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Peter Lurie

University of Richmond, plurie@richmond.edu

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PETER LURIE

The French Faulkner: Visibility, Absence, and *Sanctuary*'s "Lake of Ink"

Like Edgar Allan Poe and the American *film noir*, William Faulkner enjoyed a critical reception in France that anticipated his American audience by several years. While not the first critics to admire Faulkner's writing, readers like Maurice Coindreau, André Malraux, and Jean-Paul Sartre were among the earliest readers to recognize a particular quality to his fiction, one that, especially in the case of certain novels, evaded Faulkner's contemporary American readers. As certain examples of this cross-cultural acceptance demonstrate, such as Baudelaire's translation of Poe in the nineteenth century and his exalting of Poe as a poetic genius, or Raymond Borde and Emile Chautementon's embrace of the fatalistic atmosphere and disquieting *mise en scène* of America's postwar, B-movie cycle for which they coined the name *film noir*, French thinkers have often been more receptive to what was startling or new in American cultural expression. In these cases, something dark or 'unwholesome' attached to the American object of French inquiry. Whether or not the French acceptance of these elements was owed to a beneficial *distance* from the object – true to an extent of all transatlantic or cross-cultural exchanges – it is the case that Poe and the *noir* became what they are due to French intervention.¹

Of this critical phenomenon, Faulkner's early fiction offers a particular example. And while evidence of this relationship extends through Faulkner's career and many of his novels (and was illustrated, for Coindreau, by the fact that the French press was more effusive about Faulkner's Nobel Prize in 1950 than was the American media), it is nowhere more evident than in the critical response to *Sanctuary*. Of all his novels, *Sanctuary* enjoys a privileged place in Faulkner's French criticism. It was the first of his books to be translated into French (in 1933), an edition that was accompanied by a now-famous

preface by André Malraux in which Malraux declared that the novel showed the “intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story” (274). In 1931, Coindreau, another of Faulkner’s French translators, had already introduced Faulkner to France in a deeply admiring essay for *La Nouvelle Revue Française* in which he described *Sanctuary* in terms that would surface in countless accounts of it later, noting its “display of . . . technique which . . . approaches perfection” (“William Faulkner” 27) and an enigmatic and elliptical form that lead Coindreau to call Faulkner the “master of a new technique based on the power of the unexpressed (“William Faulkner” 27).² In 1952, Albert Camus referred to *Sanctuary*, with *Pylon*, as Faulkner’s “masterpieces” – a somewhat idiosyncratic choice (and one to which I will return). Two of France’s preeminent Faulknerians, Michel Gresset and André Bleikasten, have returned to the novel repeatedly in articles or devoted major portions of monographs to it, studies in which they have compared *Sanctuary* to a cornerstone of French modernist fiction (arguably the seminal modernist novel), *Madame Bovary*. More recently, two collections published by the *Presses Universitaires de Rennes* have been devoted exclusively to *Sanctuary*: the first was an anthology of foundational essays about the novel (1995); the other was the initial volume in a series based on annual conferences at the Fondation Faulkneriennes (1996), which offered reconsiderations of *Sanctuary* by emerging and established scholars.³

There may be different ways of understanding this interest, dare we say *fascination* of the French with Faulkner in general and in particular with *Sanctuary*. One doubts that – certain contemporary American politicians’ views notwithstanding – this is an irrefutable sign of French depravity or an interest in the novel’s sensationalism. Nor is it due particularly to the fact that, like all readers of a foreign language, French critics were perhaps drawn first to the material presence or ‘surface’ of Faulkner’s writing: its sounds, rhythm – we might even say its appearance.⁴ Rather, I suspect that *Sanctuary*’s fascination for the French is precisely the novel’s own interest in, and sustained demonstration of, *fascination* itself. For fascination is precisely the novel’s interest and its mode of articulation.

Fascination, on several levels, connotes the operation of a passive, spellbound, and wondrous *looking*. And as readers have long acknowledged, *Sanctuary* is undoubtedly a novel of looking, indeed of spectacle. From Popeye and Horace’s two-hour vigil that opens the novel in which they regard each other from across the spring: to Temple Drake’s

hold on the gaze of all the men in the novel; to Horace's melancholic, erotic fixation on his step-daughter's photograph; to Popeye's voyeuristic watching of Temple and Red's sex acts, which are in turn refracted through the gazes of Clarence Snopes and Miss Reba's spying maid, *Sanctuary* relies on the exchange of glances.

