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University of Picardy Jules Verne (France) and University of Richmond (USA) [online], May 20-21, 2021

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- 1 In her introductory remarks on the first day of the conference, **Frédérique Spill** recalled that this symposium is in the tradition of close readings that has often been privileged by French Faulkner Studies but also reflects that Faulkner's unmistakable writing style has been an enduring object of both fascination and critical analysis for Faulkner scholars and readers across the world. The aim of the symposium has been to focus on particular words whose uncanny re-appearance suggests a singular way of playing with words in the fabric of the text but also the particular entanglement of that text with the "complicated, troubled world that shaped it" (CFP).
- 2 Frédérique Spill evoked her own discovery of Benjy Compson's idiosyncratic lexicon as a source of reflection mixed with wonder. In Benjy's monologue, the limited number of words reveals a singular cognitive style: the generic words "flower," "slipper," "tree," "fire" point to a lost object of love but they also delineate the contours of a perceptive world, with clusters of sensations and affects forming around the images of flower, slipper, tree or fire, creating "a minute poetry of phenomenon." In that sense, although Benjy rarely uses negations, his words have something in common with the terms derived from negative affixation (words in *-less*, *un-* or *im-*) proliferating in other Faulknerian texts: in a way, sensation, affect and even reality seem to be envisioned as what exceeds the capacity of the nervous system to endure it, the capacity of the mind to comprehend it or the power of language to name it. "Things" always seem to be approached negatively, as the shadows of the words pointing toward them.

May 20, 2021

Panel 1: Spatial Faulkner

- 3 Chaired by Ahmed Honeini (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK)

- 4 **Stéphanie Eyrolles-Suchet** (Université de Clermont-Ferrand, France) gave a talk entitled “‘Motionless, locked, incapable of moving’: Arresting Motion in Faulkner’s novels”. Underlining that the word “motionless” preserved the image of potential motion while denying it, Eyrolles-Suchet explained that a “motionless” figure was designated as the site of a meaningful absence, a sign to be deciphered, and that a perceiving subject was also implied, a subject whose relation to time was at stake. Building on the relation established by Chklovski between art and estrangement, namely a de-automated type of perception disengaged from ordinary perceptive habits, Eyrolles-Suchet explained that the adjective “motionless,” when used by Faulkner’s narrators about moving characters (*As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*) expanded the duration of perceptions, creating a space of contemplation and re-interpretation. Instead of pointing to the character’s being overwhelmed by a sense of ineluctable fatefulness (Sartre), Faulkner’s “arrested moments” point to the poetic activity of the perceiving subject producing a motionless tableau vivant of what s/he is seeing.
- 5 **Yvan Drion** (Université de Rouen / Université de Picardie-Jules Verne, France), in “Translating the ‘whirling’ text of William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*,” explained that the image of the whirlpool was a unifying trope in *Sanctuary*: the motif is an objective correlative of a troubled identity (Horace Benbow’s image reflecting itself in troubled waters where Popeye’s image also appears) and it is also found in Temple’s circular movements as she runs in circles around her tormentors, frantic circles echoed by the circularity of Benbow’s obsessive discourse. Drion argued that a French translation of *Sanctuary* ought not to avoid word repetition (as Raimbault and Delgove’s translation did) but should instead embrace the circularity of Faulkner’s style, as it is essential to the representation of violence and trauma in the novel.
- 6 **Liza Tishchenko** (University of Michigan, USA), in “Equipped Rooms and Fictitious Names: Narrating Rent and Renting Narratives in *The Wild Palms*,” argued that in *The Wild Palms*, the vocabulary of “rent” and home ownership echoed the sentimentalizing of rent payment in contemporary press coverage or novels such as *The Sound of Running Feet*. Tishchenko related the tensions of Harry and Charlotte’s life, nomadic yet settled, with the symbolic and social positions of Bohemian renters resisting the model of home ownership advocated by public authorities as a sign of civic engagement. Tishchenko argued that the novel’s treatment of Harry as an ambivalent householder was best understood in relation to a politically charged line of discourse belonging to a collective narrative about the commodification of real estate. In the discussion that followed, Jay Watson pointed out the specific context of the LA real estate market as the frame of Faulkner’s own experience of renting (at the time of his affair with Meta Carpenter, when he was working as a screenwriter for Hollywood), an experience reflected in the story *Golden Land*.
- 7 **Solveig Dunkel** (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne / Boston University), in “Faulkner’s Corridors,” argued that Faulkner’s treatment of corridors resisted Marc Augé’s categorization of corridors as “non-places” (locations not sufficiently invested with meaning to be called places). Dunkel argued that Faulknerian corridors are “structures that convey and connect” very much like the Parisian Passages analysed by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). In Faulkner’s novels, the word “hallways” tends to refer to actual, literal hallways, while the term “corridors” is laden with metaphorical meanings, connoting both dread and artistic potential. In *Light in August*, the image of slow progress along womb-like

corridors is a trope for the work of memory and then the corridor is the metaphor of an organizing pattern which is at the heart of the experience of time, but also at the core of the text as a modernist experiment.

