A Patchwork Quilt of Perspectives:

Polyphony in Faulkner

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“Man knows so little about his fellows.”

*(Light in August, Chapter 2, pg. 47)*

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I. The “refuse” of Faulkner the man

William Faulkner ranks among the most celebrated and most studied of Southern Gothic novelists, and critics over the decades have taken his most renowned works as exemplary models of what Modernist fiction could achieve. Yet the man behind the monolithic name remains elusive, though perhaps not as elusive as he would have preferred. In a February 1949 letter to literary critic Malcolm Cowley—the man who, as his New York Times obituary puts it, “rescued Faulkner from early oblivion”—Faulkner explained that

[the public life of the artist] is not for me. I will protest to the last: no photographs, no recorded documents. It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them. It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: he made the books, and he died. (Selected Letters of William Faulkner 285)

Of course, the very fact that we can read this letter today demonstrates that Faulkner’s wish has not come true, and that wish shows no sign of being fulfilled any time soon. The endless republishing and quoting of the letter also serves as a testament to our abiding interest in Faulkner as a private individual and the “refuse” beyond his published works.

Though his letter to Cowley might suggest a reticence on Faulkner’s part when it came to talking about his work, Faulkner showed far less restraint during his 1957-1958 stint as a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Virginia. In his series of lectures and interviews as a Writer-in-Residence, Faulkner discussed his writing process in detail, but Faulkner’s answers to student
and faculty questions sometimes seem to only raise new questions. When these lectures are taken alongside Faulkner’s statements in private letters and conversations, one often struggles to reconcile the different versions of Faulkner that the author created of himself.

In his early life, Faulkner devoted much of his attention to spinning his own yarn of his life as he wanted others to see it. After the U.S. Army Air Force rejected him due to his height, Faulkner added a “u” to his family name, lied about the details of his birth, and faked a British accent to apply for the British Royal Air Force (Mississippi Writers Page 2013). In the autobiographical profile he submitted alongside “A Rose for Emily” in the April 1930 issue of *Forum*, Faulkner described his lackluster performance as a British pilot in World War I, but in reality the war ended before he had even completed his training for the Canadian Royal Air Force—not the British Royal Flying Corps—had ended (Porter 2-4). Faulkner also lied about his military service in his personal life as well: when he returned home to Mississippi, he “bought an officer’s dress uniform and a set of wings for the breast pocket, even though he had probably never flown solo” (University of Mississippi 2013).

While Faulkner had tried to make a name for himself as a man’s man in his youth, almost as if to compensate for his lack of achievement up to that point, he also hid from discussing his intellect and his talent as an author throughout his career. In the 1930 autobiographical submission accompanying “A Rose for Emily,” Faulkner downplayed his own intelligence, claiming that he spent “five years in seventh grade” when in fact he had been given the opportunity to skip a grade in grammar school (Porter 2-4). In 1957, the older Faulkner, a Nobel Prize winner with nothing to prove and an accomplished author known for his experimental prose, told students at the University of Virginia, “I don’t know anything about style” (“Blotner and Gwynn’s Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957”). Here we see Faulkner making statements that he
must have known his audience could not believe and statements which he surely could not have believed himself.

Unfortunately, Faulkner the man distanced himself from the works of Faulkner the author with his social views as well. Faulkner wrote sympathetic African American characters and explored the interiority of those whose entire lives had been defined by racial prejudices, leading critic Richard Godden to describe *Light in August* as “a thriller whose villain is the word ‘nigger’” (Godden 238). However, in his personal writings, Faulkner showed little compunction about freely using the word in its most derogatory sense, and Faulkner’s private and public statements on race relations do not always fit the liberal mold critics today might be tempted to apply to Faulkner’s fiction in hindsight.

In these pages, I will examine these dissonant voices of Faulkner the author and the Faulkner the man alongside the voices of the characters and narrators in his fiction. My interest lies not in finding a satisfactory compromise among his works but in examining how Faulkner uses the concept of polyphony—here used to describe the presentation of distinct and independent voices within a literary text or collection of texts unbound by authorial consciousness—to dismantle the concept of authorial authority in both his fiction and his own extra-textual commentary on his work.