Vision: Obscurity: Fascination

I would suggest that it is this activity itself, quite apart from the novel's events or its various objects of looking, which contributed to both the French fascination with *Sanctuary* as well as to the American critical rejection of it. Part of the reason for that may be signaled in the novel itself, when Horace declares that "there's a corruption about even looking upon evil" (*Sanctuary: The Original Text* 72). Yet this "corruption" did not seem to trouble *Sanctuary's* French readers, who found, rather, something compelling about it. Malraux first pointed to this quality in *Sanctuary* and offers it as evidence that "The deepest form of fascination . . . derives its strength from being both horror and the possibility of conceiving horror" (274). Gresset's study of Faulkner's corpus is titled, aptly, *Fascination*; like others, Gresset invests considerably in the uniquely visual manner of apprehension at play in Faulkner's fiction generally but in *Sanctuary* above all.

This difference in French and American attitudes may owe itself as well to the fact that, despite all of its emphasis on vision and looking, *Sanctuary* does not quite allow us to see. This is true literally, as concerns the novel's central, precipitous event that we never witness (Temple's rape), but even more so figuratively and in terms of the novel's larger mysteries we are never allowed to fathom: the nature of Popeye's evil or of his motives; the reasons why Temple perjures herself in the courtroom; the troubling, insistent spot to which she looks during her trial and her questioning. Yet it is precisely this opacity to *Sanctuary* that its French readers championed. And closely related to it is another, less insidious – but certainly no less unsettling – interest for *Sanctuary's* French readers, one that takes us to the heart of Faulkner's writing as well as to a mainstay of French philosophical and theoretical work.

One way to understand the particular hold of *Sanctuary* on the French imagination has to do with the towering influence in France of Maurice Blanchot. A contemporary of Sartre and Camus, though far less well-known in the U.S. than they, Blanchot's thinking about

writing, literature, and their affinity with absence, or death, initiated an inquiry that would be taken up directly by Derrida and other luminaries of poststructural theory, such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and the feminist Hélène Cixous.

At the heart of Blanchot's thinking is a term that immediately shows its relevance to considerations of *Sanctuary*: dread. In his essay, "From Dread to Language," published originally as "De l'Angoisse au Langage" in 1943, Blanchot began an inquiry into the impossibility of speech or utterance when the writer endeavors genuinely to confront the painfulness of solitude. He begins the essay somewhat caustically, indicating that "A writer who writes, 'I am alone,' or, like Rimbaud, 'I am really from beyond the grave,' can be considered rather comical. It is comical for a man to recognize his solitude by addressing a reader and by using methods that prevent the individual from being alone" (3). To experience solitude or isolation truly, the writer must own up to the fact that such a condition is unbridgeable – to use a key word of Malraux's in describing the world view in *Sanctuary*, "irremediable" (translated in the English version of Malraux's essay as "incurable"). Language's inefficacy is a staple of poststructural theory, from Derrida's notion of *différance*, to Lacan's category of the Real, to Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Yet it was Blanchot who, long before these figures – and without the programmatic approach of a codified theory – put this idea into philosophical play. In a statement in which we can likely hear Derrida's conception of the false promise of writing's self-presence, Blanchot stresses how the writer's utterance of the word 'alone' is itself problematic: "To pronounce it is to summon to oneself the presence of everything the word excludes" (3). That presence is the fact of company, an other in the person of an audience, the presence of whom – if even imagined – disavows the semantic and, in this case, emotional or psychological thrust of the term 'alone.' Being true to one's solitude, Blanchot claims, means not speaking about it at all.

The writer is in a peculiar position vis-à-vis the silence that accompanies dread. For, as Blanchot avers, such a silence is denied by the writer's vocation. For the ordinary individual, such silence is not, perhaps, especially noteworthy; it may even tap a reservoir of meaningful peacefulness. "But for the writer," says Blanchot, "the situation is different. He remains attached to discourse; he departs from his reason only in order to be faithful to it; he has authority over language, and he can never completely send it away. Having nothing to say is

for him characteristic of someone who always has something to say [in that, he has to express something]. In the center of garrulousness he finds the zone of laconicism where he must now remain" (7).