Keynote: Pr Jay Watson (University of Mississippi, USA): "The Working of That Word! Racial and Fossil Energies in *Light in August*"

- 8 Chaired by Peter Lurie (University of Richmond, USA)
- 9 In his keynote address **Jay Watson** offered a petro-modern reading of *Light in August*, linking the modernity of hydrocarbon energy to the workings of racialization. In the spirit of Faulkner's fetishized words, Watson paid particular attention to *the* word (which shall remain unspoken) that carries a higher charge in Faulkner's work than any other. In the first part of his talk, "Faulkner and Modernity's Basement," in reference to Bob Johnson, Watson briefly analyzed the works of several petro-critic scholars, including Timothy Mitchell and Kathryn Yusoff, among others, to critically examine the racial dynamics of modern carbon politics. Watson moved on to investigate specific scenes of *Light in August* in the second part of his speech, "God's Own Boiler Room," demonstrating how the novel reveals the complexities of carbon politics and a "racial ontogenesis explicitly within the turn-of-the-century landscape of coal" (Watson) – a connection which, according to Watson, "speaks volumes about how race, energy, and modernity were made in the Jim Crow South."

Panel 2: Race and Form

- 10 **Jenna Grace Sciuto** (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, USA), in "Repetition and the Reifying of Racial Lines in Halldór Laxness and William Faulkner," presented a comparative analysis of a 1948 Icelandic novel by Halldór Laxness and 1936 *Absalom, Absalom!* Sciuto argued that both texts reflected on the power of language to dehumanize the racial other, notably through the exoticized image of the linguistic Barbarian, in a way that reifies and naturalizes lines of difference. Sciuto recalled that in the Tidewater episode, Faulkner's text pointed to the presence of a kind of "double consciousness" in the character of young Thomas Sutpen himself. She argued that more generally the scenes of intraracial humiliation (that of Thomas Sutpen on the doorstep of a white plantation owner, or that of Wash by Sutpen himself) pointed to potential collaboration between members of the working class across lines of racial difference.
- 11 **Peter Lurie** (University of Richmond, USA), in "Faulkner's Racialized Light," pointed to the "lambence" in Sam Fathers's eyes as a reference to an interior light which is not recognized and / or does not command attention, recalling the specific luminosity of black bodies in film – bodies seemingly glowing from within (Richard Dyer, *White*). According to Lurie, Faulkner's poetic evocation of this "lambence" relates this light neither to the inside nor to the outside, so that it resists the distinction between the essential inside and the unnecessary outside so crucial to Western metaphysics. The "lambence" points to Sam Fathers himself as to a disruptive presence, destabilizing racial binaries and decentering centralized and hierarchized visions of space. It echoes the Faulknerian representation of sunlight as the emblem of an optical democracy, shining equally on everyone, as opposed to the light of the cinema which in Faulkner is

often associated with the reinscription of racial binaries. Lurie went on to discuss the potential of a neo-formalist approach to Faulkner's text, one that strives to articulate the forms "organizing texts" with the forms "organizing bodies, and institutions" (Caroline Levine. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 23). Lurie added that the limitations of Cleanth Brooks' formalist approach to Faulkner's text sprang less from Brooks' attention to form than from his particular definition of "form," understood as a closed, totalizing system of elements. To Lurie, a thorough and effective neo-formalist approach ought to be attentive to Faulknerian forms as to imperfect forms, exposing the very inefficacy of totalizing designs: forms that are precisely not "well-wrought urns."