II. Faulkner and Bakhtin’s conception of “polyphony”

Borrowed from music, the term “polyphony,” describes concurrent but independent tones or melodies. The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin used the term to describe how the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky achieved a similar effect in literature.¹ In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*,

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¹ Though Bakhtin’s “Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics” may have introduced the literary studies community to his concept of “polyphony,” Bakhtin did not coin the term. According to Dostoevsky scholar René Wellek, it appears
Bakhtin argues that Fyodor Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels “created a fundamentally new novelistic genre” (Bakhtin 7). Unlike most of his literary predecessors, Dostoevsky shaped his novels as a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin 6). He did not only concern himself with the thoughts of his principal characters but also, as J. Meier-Graefe observed, “every bit-player as well” (Bakhtin 6).

Dostoevsky has numerous heirs in literature and modernist Southern Gothic literature specifically. In particular, Bakhtin’s analysis can be applied to the works of William Faulkner, who, as it happens, expressed his admiration of Dostoevsky and listed his works among those which he frequently reread (“English Department Faculty and Wives. 13 May 1957”). By delivering his stories through the eyes of more than one subjective character, Faulkner gave his works an essentially polyphonic structure.

The polyphony of Faulkner’s Southern Gothic works can be seen as a manifestation of the Modernist concern with questions of identity and perspective. In his introduction to William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist, Daniel Singal describes the “passion for integration” found in the works of Modernist painters, directors, and musicians:

Modernist painters from the cubists onward [placed] all planes and perspectives on the campus simultaneously, so that the viewer could not select individual facets of the painting for attention but would have to experience it as a fused whole. The same passion for integration accounts for the predilection of twentieth-century thinkers and writers for such devices as paradox (which joins seeming opposites) and ambivalence (the fusing of contradictory emotions, such

first in Otto Ludwig's writings on “Polyphoner Dialog.” and Bakhtin himself attributed the term to V. Komarovich (Wellek 32).
as love and hate). One also finds this modality at work in the practice of cinematic montage, with its juxtaposition of diverse events and experiences; in the resort to multiple overlapping harmonies and rhythms in contemporary music. (Singal 10, emphasis his)

While the works of Faulkner and other Southern Modernists display that same appreciation for paradox and ambivalence that Singal identifies in Modernist writers, I think that one can trace the influence of other Modernist art forms in Faulkner’s works. *As I Lay Dying* seem to be structured along the same lines as a cubist painting, with all of the differing perspectives visible and audible by novel’s end, while *The Sound and the Fury*, with the sections narrated by Benjy and Quentin constant leaping backwards and forwards through time, allows the reader to experience time as a “fused whole.” ² The plot lines of other novels, such as *Light in August*, weave back and forth through other characters’ stories much like the overlapping jazz rhythms Singal describes.

This polyphony serves a dual purpose: at once, through its manipulation of perspective, the polyphonic novel demonstrates how identities are forced on individuals as it gives the reader a more or less unadulterated peek into the inner life of individuals. In the Southern Gothic works written during the Southern Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, many Southern novelists and short story writers constructed works that, in keeping with the Modernist concerns of the times, explored how society—and the rigid society of the South in particular—not only constructs identities for individuals through its expectations but also enforces these expectations with gossip and, too often, with violence. For this reason, Southern Gothic works often concentrate on Others

² Note that my notion of *As I Lay Dying* as a cubist novel is distinct from that of some other writers, such as Darryl Hattenhauer and Panthea Reid Broughton, who have argued that cubist influence manifests itself in Faulkner’s attention to geometric shapes in the prose of *As I Lay Dying*. Broughton, for instance, suggests that cubist principles can be found in the “[r]epeating geometric designs—lines and circles, verticals and horizontals—Faulkner actually facets, like a cubist painting, the design of this book” (Hattenhauer 146).
and the process of Othering in the South, which has so many Others due to its rich and troubled history and the role of religion and politics in Southern life. African Americans, women, and the mentally challenged are often given a place at the forefront of Southern Gothic novels. This is particularly true of Faulkner, as becomes clear when one considers the characters who receive some of the most attention in his novels: Joe Christmas, a man who is believed by society and himself to be black, in *Light in August*; unwed and pregnant young women such as Lena Grove in *Light in August*, Dewie Dell in *As I Lay Dying*, and Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*; and finally Benjy Compson, the “idiot” of the Compson family who is castrated following a misunderstanding in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Darl Bundren, who is taken to an asylum in Jackson, Mississippi, in *As I Lay Dying*.