Horace Benbow is such a garrulous character who "always has something to say." His talkativeness is something that other characters notice (like Ruby Lamar) and that critics routinely mention. It is also a quality that stands in marked relief from Horace's "other" in the novel, the nearly silent, menacing, "black" Popeye. With Horace and Popeye, Faulkner allegorizes the situation of the writer, particularly as that situation is related to the articulation of what Blanchot calls despair. That Faulkner approached this novel from a position and experience of personal despair is hard to dispute. He had failed to find a wide audience with his earlier novels and, while Faulkner's primary concern about his writing was not its commercial success, his personal circumstances in this period required of him that he produce a novel that would sell. Yet the stories, characters, and ideas that Faulkner felt most compelled to write about had not generated the commercial interest in his books that he needed, quite literally, to survive.⁵

It is that material necessity, I suggest, but also the despair of the writer in general that suffuses the novel. Alongside the story of Temple's violation or Horace's failed 'quest' (for justice, or even more simply, the truth) but well beyond their topical despair, *Sanctuary* is marked by the despair, or dread, of a writer who has discovered what Blanchot calls the "zone of laconicism in the center of garrulousness . . . where he must remain." Having committed himself early to a vocation as a writer, but finding it frustratingly non-remunerative, Faulkner "remain[ed] attached to discourse" – as Blanchot states, he continued to write. As an even cursory glance at Faulkner's circumstances in this period of his life suggest, he worked in the midst of intense personal difficulties and even grief. *Sanctuary* followed most directly Faulkner's writing *The Sound and the Fury*. While remarkably different in outlook, structure, style, and tone, the novels share more than a proximity in Faulkner's writing chronology. John T. Matthews has written eloquently about how the earlier novel may be read as an object lesson in the writer's intimacy with mourning (Matthews 17-21). In particular, *The Sound and the Fury* allows Matthews to connect both this novel and Faulkner's "Introduction" to it to Derridean notions of writerly absence and loss.⁶ Facilitating his own sustained overture to Deconstruction, Matthews reads Faulkner's remarks in his "Introduction" about having written *The Sound and the Fury* in response to

his lack of a sister and in anticipation of his infant daughter's death. (Alabama Faulkner was born and died ten days later, in January of 1931.) As Matthews notes, such pronouncements seem meant to ascribe to writing the solace for "frustrations or losses suffered in life" and offer "a formulation [that] assumes a prior state of grief in the author's life that may be soothed by an aesthetic substitution" (18-19). Yet Matthews also points to the salient fact that such grief as Faulkner attributes to the writing of *The Sound and the Fury* owes more to the writing act itself than to any specific events in an author's life that surround it. "Faulkner's account [of this book] is more complicated: his writing precedes any sense of loss, and actually precedes the fact of loss in the case of his daughter . . . However fine a distinction this may seem to be, the consequences are considerable. To begin to write, to mark the page, produces the mood of bereavement, as if the use of language creates the atmosphere of mourning" (19). The atmosphere of both novels, I would submit, is one of mourning, due no less to a striking thematic of loss occasioned in the earlier novel by Quentin's suicide or Caddy's flight from home than, in *Sanctuary*, the deeply wrought melancholy subsumed, at its end, in the Luxembourg Gardens "in the embrace of the season of rain and death" (398).

In pursuing such mournful ends, however, Faulkner does not falsify the silence he has found at the center of his own despair. Rather – and this, I believe, is a quality of the novel to which so many French critics have responded – he couches that despair in the novel's nefarious narrative events as well as its moral opacity. Like the *films noir* that followed it and to which *Sanctuary* and other *romans noir* are often compared, the tone of the novel is notably brooding and dark, permitting of little illumination of its events. As the central figure for this opacity and dread stands the inscrutable, unfathomable presence of Popeye. And unlike with Horace, such defining qualities as adduce to Popeye are associated with, or even motivated by his silence. From his first appearance Popeye is marked by his affinity with a threatening silence. He won't speak to Temple despite her repeated admonitions for a ride back from Goodwin's (even silencing others and telling them repeatedly to "Shut it"); he refuses to speak in the several days before his execution (or to say anything more on the scaffold than a terse "Fix my hair, Jack"); and it is his silence, more than any physical threat, that holds Horace at the spring. Gresset refers to Popeye as "the center to which everything is drawn" ("Introduction" 3, n. 2), suggesting a kind of narrativistic "black hole" or gravitational pull

on light or readers' understanding, as opposed to a fully realized fictional character. This negative energy, I suggest, emanates from his silence.