- 12 In her paper "Impenetrable faces and impenetrable walls in *Go Down Moses*," **Aurélie Guillain** (Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, France) examined the semantic and generic instability of the signifier "impenetrable." She argued that through emphatic repetitions of the adjective, rather than using synonyms, the reader becomes aware of a plurality of meanings, i.e. the connotations of the fixed epithet "impenetrable" become multiple and unstable. Guillain demonstrated her theory with a particular focus on Lucas Beauchamp ("impenetrable faces") and what remains of the big woods at the turn of the century ("impenetrable wall") in *Go Down Moses*.
- 13 **Susan Scott Parrish** (University of Michigan, USA) and **Johannes Burgers** (Ashoka University, India), gave a joint presentation entitled "The Bitter Sum: Accounting for Racist Words in *Absalom, Absalom!*" which illustrated the interest of using a quantitative approach to the frequency and location of racist words in a text such as *Absalom, Absalom!* If one starts by identifying the specific locations where the N-word appears in Faulkner's novel, it becomes apparent that these almost exclusively occur in scenes involving intra-racial humiliation, mostly in the Tidewater episode and around it, laying bare the use of racial slur as the humiliated white speaker's creation of a false target for himself. Starting with the objective statement of facts by lexicometrics, Parrish and Burgers argued, can be a useful starting-point for classroom discussion, students' attention being immediately drawn to the presence of a literary strategy, one that provides a critical framing of racist discourse. Especially – but of course not exclusively – in the context of international, multiracial classrooms, it is essential that the critical power of literary representations may be effectively thrown into relief, especially in relation with the N-word, probably the most historically charged, the most "explosive" word in the contemporary English language.
- 14 In his presentation, "A Stylometric Approach to Some of Faulkner's Fetishized Words," **Michał Choinski** (Jagiellonian University, Poland) illustrated in his turn the benefits of stylometry (e.g. AntConc software) in the study of literary works (see journal.r-project.org). For instance, stylometric modularity reveals the existence of several Faulkners with distinct "author fingerprints" depending on the phase in his novelistic career, or it reveals how "Southern" or how close to other writers Faulkner is. The study of word collocation may also be a starting-point for stylistic considerations, as quantitative approach and qualitative approach need to work hand-in-hand.

May 21, 2021

Panel 3: Faulkner's She(s)

- 15 Chaired by Solveig Dunkel (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne, France)
- 16 **Astrid Maes** (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne, France) explained in "Faulkner's Serene Women" that the adjective "serene" was generally applied to women in Faulkner's prose, and that it described a multitude of women and of feelings. Serenity in Faulkner's women can be a denial of complex feelings, and is thus reassuring for men, all the more so as it protects them from the idea of women's sexual desire. Serenity is thus a fetish in Faulkner's fiction as it veils women's sexuality. Yet "serene" also reveals contradictions, as women can be both serene and unpredictable, dangerous. It enforces the otherness of women while silencing them. According to Maes, the importance of serenity lies in what it reveals – women's confidence as to their feelings. Serenity in Faulkner is thus a feminine way of loving.
- 17 In her presentation entitled "'“Women, shit,” the tall convict said’: Female Bodily Functions in the Fiction of William Faulkner,” **Laura Wilson** (Fisk University, USA) analyzed how women conceal their biological excretions in Faulkner's prose, how men react to them and how the reader needs to infer what is left unsaid. Wilson explained that, in *Light in August*, menstruations are described as periodical filth as they are the sign of men's failure to fertilize, of their incapacity to stop women's cycle with their own male excretion. Wilson pointed out that women in Faulkner try to conceal their biological processes, like Temple Drake's bleeding after her rape, or Dewey Dell's pregnancy. Wilson demonstrated that abortions are never told but only hinted at in Faulkner's fiction, as they are considered as more forbidden than the selling of sex. The reader thus has to infer what is happening to the female body.
- 18 **Mary Knighton** (Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan) in "Transformative Bovine Figures in Faulkner's Fictions" pointed out that the bovine status given to female characters in Faulkner's prose sexualizes their bodies and makes them interchangeable. Knighton argued that Faulkner's version of bovinity is not only gendered but also racialized as his bovine figures are milky white and plump, except for an unnamed gray woman in *The Hamlet*. She explained that female bovines and actual cows are the signs of the commodification of land and people, that they were both considered as exchangeable and interchangeable property, like commodity. Knighton then mixed metaphors and contended that the bovine figures in Faulkner are also fish creatures, like mermaids.

Panel 4: Faulkner *in Absentia*: Language and "notlanguage"

- 19 Chaired by Astrid Maes (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne)
- 20 In "The Word that Quentin Cannot Say: Evasion and the Linguistics of Suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)," **Ahmed Honeini** (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK) argued that, although Quentin's suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* has often been described as a passive, entranced surrender to death, the young man has in fact internalized societal qualms toward suicide and his ambivalence is reflected both in the language he uses and in the one word he cannot utter: suicide. Honeini pointed out that Quentin's walking on his own shadow is already a metaphorical suicide. Although Quentin is obsessed with other people's words especially his father's, the words he

cannot say are unexplored. The word “suicide” represents such a social stigma that Quentin cannot verbalize it. However, Quentin’s discourse will liberate itself and become his own just before his death.