However, it is important that Faulkner and his Southern Gothic peers, such as Eudora Welty, did not only seek to include voices of the oppressed: in these works, one also hears the voices of misogynists, sexual predators, violent racists, and murderers—the kinds of characters typically classified as villains and rarely given the limelight. Though some stories, such as Faulkner’s “Dry September” may seem to deliberately include the perspectives of victims or sympathetic individuals who challenge their peers so that the reader can call into question the dominant cultural norms of the South, others seem to flout moral responsibility by giving voice to characters guilty of morally questionable or even evil deeds—such as Eudora Welty’s “Where Is the Voice Coming From?”, which invites the reader into the mind of a civil rights leader’s assassin, or Jason’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*, which gives voice to the novel’s most antagonistic character.

The polyphonic novel, as envisioned by Bakhtin, refuses to impose an authorial moral vision, and these works dismantle the writer’s authority through their willingness to open the
floor to the perspectives of antagonists. The characters in a polyphonic novel are not bound by the author’s sense of justice or morality. Bakhtin likens Dostoevsky to a titan creating mankind: “like Goethe’s Prometheus, [he] creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Bakhtin 6). Like Dostoevsky, Faulkner is not content to “illuminate” his works with his “single authorial consciousness” through an omniscient third person narrator vested with the authority of the author (Bakhtin 6). He opts instead to generate “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin 6). The “event” here, translated from sobytie, refers to a moment of shared existence among individuals. Though the world created by the polyphonic novel “may seem a chaos, and the construction of his novels some sort of conglomerate of disparate materials and incompatible principles for shaping them,” an “organic cohesion” arises based around the coexistence and interaction of voices within the novel (Bakhtin 8). The polyphonic novel, with its attention to a broad range of characters, can be imagined as a collage of voices.

According to Bakhtin, the polyphonic text allows “each of the contending [philosophical] viewpoints” present in the work “to develop to its maximum strength and depth, to the maximum of plausibility” (Bakhtin 93, citation pending). Dostoevsky scholar Renй Wellek points to “the power of empathy [Dostoevsky] shows with the most diverse ideological points of view and attitudes to life” as driving his ability to “enact” and “embod[y]” his own ideas in his novels (Wellek 33). Wellek emphasizes how, in Dostoevsky’s novels, characters engage in extended conversations about politics and philosophy. While one can find the same in some Faulkner novels—The Sound and the Fury, Requiem for a Nun and Intruder in the Dust in particular—the
The overriding interest in Faulkner's work is to present the voices of people from different walks of life. While Bakhtin’s interest lies more in how Dostoevsky deals with philosophical alignments, Faulkner’s use of polyphony is about exploring social attitudes and perspectives, often through the first person perspective of individual characters.

Notably, Dostoevsky himself seems to have disagreed with Bakhtin’s central thesis regarding his own work. In his review of Kishenskij’s “Pit’ do dna, ne vidat’ dobra,” Dostoevsky wrote:

> [I]t is too little to display all the given qualities of character; rather one should resolutely illuminate it by one's own personal artistic point of view. An artist must not remain on the same level with the characters he depicts. (Wellek 35)

But Bakhtin’s vision of the character in the polyphonic novel as a “free” person was often echoed by Faulkner himself in terms strikingly similar to Bakhtin’s own. Faulkner explained to a participant in a radio seminar at the University of Virginia that “when a writer gets the character properly on his feet, the character takes charge of things. The character says, ‘This is what I'm going to say, you put it down’” (“‘What’s the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”). Later that month, Faulkner denied responsibility for the ideas of his characters: “I assume responsibility for the people, but they have their own ideas and opinions that I don't always agree with” (“General Public, 23 May 1958”). Regardless of whether Bakhtin’s analysis accurately describes Dostoevsky and his works, it is interesting how Faulkner’s account of his own work and his approach to writing sound much more like Bakhtin’s polyphonic ideal than Dostoevsky’s own description of his work.
III. Faulkner and his Southern Forebears

Before delving into the details of what makes Faulkner’s works exceptional, it may be helpful to look at how his works differ from those of other Southern authors before the Southern Renaissance. In Bakhtin’s terms, if Faulkner’s and Dostoevsky’s works generate “a plurality of consciousnesses” of “free people” capable of “rebelling” against the author,” then what does a monologic novel populated by “voiceless slaves” look like?