In the novel's opening pages and in another telling association with Popeye appears an image that lies at the heart of Faulkner's writing and, potentially, of French criticism's interest in him. Traversing a hillside with Popeye to get to Goodwin's, Horace looks off in the direction of the "jungle" they've just left. What follows is a particularly opaque image: the jungle lay below them, we are told, "like a lake of ink" (183). This inky, dark lake suggests something crucial, appearing here at the opening of a novel that, as so many critics have pointed out, will *not* illuminate its characters' actions or, for some readers, even its putative subject. Appearing here, at the outset of Faulkner's most openly despairing book (with the possible exception of *Pylon*),⁷ this image of opacity has much to recommend it as a locus of significance. The role it plays in *Sanctuary* is as a clear (or rather, *unclear*...) figure for writing. In an almost proto-Derridean moment, we find a suggestion of what writing ("ink") cannot reveal, the inherent obscurity or leading-away of writing from what it means to say in the image of a lake filled with an impenetrable jet.⁸

Pylon, Writing, and the Recovery of the Dead

Such opacity and its associations with writing, darkness, and either a literal or figurative death appears elsewhere in Faulkner. Perhaps not surprisingly, these instances also include a French point of reference and have been taken up with particular vigor by French scholars. In *Pylon*, the other Faulkner novel Camus designated, along with *Sanctuary*, as his masterpieces, we find a similar "lake of ink." In the middle of the novel, the barnstorming pilot Roger Shuman crashes fatally into a body of water Faulkner churlishly calls "Lake Rimbaud." In a novel with chapter titles such as "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Tomorrow" and "And Tomorrow," such a wink at precursors to or paragons of the modernist canon might appear less surprising. Yet this reference takes on greater meaning when we consider, first, what role this lake plays in the novel's subsequent action and, second, what that role suggests about Faulkner's potentially 'French' attitudes toward writing.

Following Shuman's plane crash, the later sections of *Pylon* relate the elaborate (but ultimately unsuccessful) efforts of a search party

to recover his body. Illuminated all night by a probing, revolving searchlight, the lake's darkness nevertheless remains impenetrable, as teams of diving crews fail to find any trace of the pilot. As with all of the novel's action, this sequence of events is followed closely by the focalizing consciousness of *Pylon's* protagonist, its nameless, "cadaver-like" reporter. Fascinated with the nomadic pilots, and bearing the weight of an unrequited love for Shuman's wife, the reporter is scandalized by the failure to recover Shuman's corpse. Gresset finds *Pylon* to be "even more self-conscious" (*Fascination* 240) than Faulkner's earlier novels, including *Sanctuary*, and in it he finds another striking emphasis on vision. This occurs in the crowd's sustained activity of watching the airshow; it obtains in the opening scene of Jiggs fixating visually on a shop display of a pair of boots; it figures centrally in the reporter's impassive, floating observance of the pilots and Laverne; and, of course, in the book's closing section, as the searchlight fails in its endless monitoring of the lake where Roger Shuman has died. We find in *Pylon* then both a recapitulation of the voyeuristic fascination at play in *Sanctuary* and, in the reporter, a manifestation of what Blanchot would describe as the "genuine" suicide, that figure defined above all by an extreme form of lassitude (*The Space of Literature* 103-5).⁹ It is that affinity with death that occasions the reporter's final efforts to write the pilot's story as well as his withdrawal into drunken oblivion. He writes the story of Shuman's death and of the failed search party, as his job mandates that he do. But in doing so, he fashions a language that paradoxically speaks from the space of quietude. For he in fact writes the story twice, in versions that conflict radically in tone and that reveal the stubborn resistance in *Pylon*, not only to bringing the dead to the surface, but to the efficacy of writing of any kind once it has adequately contemplated death to 'return' to the space of the living.¹⁰

The Orphic and Faulkner's Writing

That kind of failed return provides the mythical point of reference for one of Blanchot's most celebrated essays. In "The Gaze of Orpheus," Blanchot finds a concrete image for the deathliness of writing. The same essay, in turn, gives Bleikasten a concrete image for his account of the force at the center of *The Sound and the Fury*. As the Orpheus myth demonstrates, to look directly at the object of longing – to succumb to the urge to will it into existence – means to lose it.

