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Review Essay

Kinds of Faulknerians

By Peter Lurie, University of Richmond

***Faulkner and Material Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* 2004. Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, eds. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. Pp. xxii + 155. \$50.00 (cloth).**

***Faulkner's Inheritance: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* 2005. Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, eds. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. Pp. xviii + 178. \$50.00 (cloth).**

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There are, it seems, two kinds of Faulknerians. Or there used to be. Although not contending critical camps per se, these two approaches to the long career of this modernist from the American south nevertheless partake of very different ways of considering the canonical writer. In the process, they seek to maintain Faulkner's continuing relevance in ways that say much about his contribution to a uniquely American and regional modernism as well as a body of work marked, particularly in his later novels, by post-Second World War—if not also postmodern—practices and concerns.

These two recent volumes from the long standing *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* series offer strong examples of both “versions” of the Bard of Oxford. At first glance, the topics of these two books might seem to trace a divide between traditional and contemporary approaches to Faulkner. “Inheritance” suggests a concern with pasts and origins, powerfully held to in the Old South, that Faulkner both thematizes and complicates in major novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. Material culture is, of course, a not-quite new methodology that offers critics a way to approach Faulkner through what is considered a democratizing, forward-looking perspective—one in which the literal detritus or material things in his fictional world matter more than grand, master narratives about the lingering effects in the South of rules of primogeniture.

The modernist Faulkner would be one for whom, as Patricia Yeager described in a recent issue of *PMLA*, “the past [and] tradition become



804 . . . a source of gleams.”¹ Offering here “the history of what shines,” Yeager describes a difference between modernist and postmodern understandings of trash in the light of a numinous, sublime contemporary aesthetic (associated with landfills, a decaying but toxically charged ecology, and a DeLilloean aporia at the end of *Underworld*). As one of the contributors to the *Faulkner and Material Culture* volume, Yeager would seem to relegate Faulkner to an earlier, modernist treatment of gleaming. After all, for characters like Gail Hightower, Quentin Compson, and Horace Benbow, Southern history shines strong and hard.

Yeager’s own essay in *Faulkner and Material Culture* (“Dematerializing Culture: Faulkner’s Trash Aesthetic”) suggests the interesting fault lines in Faulkner studies. It would be reasonable, and largely true to say that Faulkner’s writing from the period before 1942 constitutes his more recognizably high modernist stage. Yet as Yeager and others throughout these books demonstrate, much of what appears in Faulkner before the 1940s demonstrates what critics here and elsewhere have described as postmodernist strategies and perspectives. While the idea of Faulkner’s “inheritance” may seem to refer to a modernist fascination with the past, several essays in *both* volumes are themselves inflected with more recent critical perspectives or find in Faulkner a different kind of modernist than the one with which we are perhaps familiar.

Yeager sees Abner Snopes in “Barn Burning” as a postmodern, productive defiler of *haut-bourgeois* and aristocratic objects, and of social positioning. “Snopes’s laborious obliterations [of de Spain’s rug and others’ property] have a logic, as well as a resonance with postmodern destructivist artists who produced gorgeous, ruined work in the 1960s and ‘70s [such as Rafael Montañez Ortiz and Gordon Matta-Clark].”² This is rather different from the Faulkner who was once understood as the great lamenter of the Old South’s passing.

For Yeager, the two Faulknors exist in conflict in the same story. “Barn Burning” ends with an aesthetic, even Romantic celebration of natural sublimity. Opposing his father by alerting the authorities to Ab’s barn burning plan—and thus, siding with landed property (or with inheritance)—at story’s end Sarty awakens to “the dark woods within which the liquid silver voices of the birds called unceasing—the rapid and urgent beating of the urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night.”³ As Yeager puts it, “Awash in song and ‘liquid silver’ [another modernist gleaming], we find [in “Barn Burning”] no celebration of the ashy [postmodern] sublime” (*FMC*, 55). Yet, as her discussion of Ab and of other characters suggests—such as Armstid in *The Hamlet* digging for a non-existent buried treasure at the close of the novel—Faulkner and his characters “create detritus as spectacle” (*FMC*, 60).⁴

Like Yeager, Miles Orvell’s essay, “Order and Rebellion: Faulkner’s Small Town and the Place of Memory,” suggests something of this split between a traditional, mournful modernist and a more contemporary sensibility. Faulkner’s treatment of both Jefferson itself and of certain key material objects in it (the courthouse and the Civil War monument, in particular) functions alternatively in his fiction. The early novels like *Soldier’s Pay* and *The Sound and the Fury* show a version of the town that preserves a social and cultural order, the passing of which Faulkner both appreciates and regrets. The South’s insurgency during the Civil War, the “rebellion” of Orvell’s title, then becomes the resistance to modernity’s crushing weight in the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet the South’s clinging to an outmoded past, which with the increasingly popular Civil War monuments became more pervasive in the twentieth century, also “devolves into the mock observances of” miniature Confederate flags (*FMC*, 118), a kind of false, performed Southernness that Faulkner would go on to describe in a later novel like *Requiem for a Nun*.

