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International conference, Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens,  
France, October 13-14, 2022

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# Faulkner's France

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Solveig Dunkel and Emilie Heude

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- 1 “Faulkner's France” (“La France de Faulkner”) is the third international conference on William Faulkner organized by research team CORPUS (UR 4295) at the University of Picardie Jules Verne in Amiens, France. It was the result of a close cooperation between international scholars from France, Scotland and the USA, namely Frédérique Spill and Astrid Maes (University of Picardie Jules Verne, France), Peter Lurie (University of Richmond, USA) and Bernard T. Joy (University of Glasgow, Scotland) and it took place in Amiens on October 13-14, 2022. The conference aimed at emphasizing the unique connection between William Faulkner, France and French artistic culture. Therefore, the conference proposed to examine Faulkner's France, the country that has given William Faulkner pride of place since the 1930s, but also France as Faulkner wrote about in his works throughout his career. Moreover, Faulkner was profoundly influenced by the time he spent in France in the mid-1920s, as the connection goes both ways. Thus, a great number of French writers have been fascinated with Faulkner's work. The plurality of connections between Faulkner and France, and perhaps more significantly even, Faulkner's France as the organizers have phrased it, led to the following papers.

## Day 1: October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022

- 2 **Frédérique Spill** opened the conference, by expressing her appreciation to the various people involved in the organization of the conference, as well as to the institutions which provided financial support. Her intervention was followed by an introduction delivered by **Peter Lurie** who gave an in-depth overview of the influence of Faulkner in France, but also the influence of French research on Faulknerian studies.

## Panel 1: Faulkner, Influence, Global Francophonie, French Literary History

- 3 **Robert Sayre** (Gustave Eiffel University), opened the first panel with a paper entitled "Faulkner's Romanticism: The French Connection." In his presentation, Sayre proposed to explore the relationship between the romantic preoccupations found in Faulkner's work and French culture. Romanticism, according to Sayre, was not simply a literary trend of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather a fundamental cultural trend marked by a rejection of and a protest against modernity's commercial capitalization. Indeed, some of Faulkner's works display a sense of romantic anti-capitalism: a variety of texts are evoked, while the ambiguity and ambivalence at the core of this impulse are emphasized. Sayre then examined the romanticism at work in Faulkner's later fiction, a romanticism which shares similarities with the works of two French novelists, Balzac and Proust. Indeed, the two novelists exhibit a shared pattern that is characteristic of romanticism, which Sayre defined as the opposition between pre-modern social forms and groups, notably the aristocracy, and those of bourgeois modernity.
- 4 The second paper, "Emma Bovary's Death, Faulkner, and the Erotic," was delivered by **Astrid Maes** (University of Picardy-Jules Verne) who provided a thorough analysis of the literary and thematic link existing between Faulkner's fascination with female dead bodies and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), a novel which Faulkner evoked explicitly in *Sanctuary*. The scope of her analysis primarily focused on the physicality of the decaying yet erotic bodies of Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily," Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, and Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *If I forget Thee Jerusalem*. Maes analyzed the ghost of Emma Bovary's body within Faulkner's depiction of decaying female bodies, especially in their eroticized representation, all the while highlighting the similarities between the temporality of Flaubertian and Faulknerian death.
- 5 **Jenna Grace Sciuto** (Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts), in "Language and History in William Faulkner's US South and Tierno Monénembo's Rwanda," opened the scope of the panel across the border of metropolitan France by gauging the influence of Faulkner on Francophone African writers, more specifically on Guinean novelist Tierno Monénembo and his novel *The Oldest Orphan*, written shortly after the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Sciuto connected this novel with Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, enabling her to provide a transhistorical and transgeographical reading of these texts. Indeed, Sciuto argued that, by using large-scale historical events as filtered through individual experiences, Faulkner and Monénembo both exhibit the resonances of the colonial past onto individual lives. Similarly, a focus on malapropisms in *The Oldest Orphan* as well as Faulkner's neologisms led Sciuto to argue that each author's way of playing with language constitute a subtle critique of the inaction of Western institutions.

## Keynote Address 1: Claude Romano, "Remarks on Faulkner's Phenomenology of Evil."

- 6 Philosopher **Claude Romano** (Paris-Sorbonne University) delivered the first keynote of the conference, "Remarks on Faulkner's Phenomenology of Evil." Romano emphasized Faulkner's interest in writing about "people" and characters placed in situations of

injustice. "Life is not interested in good and evil," the Mississippian writer famously stated in an interview in 1956. Faulkner's "phenomenology of evil," Romano argued, relies on a double refusal: indeed, he refused to rationalize evil, but he equally refused to mythologize it. Romano contended that in Faulkner's novels, evil is never diabolical, never fiendish, and evil-doing is never represented as genius. Among other sources, Romano used Hannah Arendt's theory of the "banality of evil," which she developed in her writing about Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. Therefore, evil tends to be simultaneously banal and extreme. Through a series of close-readings — and *Sanctuary's* opening scene particularly piqued his interest — Romano asserted that Faulkner's characters can be classified in three distinct categories. First, there are those who suffer from the burden of consciousness of evil and pass it on to others. The second category of characters corresponds to those who collapse under this burden. The third and final category concerns itself with "les grands vivants," the characters living beyond ethical judgment, in the manner of Sam Peppers or Lena Grove.