The interesting point for Blanchot is that Orpheus seeks Eurydice not in the full light of day or in the "space of the Orphic measure," his song ("The Gaze of Orpheus" 101). He seeks to see her and turns to look at Eurydice while he is still with her in the underworld. What this means to Blanchot is that "[Orpheus] does not want to make her live." Rather, Orpheus seeks the endless, inessential "profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead" (99).

This 'writerly' morbidity informs Bleikasten's major study of *The Sound and the Fury*, his early monograph *The Most Splendid Failure* (later collected in *The Ink of Melancholy*.) For Bleikasten the Compson brothers' repeated monologues are infused by Caddy's absence, a lack or deathliness against which their efforts to "tell" of their longing for their lost sister continually founders. Such foundering, however, is not a reflection of some intrinsic quality to Caddy herself, or to the incapacity of the brothers' (or their author's) verbal resources. Rather, as Bleikasten avers, this repeated need to "start the story over" tells us something crucial about the absence that writing not only seeks to overcome, but in fact itself engenders. The three Compson brothers' efforts to capture Caddy (or her surrogate for Jason, her daughter Quentin), to hold her fixed within their respective memory or their narrative gaze, produces what Bleikasten sees as the necessary "failure" of all writing to capture the ephemeral object of longing or to cover over – to make visible – the inchoate, impalpable, invisible nature of desire. As Bleikasten writes, invoking Blanchot, "Caddy is . . . rendered in such a way to make her appear throughout as a pure and poignant figure of *absence*. Caddy . . . is no sooner found than she is lost again. *The Sound and the Fury* does not celebrate the (imaginary) triumph of desire but reduplicates its necessary defeat. This novel is Faulkner's first descent into Hell, and Caddy remains his ever-elusive Eurydice" (*The Ink of Melancholy* 49).

Instrumentality and the New Criticism

Against the striking French interest in the ways that Faulkner's writing sought to show us, paradoxically, something that we cannot see, were the efforts on the part of American criticism to read Faulkner 'illustratively.' This was nowhere clearer than in the contemporary, wholesale American rejection of *Sanctuary*, precisely for its supposed immoral qualities. *Time* magazine referred to the novel's "pathology,"

and Henry Seidel Canby also referred to its despicable "sadism." Writing in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Canby coined the expression "The School of Cruelty" to describe what he saw as "the further end of both Puritanism and anti-Puritanism" (108). Faulkner, Canby claimed, depicts a "community which seems incapable of virtue in either the Christian or the Roman sense" (108), and this approach to the function of fiction is both "excessive" and clearly beyond what Canby sees as the purview of literature's proper ends (which would seem to be to exemplify these virtues).¹¹ Later American readers would similarly seek a way of critically harnessing or domesticating *Sanctuary's* unsettling power. Cleanth Brooks described the novel as Faulkner's exploration and condemnation of modern (for him, early twentieth-century) 'evil': urbanization, commercialism, and the failure of a traditional Southern-agrarian social order. In contrast to the French appreciation for the more abstract qualities of Faulkner's writing, then, a very different approach defined a school of thought that was to prove crucial in establishing Faulkner's reputation in America. Despite readers like Brooks and Allen Tate and their purported emphasis, not on a literary work's indebtedness to history or social commentary, the New Critics nevertheless saw in Faulkner precisely a paragon of the vision they held for a 'right way of living.' Traditional-minded, agrarian, and with a strong awareness of Southern gender and racial divisions, Faulkner appeared to critics like Cleanth Brooks to share – and to hold up for emulation – the values that they themselves extolled.

Canby, Tate, and Brooks were not the only representatives of an emerging literary establishment in the United States that shaped the early reception of *Sanctuary*. The notion of a writerly 'failure' that Bleikasten attributes to *The Sound and the Fury* and that Blanchot theorizes about language in fact obtains in an exemplary work of later New Critical scholarship. Yet the valence of failure in this work operates very differently than it does in examples of French thought. And that more literal valence suggests the limitations of a New Critical approach, at least as it was wielded by Walter Slatoff in his book *Quest for Failure*. In pursuing the New Critical aim of tracing a text's ambiguity, even its productive tensions and emotively suggestive lexical and rhetorical cross-purposes, as he does, Slatoff ultimately concludes that what "troubles [him] is the amount of such disorder in Faulkner's work" (264-65, emphasis mine). Faulkner 'fails' for Slatoff, not because he reaches for the inexpressible or the impossible in his

work (although Slatoff allows that this is indeed part of what defines Faulkner's writing). Rather, Faulkner fails to determine the 'real' ambiguities worthy of literature and such heroic failure-seeking (265).¹²