One of the reasons for the notion of dual approaches to Faulkner follows from the fact that, as in recent Faulkner studies generally, several critics in these collections pay more attention to later Faulkner works than his celebrated novels from the 1920s and 1930s. *Go Down, Moses*, *The Mansion*, and *Requiem for a Nun* figure prominently in these volumes, in essays that describe both inherited values or beliefs and the pervasive role in Faulkner’s fiction, not of Southern attitudes or antiquated ideas (like inheritance), but also of things.

Jon Smith’s essay on *Faulkner’s Inheritance*, “Faulkner, Metropolitan Fashion, and ‘The South,’” might well have appeared in the *Material Culture* volume. Smith focuses on several representations of Southern codes of dress—examples of material culture such as neckties and, in *The Mansion*, an only seemingly innocuous piece of wood that Flem Snopes nails to the mantle of his home’s traditional fireplace. Smith shows how this gesture amounts to a willful gesture of

resistance on Flem's part to the South's culture of performing fashionability and to an upwardly mobile taste. An act of defiance that Smith calls "protopunk," Flem nails his unadorned ledge into the very embodiment of a Southern gentile culture that he both joins and spurs. In a subtle extension of Priscilla Wald's Cold War analysis ("Atomic Faulkner," see below), Smith goes on to show how Ratliff's and Stevens's visit to Greenwich Village critiques a 1950s ethos of intolerance that extends aesthetically as well as politically. Smith argues that Ratliff's canny appreciation of the sculptor Barton Kohl's abstract formalism and the New York designer Allanova's ties is an antidote to the South's rejection of aesthetic difficulty, exemplified by modernism. "It's that intolerance that leads to boredom [of the sort that leads to Eula Varner Snopes's suicide] by expelling the surprising, the creative."⁵

Priscilla Wald reads provocatively backwards from Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Prize speech in the *Inheritance* volume. Noting in "Atomic Faulkner" the Cold War overtones to Faulkner's remarks in Stockholm about the fear of annihilation and humankind's endurance, she connects such postwar anxieties to Faulkner's remarks in an interview about living in a post-apocalyptic world (in other words, the post-Civil War, reconstructed South) well before the atomic age. By way of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Wald connects Sutpen's discovery of class identity to Faulkner's civil rights analysis of the South's resistance to integration. In a 1956 essay entitled "On Fear," Faulkner described the white South's worry about economic equality with African Americans. He urged his fellow Mississippians to marshal their courage in the face of what they perceived as challenges to their way of life in the same way that they had in pursuing the "Lost Cause." Invidious as such connections may be, they show Faulkner's thinking about "freedom" to be both marked by his region's more limited perspective as well as deeply understanding of white as well as black fear of "social death"—a term coined by Orlando Patterson to describe slavery, but one that Wald shows is apposite to Thomas Sutpen in his discovery of class difference and his longing for a *narrative* genealogy. She argues that, "In [Faulkner's] analysis, apocalyptic fear is the fear of social death writ large, since it leaves no one to tell the story that bestows social existence and the measure of immortality that memory offers" (*FI*, 50). On this reading, Faulkner's watershed modernist novel becomes retrospectively linked to (and prescient about) historical developments that postdate the modern period.

In "Making 'Something Which Did Not Exist Before': What Faulkner Gave Himself," Noel Polk poses radically inventive questions about what it meant for Faulkner to forcibly re-make a novelistic language when he found himself confronting the fraught, weighted legacies of the South's and his family's history. Comparing Faulkner's position as a developing writer to Jim Burden's in Cather's *My Ántonia*—whom Polk describes as having the seeming advantage of writing about and from the newly created country of turn-of-the-century Nebraska—Polk shows Faulkner exploring ways to re-make a world that felt otherwise closed to interpretation and re-ordering. The result is one of the more subtle appreciations that Faulkner studies has produced of the intersections of Faulkner's formalism with history as a made, rather than "found," order of knowing.

