displacing his following novels to different geographical locations. However, his famous narrator, Frank Bascombe, cannot be completely free of the burden of the Southern past that he carries in his surname¹. Eyrolles Suchet argued that, like Quentin Compson, Frank has not managed to emancipate himself from racial prejudice, despite his claims to the contrary. She concluded her comparison by referring to Viktor Shklovski's concept of estrangement (*ostranenie*), the artistic technique of making common things appear unfamiliar and strange. Frank, like Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*, reaches a better understanding of himself through the very process of defamiliarization and, in the process, he reveals more about himself than he is aware of.
- 16 In his paper "Winking at Faulkner: Elizabeth Spencer's Tribute to '[t]he literary genius of [her] locale'," **Gérald Préher** (Catholic University of Lille, France) came back to the American South to analyze how Elizabeth Spencer creatively anticipated the inevitable comparison with Faulkner in her work. Spencer was aware of how perilous stepping into what she herself called "Faulkner's Mississippi" was and she has sometimes

explicitly quoted Faulkner in her narratives, as in *The Salt Line*. Préher showed how her use of recognizable Faulknerian material often introduces a comic or ironic twist. He focused on the story “First Dark,” where Faulknerian themes and characters make a more subtle appearance. The story strongly echoes “A Rose for Emily,” yet the characters, after experiencing death and a total immersion in the past, are able to leave the small Southern town, to choose life over death. Préher concluded by emphasizing the importance of facing and taming one’s environment and heritage, so that “life can begin” and, for Spencer, a literary career of her own.

- 17 In her paper “Claude Romano, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Paul Sartre: Faulkner Among French Philosophers,” **Aurélien Guillain** (University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France) examined the relationship of three French philosophers with Faulkner. She started with Sartre’s admiration of Faulkner’s handling of chronology and stated that Sartre must have admired the outrage felt by Faulknerian characters at their entrapment in their circumstances. Yet, she sees this unifying vision of time as problematic for Sartre, as the dimension of the future – and therefore of freedom – is completely absent. Sartre’s novels are more realistic than Faulkner’s in that they articulate the experience of freedom with that of contingency. Several decades later, Claude Romano disagreed with Sartre’s reading of Faulknerian time: for Romano, Faulkner accurately showed that events can only be grasped in the aftermath. Romano also interpreted Faulkner’s relation with the body differently, beyond the nausea felt by characters such as Joe Christmas that may have been a model for Sartre’s *nausée*. Faulknerian bodies can go beyond their ugly contingency, as demonstrated in the case of Lena Grove. After a brief discussion of Jacques Rancière’s approach to Faulkner, Guillain concluded by emphasizing the variety of existential attitudes in Faulkner’s fiction.
- 18 In her paper, “From the Far North to the Deep South: Two Nobel Prize Winners,” **Ineke Jolink** (Catholic University of Paris, France) chose to compare Faulkner with a contemporary writer and fellow Nobel prize winner, the Icelandic Halldór Laxness. Despite Laxness preferring Hemingway to Faulkner, Faulknerian themes find an echo in his works. The Southern lifestyle, plagued by racism, poverty and an unbearable North is paralleled in Iceland, where racism is translated into classism, and the North of the US into the Southern country of Denmark. Jolink highlighted the importance of the land, and especially of rural settings, to both authors. She then focused on the portrayal of the poor in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Laxness’s *Independent People*. Laxness’s characters are obsessed with self-sufficiency – a concern also shared by the Bundrens. If the novels are similar at times to mock epics, Jolink argued that they also work towards the rehabilitation of poor people by showing them capable of having profound ideas despite their lack of education.
- 19 This panel attracted many questions, mainly around the “portability” of Faulkner. The participants expressed their continuing amazement at Faulkner’s universality. If Yoknapatawpha’s topographical idiosyncrasies are surprisingly adaptable, the specific racial context of the South has often been translated into classist issues by his Western heirs.

Keynote address 2

- 20 **Peter Lurie** closed the conference with a discussion of representing and seeing race in various media in his address entitled “Seeing Blackness: Faulkner, Modernism, and the

longue durée of African American Cinema.” Lurie started with Conrad’s literary endeavor to “make you see” through his prose – an attention to the visual that is also a defining feature of Faulkner’s writing. Lurie drew a parallel between this emphasis on seeing and the context that saw the birth of a rival medium, cinema. Analogue films imply the suppression of the photographic imprint, yet, according to Garret Stewart, the photograph remains present as the “specular unconscious” of film. Lurie, with Stewart, sees this phenomenon as representative of the cinematic treatment of racial content until the 1990s: through its insistence on whiteness, cinema always carried forth its “negative.” Even when black people were excluded, as in Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the use of blackface betrays an evanescent black presence. Faulkner’s many references to film and his engagement with race, especially in *Light in August* or *Go Down, Moses*, make us see this absent presence in the darkened spaces of analogue films. The appearance of digital movies, combined with the rise of black directors in Hollywood such as Spike Lee, truly allowed for the representation of black people. The openness of the digital medium, whose images are never fixed, is matched in Faulkner’s porous prose and resistance to boundaries. The same breaking of boundaries is exemplified in Du Vernay’s film *Selma* when analogue and digital touch: this contact marks the end of the entrapment of race on the image. Lurie concluded by stating that Faulkner’s modernism, part and parcel of his awareness of racial issues, is expressed by Conrad’s ideal of a visual language that makes you see, but also feel.

- 21 The discussions outside the conference room included the panelists’ personal relation to the writer’s works and a lively debate around the practicalities of teaching and reading Faulkner as a novice: whether to clarify the sometimes obscure prose or bask in the confusion provoked by a dive headfirst into Benjy’s idiosyncratic perception of the world in *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner’s relationship to race also featured several times, as well as his use of the visual and his frequent referential ambiguity.

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NOTES

1. “Bascombe” is the maiden name of Caroline Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*.

INDEX

Subjects: Actualité de la recherche

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