Questions about the correct province of writing and of literary merit or 'worth' have, of course, informed debate in France about literature and its political efficacies for generations. Such questions have also played a role in the various understandings, and perhaps misunderstandings, both within the academy and outside of it, of a thinker like Blanchot as well as Derrida. There is clearly not time to revisit those debates here.¹³ They further suggest, however, possible reasons that Faulkner would strike a French critical nerve. As such they allow me to relate Faulkner's appeal in France to a short lived but influential cultural institution. Moreover, they point up revealing limitations in the approach to Faulkner of at least one of his French readers.

Un Titre Manqué: *Sanctuary* and the *Série noire*

As a subsidiary of the great publishing house Gallimard, the *Série noire* devoted itself to the so-called *roman noir*, French translations of hard-boiled American fiction and European practitioners of a similar genre and style. Although the series did not in fact publish a version of *Sanctuary*, Faulkner's novel shared a spirit with much of what did appear in titles by this imprint. Initiated in 1945 by Marcel Duhamel and immediately following World War II, the *Série noire* continued a trend in France of celebrating a certain kind of 'hard' as well as hard-nosed American realism. Committed largely to French translations of writers like James Cain, Horace McCoy, Dashiell Hammett, and others, the *Série noire* was immensely popular.¹⁴ Although modern American fiction's commitment to a kind of brutal honesty and realism had attracted French readers to figures like Hemingway or Steinbeck, these authors differed significantly from the writers of the *Série noire*. Social realism like Steinbeck's and other 1930s writers such as Mike Gold resembles what Jean-Paul Sartre called "engaged writing," a political approach to literature that valued it for what it could effect or *do*. Yet, as French readings of Faulkner or certain French cultural phenomena like the *Série noire* suggest, such efficacy was not always considered primary.

As a means of drawing the terms of this discussion together, Sartre's opposition to what he saw as the particular quality of Faulkner's 'excess' tell us something important about his difference from several of the French writers whom I have considered. Gresset refers to Sartre's 1938 review of *Sartoris* and Sartre's reference in it to Faulkner's reliance on his characters' "gestures." In tones that sound the depth of Sartre's belief in the political uses of writing, he finds himself looking, when reading Faulkner, for the concreteness of an "Act." Against these precious moments Sartre notes "Faulkner's volubility, his superbly abstract style," which for him functions as a writerly version of *trompe l'oeil* technique: we see an illusory if captivating surface to his prose; yet not, within it, the (realist) world of narrative action. "All of a sudden," Sartre declares, "from the depths of [Faulkner's fictional scenes], the Act looms up, like a meteorite. An Act – at last something has happened, there is a message" (Sartre quoted in Gresset, 151-52).

Yet it is precisely against this need for literature to dramatize an 'act' and a commensurate 'message' that the *Série noire* and much French thought has been committed. The writers of the *Série noire* differed from their counterparts in social realism in the latter's efforts to use literature as a way to mount protest or directly address social issues. By contrast, the determinedly fatalistic tones of *Série* titles such as Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1934) (*On achève bien les chevaux*, 1946), or the chaotic narrative and almost surreal violence of Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929) (*La moisson rouge*, 1932), suggest a world that *cannot* be understood by its characters or explained, least of all in writing. As a result, such works could not be said to be useful or to effect any positive material change in the order of things. The absence of legible meaning to the world outside of fiction in this period – manifested in the postwar European city or in an America that the 1930s showed to have fallen well short of its promised dream – found a suggestive voice in American hard-nosed crime writing – in France as well as the U.S. It also found a ready audience and commensurate editorial support in the *Série noire*.

As Jonathan Eburne points out about French attitudes about language and, especially, literature, the debate about the political efficacy of writing is long standing (807-08). Ever since Flaubert labored heroically to write a "novel about nothing" in elegant sentences and a glimmering style, or Charles Baudelaire placed Parisienne prostitutes in balanced Alexandrines in *Les Fleurs du mal*, French writers have challenged the notion that a well-made literary work should also edify.