## Panel 2: Vision, Visual Art, French Representations and Representations of France

- 7 The second panel of the conference turned to visual arts. In "Beyond clichés: Faulkner's kaleidoscopic Paris in 'A Portrait of Elmer,'" **Françoise Buisson** (Pau & Pays de l'Adour University) offered a study of the *lieux communs* ("commun" meaning both "common" and "ordinary, commonplace") of Faulkner's representation of the American artist and tourist in Paris in the short story "A Portrait of Elmer" (1935), which, for Buisson, are more complex and ambiguous than simply *clichés*. Buisson highlighted the tensions between a frozen, caricatured depiction of Paris and its Bohemian life, and a more kaleidoscopic representation derived from an aesthetic experimentation based on elusiveness, the ephemeral, fragmentariness and juxtaposition, which reminds readers of modern paintings.
- 8 **Randall Wilhelm** (Anderson University), in a presentation entitled "'Death in the Air': Faulkner, Faktura and Martial Disguise," argued that two events that occurred in 1914 drastically affected Faulkner's creative imagination. The first event was the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, which led to the chaotic beginning of World War I. The second incident, Wilhelm advanced, was related to the breakup of cubist pioneers Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, two artists who had started their own war against the art world with their artistic experimentations with forms. Wilhelm demonstrated that Faulkner used cubist techniques that disguise his narrative construction in several works, in the manner of military camouflage, by alternating between literary theory and art history.
- 9 **Bernard T. Joy** (University of Glasgow) analyzed the figure of the *flâneur* in the 1920s in "Faulknerian Flânerie: Faulkner's Psychogeographies in the Contexts of New Orleans and Paris." Joy offered to use Merlin Coverley's term *psychogeography* and its closely related conceptual frameworks, including its debt to the figure of the *flâneur* as a methodological lens in order to analyze Faulkner's interactions with the material cultures and relational economies of modernity in urban spaces. He highlighted the psychogeographical intersections between New Orleans, which Faulkner depicts as the "natural city," and Paris, which Joy presented as an internally divided city for Faulkner, a city constructed in the manner of a palimpsest as a nostalgic (and natural) "old

Paris,” and the unnatural modernity of “new Paris.” Joy also focused on Faulkner’s connection to Charles Baudelaire and to Paul Cézanne. Indeed, Baudelaire, Cézanne and Faulkner share a common nostalgia for an “old Paris” conceived of as a “natural,” “human” city as yet unspoiled by the mid-19th-century rebuilding projects of Georges-Eugène Haussmann under Napoleon III, which Joy presented as a phenomenological engagement with urban environment and its artistic representation.

## Day 2: October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022

- 10 The presentations of the day were preceded by a tribute to François Pitavy (1934-2022), given by Jacques Pothier (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France).

### Panel 3: Faulkner, French Translation, and Faulkner’s European Reception

- 11 **Jacques Pothier** (Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines University), in “Faulkner for the French: Some issues of transmission,” provided a synthesis of the last forty years’ critical approach to Faulkner’s reception in France. He started by defining the public for Faulkner in France before focusing on the policy of translation. Pothier explained that the translations of Faulkner’s texts have long been ethnocentric, erasing what he called “the foreign text’s strangeness.” Building on Walter Benjamin’s advice to avoid considering the receiver, he argued that one must recover the initial strangeness of the text. Pothier then drew a comparison between Addie Bundren’s perception of words in *As I Lay Dying* as webs in which we get trapped on the one hand and translation itself on the other. Using the example of Faulkner’s appetite for obscure titles, Pothier pointed out that no translation can be perfect but some effort can be made.
- 12 In her paper “Shaping the French Faulkner: The Power of the Unexpressed in Maurice Edgar Coindreau’s Translations of Faulkner,” **Aurélien Guillain** (Toulouse-Jean Jaurès University) examined the role which translator and scholar Maurice Edgar Coindreau has played in popularizing Faulkner’s work in France but also in shaping the “French Faulkner.” She began with a quick survey of Coindreau’s role in the French literary landscape and emphasized the symbolic capital he has accumulated. Guillain then specifically focused on Coindreau’s translation of *As I Lay Dying* and on what may be regarded as the translator’s “domestication” of the foreign text. Indeed, Coindreau tended to ennoble the characters’ voices, neutralize some stylistic idiosyncrasies and simplify the author’s syntax. Yet Guillain also highlighted how Coindreau “foreignized” the French text, for instance with the translation of the modal auxiliary CAN with verbs of perception.
- 13 In his presentation entitled “Retranslating Faulkner, from Annexation to Decentering: The Case of *Sanctuary*, an Attempt to Restore Tension and Fascination,” **Yvan Drion** (Rouen University) pointed out that the variety of translators and translations may have “annexed” Faulkner’s voice. Indeed, editors have long been concerned with classicizing the author’s language and making the texts less foreign to the French public. Focusing on the case of *Sanctuary*, Drion argued that translators need to preserve what he called “Faulkner’s foreignness” by becoming “decentered,” that is to say by paying renewed attention to syntax, punctuation and rhythm. What matters is to restore the tension and fascination at the heart of Faulkner’s works after decades of

standardization. To do so, it is essential not to try to elucidate what is not meant to be elucidated.