- 21 **Ineke Jolink** (Université Catholique de Paris, France), in “Faulkner’s Use of the Prefix *Un*, A Study in Deviant Morphology,” studied how Faulkner’s morphological deviations create liminality in his texts. She demonstrated that these deviations created defamiliarization without losing understandability. Through various examples from different texts by Faulkner, Jolink showed that the words created with the prefix *un-* situate themselves in a liminal space of neither here nor there. She examined how French translations avoided these morphological deviations and normalized the language. Jolink contended that these deviations are tools that Faulkner used to create a universe in which truth was deconstructed and a liminal space was created to represent the verities of the heart.
- 22 **Benoît Tadié** (Université Rennes 2, France), in “‘Little verbal toys’: Words in ‘-less’ in *Sanctuary*,” explained that words in “-less” are imbricated with traumatic events and that they are defined by absence. Etymologically, the suffix *-less* and the noun *loss* are derived from the same root meaning “cut apart”. Words formed with the suffix *-less* thus suggest a disruptive agency, a disjunction. Tadié then explored the use of the word *motionless*, which recurs thirty-seven times in *Sanctuary*. He demonstrated that in the verbal economy of the novel, the repetition of *-less* is the sign of a fetishizing process, in which the traumatic castrations are not told but represented. He then contended that the use of the suffix *-less* was a textual fetishism.
- 23 In his paper “The Missing Word: Describing the ‘(Un)Real Thing’ in *Sanctuary*,” **Phillip “Pip” Gordon** (University of Wisconsin-Platteville, USA) explained that the central event of the novel was Popeye’s sexual assault on Temple, but that the missing word in the narrative was “penis”. He demonstrated that the word was represented through metaphors but that it was never said. Gordon then studied this absence through a transgender gaze, using two films to illustrate his point of view: *Boys Don’t Cry* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, Kimberley Pierce, 1999) and *The Crying Game* (Miramax Films, Neil Jordan, 1992). Gordon then questioned the role of the penis in making a man. He argued that, in *Sanctuary*, although the penis is never there, it has enormous power over people and is a source of violence.

Keynote: Pr John T. Matthews (Boston University, USA): “Dispossessed Him Dispossessed’: The Fetish of Recursive Forms”

- 24 Chaired by Frédérique Spill (Université de Picardie-Jules Verne)
- 25 “[D]ispossessing the South’s dispossessed of their dispossessions” – with such phrases, keynote speaker **John T. Matthews** demonstrated a fetishization of words in Faulkner’s work. Referring to a passage from “The Bear” in his title phrase, Matthews devoted his keynote speech to the marked and riddling word “dispossessed” and the logic of recursive dispossession in American history as well as in Faulkner’s oeuvre. With a close reading of a significant passage of “The Bear” in *Go Down Moses*, Matthews unraveled the recursive, paradoxical nature of dispossession as it presumes a prior establishment of ownership, i.e. “possession is the consequent of dispossession” (Matthews), which marks theft as a crucible of property logic. Matthews further explored how this logic of recursivity is immersed in settler class reasoning. Drawing

from Robert Nichols' teachings, Matthews argued that this form of recursive dispossession offers itself as a critical theoretical tool that may complicate existing accounts of settler colonialism, ultimately contributing to Indigenous and African American studies.

Panel 5: Faulkner and Aesthetic Production

- 26 Chaired by Jay Watson (University of Mississippi, USA)
- 27 In his paper titled "Both Virgin and Pregnant: An Impossible Confluence of Referent and Reference in Faulkner's 'A Portrait of Elmer,'" **Bernard T. Joy** (University of Glasgow, Scotland) drew connections between Faulkner's male artists' fetishization of artistic products and the fetishized use of the words *virgin* and *pregnant*. He argued that Elmer's fetishized art works form an unfeasible union of *virginity* and *pregnancy*, being expressions of interiority simultaneously untouched *and* inflected by the external materiality. Joy observed an idealistic metaphysical purity that Elmer infers on his subjective interiority and how he hopes to inflict such purity as an established fact on the linguistic and semantic world he inhabits.
- 28 **Benjamin Robbins** (University of Innsbruck, Austria) concluded the final panel with his paper "Faulkner's Hollywood Allusions and the Semantic Fields of Contagion or Commodification." Robbins offered both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of Faulkner's allusions to Hollywood in his fiction writing – references small in number, yet powerful in imagery. While Robbins uncovered a shared pattern of the homogenizing forces of Hollywood in Faulkner's fictional references, which seem to devalue human interaction and debase the cultural awareness, the panelist suggested ways to read against these innuendos so as not to fetishize them.

Conclusion

- 29 "The text is back!" With this notion, **Peter Lurie** (University of Richmond) concluded a successful virtual conference that has proven a formal turn in literary studies, at least in the Anglo-American context. This may seem amusing to European, in particular French, scholars for whom the text never went away, as Lurie admitted. Yet this is a testimony to the indispensable value of an internationally networking Faulkner community. The growing popularity and variety of this year's iteration of the Faulkner Symposium indeed bore witness to that.

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