Into this long context, Faulkner's fiction may well be seen as an American example of non-instrumental, even absurdist fiction.¹⁵ In addition to the circumspect nature of a book like *Sanctuary*, a perversity that most American critics were only too willing to condemn, Faulkner's writing generally possesses a quality of 'excess' on the level of style. The details of such a quality may not need enumerating. Faulkner's seemingly endless sentences, his proliferating narrators and voices, his 'baroque' diction are familiar to Faulkner's admirers as well as his detractors.

While *Sanctuary* might well be said to resemble the (absurdist) novels of the *Série noire* as well as American hard-nosed and pulp fiction, it was published before many of the titles in Duhamel's series. What *Sanctuary* does share with these *noir* fictions is a view of language, in particular, the absurdist, non-instrumental vision of both narrative and verbal expression that differed so strikingly from the naturalism and social protest works that were powerful and popular in the 1930s. Over twenty-plus years, Duhamel published hundreds of titles, including, as Eburne demonstrates, the crime fiction of Chester Himes, novels that shared a vision of the non-instrumental nature of both language and the absurd quality of black social reality in America and that, for Eburne, contributed to Himes's becoming a 'French writer.' In sum, I make a similar claim for Faulkner. Duhamel may never have read *Sanctuary* or, indeed, any other of Faulkner's novels. Undoubtedly, if he had, he would have published them.

Notes

- ¹ It is by now a commonplace of histories of film culture that French *cinéphiles* such as Borde and Chaumont were, like the rest of the French viewing public, exposed to this cycle of films at one time, when they glutted the French market following World War II. In such circumstances, these and other critics discerned qualities to films they designated as *noir* that other audiences, seeing them over many years, may have overlooked. See Lois Davis Vines, "Poe in France," for an account of the American poet and short-story writer's varied receptions in France and the United States. See also Christopher Peterson, "Possessed by Poe: Reading Poe in an Age of Intellectual Guilt." One could easily extend this list of 'underappreciated' American artists who at critical points in their careers found greater support in France than at home: Dexter Gordon, Charlie Parker, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, or Chester Himes.
- ² See also John T. Matthews, "The Elliptical Nature of *Sanctuary*" and George Toles, "The Space Between: A Study of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*."

- ³ Sartre's early work on Faulkner included the celebrated essay "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner." While this piece was highly influential to later readers of this novel, Sartre's work on Faulkner elsewhere marks his perspective as different from the French critics who valorized *Sanctuary* and whom I treat here. I will return to Sartre's unique position within French critical thought on Faulkner in closing.
- ⁴ I have in mind a remark by Roland Barthes: "I have a disease; I see language . . . I feel myself to be the visionary and voyeur of language" (Roland Barthes 161).
- ⁵ Joseph Blotner traces the elaborate timing of *Sanctuary*'s original composition and Faulkner's long deferred marriage, within the same few months, to Estelle Oldham (Blotner 232-40). In one particular letter Faulkner wrote in the spring of 1929, he fairly pleaded for a cash advance from his publisher, Hal Smith, pursued in part because of his pending nuptials and the honeymoon, for which he would also have to borrow money. Expressing a willingness in this letter to incur debt (at the alarmingly high interest rate of ten percent [quoted in Blotner 240]), Faulkner demonstrates the kind of desperation that, whatever else contributed to *Sanctuary*'s original conception, inspired the book's writing.
- ⁶ Faulkner wrote this introduction for Malcolm Cowley's *Portable William Faulkner* (New York: Viking Press, 1946).
- ⁷ Like *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Cape & Smith, 1929), *Pylon* may be said to anticipate a personal tragedy for Faulkner. Its account of the violent death of a barnstorming pilot preceded by six months Faulkner's brother Dean's own death in a plane crash.
- ⁸ In his essay "C'est affreux goût d'encre: Emma Bovary's Ghost in *Sanctuary*," Bleikasten wrote of the sour, deathly taste of ink in the novel he sees as *Sanctuary*'s literary forebear, *Madame Bovary*, and he refers to the "liquide noir" that runs out of Emma's mouth after she's died. Bleikasten then reminds us that Popeye, to Horace, "smells black . . . like that black stuff that ran out of Bovary's mouth and down upon her bridal veil when they raised her head" (*Sanctuary* 7). Bleikasten traces tropes of liquidity and vomiting in both novels and links them to bodily dissolution and to what Bleikasten describes as female hysteria (in Temple and Emma alike). Though Bleikasten's concerns here are more with the intertextual depth that *Sanctuary* gains by such references, he elsewhere demonstrates a sense of the amoral insistence on surface that is suggested by the description of the "lake of ink." See the chapters devoted to it in *The Ink of Melancholy*, especially Chapter XIII, "The Madness of Bodies" 237-39.
- ⁹ See Blanchot's comments about the paradox of suicide, "The Strange Project, or Double Death," *The Space of Literature*, 103-07. I will return shortly to this conception. We may note in passing that the reporter's passivity is in contrast to the more purposeful, teleological and thus 'false' suicide Quentin Compson imagines in *The Sound and the Fury*, a notion of which his father tries to disabuse him. In a similar provocation to my own with this essay, Gresset challenges that "*Pylon* . . . feels like an 'evil,' inhuman novel - one that hardly pleased anyone in America. And yet *Pylon* may well provide us with the key to Faulkner's imagination" (250).
- ¹⁰ Like death, language negates. As Blanchot and others claim, to write is necessarily to engage with a vast, vague impersonal realm, like death in that such a realm