Paradoxically, material culture studies are both an unlikely source of scholarly intervention and a seeming easy fit for Faulkner. In his fiction, objects perform a key function in the lives of characters. This is nowhere clearer than in Charles Aiken's reference, in his essay "Faulkner and the Passing of the Old Agrarian Culture," to the depictions of shelved goods in rural furnish stores, like the one that opens "Barn Burning" (with its "ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans"⁶), or that Thomas Sutpen turns to in *Absalom*, and Flem Snopes later manages in the Trilogy. Yet as forceful as such objects are in the lives of characters and in actual Southern experience—whether they be furnishings, photographs, buildings, or canned goods—they are always subordinate to the ways they intersect with Faulkner's complicated depictions of them: the overlapping, layering effects of Faulkner's imaginary spaces and his explorations of characters' consciousness or desire. In "Order and Rebellion: Faulkner's Small Town and the Place of Memory," Miles Orvell refers to this "amalgam of the powerfully imaginative with the embodied realism of place" as distinguishing Faulkner's work more generally (*FMC*, 108).

Jay Watson's treatment of this amalgam is superb. In "The Philosophy of Furniture, or *Light in August* and the Material Unconscious," he pays scrupulous attention to the exigencies of the

806 lumber and timber industries in the South and in Mississippi in the period of *Light in August*. At the same time he shows the novel's deep awareness of the violent processes of planning and shaping—people as well as wood—in the *cultural* economy of Yoknapatawpha County. Encompassing Lena's peregrinations through Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, *Light in August* becomes in Watson's hands a remarkably dense, well-nigh overdetermined novel, unique perhaps in Faulkner's oeuvre in its treatment of actual mills, metaphors of naming (Lena Grove, Lucas Burch), descriptions of characters' wooden "bodies," and the both symbolic and material role of furniture in the novel and in the South. Using a range of economic and material culture theories, Watson's essay concludes with the Marxian failure of Gail Hightower's table to "stand on its head" and protect Joe Christmas, allowing itself, rather, to function only inertly and as an ineffective shield for Percy Grimm's fatal gunshots. "The table's failure to carry out its ethical task should not be read as an indictment of the object," however, "but as an indictment of the human world in which it attempts to function, a world of such excessive violence and risk that not even material culture, with its in-built charge of compassion and charity, can shelter the human subject from its blows (*FMC*, 40).

Katherine Henninger points up the prevalence of manufactured images of the South rather than the objects in it in her essay, "Faulkner, Photography, and the Regional Ethics of Form." "Picture the South," she urges in her opening (*Faulkner and Material Culture* 121)—a deceptively simple remark that leads to a striking analysis of the ways in which for many non-Southerners, the region has already been pictured and imagined for us in photographs. Henninger shows the ways in which what she calls Faulkner's "fictionalized photographs" (after work in this direction by Judith Sensibar and others) summon both the supreme power of visuality in a Southern culture, one in which external signs of race can literally determine life or death (123), and a way to question the formal definitions by which the South claimed regional identity. Examining the received notion of a strong Southern tradition of oral culture, Henninger shows the contingent nature of the ways in which representation allows individuals to acknowledge (or fail to acknowledge) one another in the South and, more importantly, how such contingency challenges ideas about evidence and the photograph's supposedly indexical truth.

D. Matthew Ramsey offers another useful material culture approach. His essay "'Touch Me While You Look at Her': Stars, Fashion, and Authorship in *Today We Live*" takes a materialist approach to not only the audience for MGM's 1933 film *Today We Live*, based on Faulkner's story "Turnabout," but also to the significance for such audiences of Joan Crawford's involvement in the film. Reading against common analyses of Faulkner's adversarial relationship to Hollywood, Ramsey suggests that the film's putative failure rested, not on the unsuitability of Faulkner's high art fiction to the crass venality of the culture industry, but on Faulkner's and Howard Hawks's non-understanding of the "meaning" of Joan Crawford as a Hollywood icon—a signifying phenomenon that rested on audiences' pleasure in Crawford's habitual costume changes, and the *non-instrumental* role of her ravishing gowns (which clashed with her "shopgirl" persona). Because the film departs significantly from Faulkner's story (notably in its fashioning of a completely new female character for Crawford), it intervened in a complex material cultural life that the films' creators did not yet understand. As a result, however, Ramsey offers the provocative suggestion that in writing the screenplay, Faulkner was compelled to imagine female subjectivity and desire for one of the first times as a writer. Ramsey points to subsequent characterizations like Laverne in *Pylon* (and might have included Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*) as examples of sexual, autonomous female characters that Faulkner could only have written after working on this film.