- 14 **Ineke Jolink** (The Catholic University of Paris) in “Translating Faulkner’s Fights with the Linguistic Code: The Case of *The Sound and the Fury*,” argued that translators should do Faulkner justice by translating his “deviations” in *The Sound and the Fury* appropriately. Indeed, Coindreau and Gresset normalized the text in 1977 in various ways. For example, they standardized the punctuation, played down the use of transitive verbs as intransitive ones, and put question marks where there were none in the source text. Jolink also offered an analysis of the sentence “I was trying to say and trying” where the object is finally left out at the end. She drew links between echolalia, which is the ability to repeat a series of sounds even though their meaning is not understood, and Benjy’s autism. She concluded by saying that deviations, no matter how insignificant they may seem, must be translated as such. In the discussion that followed, this “trying to say,” it was contended, was a fitting metaphor for translation, as any attempt to translate Faulkner is a failure.

## Keynote Address 2: Michael Zeitlin, “Flying for France in Faulkner’s War.”

- 15 In his keynote address, **Michael Zeitlin** (University of British Columbia) offered a comparison between Faulkner’s fictitious experience of World War I and Quentin Roosevelt’s real participation in it. The latter was a pilot as well as a talented young writer who died in combat in July 1918, at the time Faulkner was training. His letters to his family were testimony to his first-hand experiences of the battle. Zeitlin underlined that Faulkner did join the Royal Canadian Air Force as a volunteer and enjoyed the mystique of military aviation, but the conflict ended before he completed his training. He was thus demobilized with nothing to show for his service. His version of the war was then imaginary: he would create tales and walk with a limp to impersonate the wounded veteran he pretended to be. In the discussion that followed, it was pointed out that while Faulkner went masquerading for a long time as a veteran, he ended up refusing his war experience to be known. Indeed, his embarrassment grew as it became easier to check that he had no combat experience.

## Panel 4: Faulkner, Europe and War

- 16 **Ahmed Honeini** (Royal Holloway, University of London) opened the fourth panel with his paper “Blood and Soil: Faulkner, France, Germany, and the Politics of Misreading,” where he compared Faulkner’s different attitude towards France and Germany during his lifetime. While his work has been correctly interpreted by early French scholars such as Maurice Coindreau and François Pitavy, it was completely misinterpreted in Nazi Germany. Honeini studied the example of *Light in August* which was read by Nazi officials through the lens of the ‘Blood and Soil’ ideology—the belief in a direct correlation between racial purity and geological background. Thanks to German Faulkner scholars, his work is no longer misunderstood and it has even had an influence on texts which contributed greatly to the formation of the German commemorative culture. Honeini argued that his work in general and *Light in August* in particular have remained relevant to postwar German literary culture and academia.

- 17 In her paper “William Faulkner’s Muddy Somme,” **Frédérique Spill** (University of Picardy-Jules Verne) examined how Faulkner registered the traces of World War I in his fantasized recreations of war sceneries in the Somme. Indeed, he did not fight in that conflict, but he visited the war zone in the North of France in 1925. Among the features of his war poetics, Spill highlighted his attention to natural elements and sensory perceptions as well as his use of a lexicon of dissolution, all being echoed in the overwhelming presence of mud. This muddiness reflects the human experience of World War I and the perception of time and place as a continuum. Spill showed how Faulkner’s deep impressions on war were particularly inscribed in two short stories entitled “Ad Astra” and “Victory.” She added that the pervasiveness of World War I in Faulkner’s work almost accounts for a first-hand experience of the battle. The conflict precipitated the author and his writing into modernity.
- 18 **Kristi Rowan Humphreys** (Baylor University) concluded the final panel with her paper ““For the Good of My Soul’: French Postwar Sentiment and Faulkner’s Staged American South.” Drawing from Michel François’s article “Against Oblivion,” she explained the “don’t let’s speak of it anymore” approach to the war. Humphreys argued that the popularity of Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* in France was related to its alignment with the postwar struggles of European audiences. While this play presenting southern American characters dealing with issues of guilt, admission of sin, and forgiveness surprisingly failed on Broadway, it resonated with the confusion felt by the French. The universal qualities of the story seemingly dominated the strictly southern American elements and elicited empathetic connections for people who were geographically and culturally distant from the South.

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