is precisely where the writer loses him- or herself. Blanchot refers to the fact that writing is most effective, or most successful, when it fails, for such failure signals the genuine giving up of mastery – over meaning, being, or language – that he defines as the (negative) ‘space’ of literature. Consonant with this idea is Blanchot’s account of the work vs. the book. The ‘work’ is that which Blanchot designates as an objective, impersonal presence that negates or leaves behind the writer; it is what emerges from a writer’s effort to grapple with that which eludes him or her, that which is sought – but is always sought *in vain*. Blanchot makes the analogy of the work and a certain understanding of death, one that he conveys through a consideration of suicide. The aim of the suicide is generally not the thoroughly negative, passive state of non-being. Blanchot believes that the conventional view of suicide is entirely too active, too *positive* in the sense of seeking a goal or an ‘end’ – not the end of life, but an object or a meaning to the act of suicide that bears a connection to the world of the living. Rather, if death is understood as that to which we have no connection, suicide cannot be understood as a meaningful action. (Indeed, this is the problem Mr. Compson has with his son Quentin’s approach to suicide). Suicide “is a passage from an act that has been planned, consciously acted upon, and vigorously executed, to something which disorients every project, remains foreign to all decisions – the indecisive and uncertain, the crumbling of . . . interest” (*The Space of Literature* 104). The writer – if he or she approaches language open to all its annihilating, disorienting possibilities – commits him- or herself to an endeavor that could well mislead or confound the best-laid plans. The unknown, disabling impersonality of death in this respect resembled what Blanchot sees as the nocturnal, obscure ‘space’ of writing.

- ¹¹ In the same review, Canby declared that Poe’s stories “are now read as drug fantasies, more interesting to the psychologist than to the man of letters” (109) – leaving little use for Poe by a later French thinker like Lacan and in a way that extends my account of French [poststructural] thinking about American literature. See Lacan’s near-canonical “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter.’”
- ¹² In this light, it is worth noting that in his study of the Faulkner canon, Slatoff offers a mere single page to discussing *Sanctuary*, a novel notable for him above all for “provid[ing] the greatest degree of resolution of any of Faulkner’s novels” (210). For Slatoff this is a resolution that, in its futility, points up the New Critical lament about urbanization, mechanization, and ‘rootlessness’ evident in the dystopic villain, Popeye.
- ¹³ I refer, of course, to the scandal surrounding both men’s politics and, in Blanchot’s case, a dubious personal history and the relationship of his early writing career to National Socialism.
- ¹⁴ It also harkened back to literary and artistic thinking and practice from the 1920s. In a recent article in *PMLA*, Jonathon Eburne suggests that the *Série noire* writers offer an extension of French surrealist thought that had developed before the War and which found its clearest expression in the manifestos of André Breton about the powerful absurdism of ‘*humour noir*.’ See “The Transatlantic Mysteries of Paris: Chester Himes, Surrealism, and the *Série noire*.”
- ¹⁵ We might note even in passing the absurd extended scene of *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Cape & Smith, 1930) or the combination of comedy and horror in *Sanctuary*,

a combination that threw off so many American readers of the novel but which was crucial for Breton's concept of 'black humor.' Interestingly for this discussion, the African-American writer Chester Himes claims he read *Sanctuary* to "sustain [his own] outrageousness" because Faulkner's fiction was, to him, "the most absurd ever written" (quoted in Eburne 812).

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