In a move that may reveal a more conventional critical trope, Kevin Railey focuses on the South's loss of more traditional modes of behavior. In "*Flags in the Dust* and the Material Culture of Class," Railey traces the ways in which the new Southern man felt forced to perform masculinity aggressively. This marks a change for a character like Bayard Sartoris who, in an earlier era of gentility, would have found an identity conferred by birth. As a result of his grandfather's (and the South's) severing of ties from the past, Bayard "seek(s) endlessly for what was lost" (*FMC*, 76), a longing that is also felt as a penchant for lost objects or things. Horace Benbow appears in Railey's conclusion as a kind of modernist *fabbro*, his glass blowing an example of, as Railey puts it, the fact that, "Rather than doing things or owning things [as Bayard and other

New South denizens must], people can make things" (*FMC*, 80). Against such a view, T. Jackson Lears closes the *Material Culture* volume by describing Faulkner's resistance to just such a modernist "productivist" ethos. In "True and False Things: Faulkner and the World of Goods," Lears describes Faulkner's decidedly postmodern awareness of the ways that artificial products and indeed consumption can lead to a performed, but nonetheless authentic identity.

The essay which engages most directly, perhaps, with the topic of Faulkner's inheritance is Lael Gold's "A Mammie Callie Legacy." While other work on Faulkner's engagement with African Americans exists—both in his writing and in real life—Gold's chapter is a genuinely fresh account of what she terms the dialogical operations of Faulkner's Bible. Throughout his fiction, she avers, Faulkner offered both a black, oral version of Biblical stories and injunctions and, against this, a more limited, writerly version of religion subscribed to by whites. White characters like Ike McCaslin and Gavin Stevens in *Go Down, Moses* exhibit an estrangement from scripture due to their rational, discursive approaches to it—an approach that Faulkner links allusively to nihilism and despair in books like *The Sound and the Fury* and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. Faulkner's often illiterate African-American characters, conversely, enjoy an ecstatic and positive version of Freud's "oceanic" sense of connection to the world and to others by way of a spoken version of the good book. Well aware of the potential pitfalls of this primitivist approach on Faulkner's part, Gold successfully shows that Faulkner routinely questions such binaristic thinking. Her thoroughly detailed Bakhtinian approach to the legacy of black oral culture surrounding the Bible in Faulkner's South leads to a thoughtful, original approach to a direct "inheritance" of Faulkner's: namely, his caretaker Caroline Barr and her spoken renderings of the Old and New Testaments.

Not the least important insight of the essay is Gold's suggestion that, in translating Bakhtin, Kristeva altered his Russian term for "word," in all its multivalent possibilities, into the much more strictly Western (and poststructural) "text." The interest of this mild correction extends well beyond Faulkner studies. It allows the insight into Faulkner's own meaningful celebration of African-American Biblical orality, showing how this famous literary experimenter profoundly adapted the lessons of modernist formalism to his multicultural South. More broadly, it also opens up a discursive space to expand on Kristeva's and Bakhtin's thinking about literature, the carnivalesque, and the *mutual* life of marginal and dominant groups. Gold, therefore, offers a valuable contribution to a Faulkner studies that has mired itself in either critiques of the author's putative, internalized Southern racism or extollings of his having avoided this pitfall.

Gold's essay is the last to appear in *Faulkner's Inheritance*. Her work represents a potential new wave of Faulkner scholarship and, as such, offers evidence of a critical "inheritance" for this at times troubled writer (Gold was a graduate student at the time of the 2005 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha conference). In the final analysis, Faulkner is not readily definable as a postmodernist; he is genuinely not of our era. But neither does he need to be. For as the essays in these volumes suggest, his writing continues to speak to a changing modernist studies and, indeed, to the concerns of the later twentieth- and even twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Patricia Yeager, "The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash," in *PMLA* 123.2 (March 2008), 329.

2. Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Material Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 2004* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 54. Henceforth abbreviated *FMC*.

3. William Faulkner, *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1934), 25. Quoted in Yeager, 55.

4. Curiously, Yeager makes no mention of Faulkner's arguably most postmodern novel, *Pylon*, or of *Sanctuary*, a book concerned from its opening with material culture. *Sanctuary's* narrator famously comments on Popeye's "tight suit and stiff hat [being] all angles, like a modernist lampstand" and, in the same passage, on the poisoned natural setting in which Popeye's "hat jerked in a dull, vicious gleam in the twilight as he looked down the hill where the jungle already lay like a lake of ink." Wil-

808 liam Faulkner, *Novels 1930–1935* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 183. Yet surely the gleam of a post-ecological detritus suffuses *Sanctuary* in such moments, as it does in *Pylon*: think of the description of the Feinman airport, erected on a landfilled Louisiana swamp, with its “rotundra, filled with dusk . . . lighted now with a soft sourceless wash of no earthly color or substance and which cast no shadow.” Faulkner, *Novels 1930–1935*, 799.

5. Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner’s Inheritance: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 2005* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 97. Henceforth abbreviated *FI*.

6. Faulkner, *The Collected Stories of William Faulkner*, 3.