Thomas Dixon’s novel 1905 *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* might be useful in answering this question. The novel provides us with a compelling contrast with Faulkner’s corpus because Dixon’s work, perhaps more than any other novel in American history, encapsulated and in real terms influenced the dominant narrative of the South during the childhood of Faulkner and other Southern Renaissance writers. After Dixon himself adapted the novel for the stage, in 1915 director D.W. Griffith turned *The Clansman* into the immensely popular silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, a film considered perhaps as technically groundbreaking in the world of cinema as Faulkner’s prose is in the world of literature. A blockbuster in its day, the film’s popularity is commonly said to have been a major factor in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and it maintained its status as the highest grossing film in cinematic history until its success was surpassed by 1939’s *Gone with the Wind*, itself an adaption of Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel about white Southern plantation owners (Finler 47).

However ironic it may be, perhaps it is no coincidence that these two films would hold such an esteemed spot in the public consciousness. Dixon’s wrote *The Clansman* at a time when Southern literature was dominated by “the local color story, the reconciliation romance, and nostalgia for the Lost Cause,” the kind of formulaic fiction that “editors, writers, and readers knew well and demanded often” (Kreyling 67). In an unused preface to his 1929 work *The Sound
and the Fury, William Faulkner criticized this impulse to romanticize the South: in his words, the Southern writer must make a choice to either engage in a “savage indictment of the contemporary scene” by confronting the social ills pervading the South or to give in to “sentimental” nostalgia and “escape from it into a make-believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere” (Volpe 254). Though the novel concerns itself with the post-Appomattox fall from grace, Dixon’s novel glorifies precisely this idealized version of the antebellum South.

In addition to deconstructing the Lost Cause conception of the South, of which Dixon’s novel stands as perhaps the quintessential text, Faulkner destabilizes the authority of the kind of narrator found in Dixon’s text. When reading The Clansman, one gets the sense that each white stock character has all the agency of a marionette puppet, but the truly “voiceless” in Dixon’s novel are the black characters, each of whom seems to have walked straight out of a minstrel show. (As if to emphasize this very point, only white actors in blackface were allowed to play the black characters with speaking roles in Griffith’s adaptation, while black actors were hired to perform background parts.)

Though their actions may be predictable and their characterization unremarkable, the white characters in Dixon’s novel are depicted in a way such that the reader can get a sense of their interiority. After she has been viciously raped by Augustus Caesar, formerly a slave owned by the Cameron family, Ben Cameron’s childhood sweetheart Marion reminisces on the purity of yesteryear and decides to dress herself in “the dress of spotless white she wore the night Ben Cameron kissed her and called her a heroine” (305). Though Dixon’s omniscient third person narrator maintains a distance from the characters that prevents him from exploring their thoughts
too deeply, this narrator does give us access to her inner thoughts and seems sympathetic to the white characters’ perspectives.

The black characters in the novel, however, are incapable of any emotional depth. In the chapter in which Gus assaults Marion, his lines of dialogue amount to little more than a command to another former slave “Tie de ole one [Marion’s mother] ter de bedpost” and his laughing that he and his cohorts “ain’t atter money!” (303-304). Dixon offers no look into his mind; instead he focuses on his “beastly” body and “his sinister bead-eyes wide apart gleaming ape-like” (303). Much like the narrator of _Light in August_, the narrator of _The Clansman_ participates in the propagation of the same negative images of African Americans as his characters.

Dixon’s narrator takes a particularly active role in telling the reader what to believe about Reconstruction politics. For instance, the narrator lauds the Tennessean Andrew Johnson for defending “the constitutional rights of the states”—presumably the very rights which the Confederacy had sought to restore through secession (140). Unlike in Faulkner’s prose, the overbearing authorial vision of Dixon’s novel seems imposed on the reader. Dixon’s voice seems to seep into that of his opinionated narrator when his narrator describes the extension of suffrage to former slaves as an effort to overthrow “an aristocracy founded on brains, culture, and blood” and to “reduce the ‘conquered provinces’ of the South to Negro rule” (Dixon 155, 140). The entirety of Dixon’s chapter “The King Amuses Himself” seems fixated on this notion of Reconstruction efforts:

Now a Negro electorate controlled the city government, and gangs of drunken negroes, its sovereign citizens, paraded the streets at night firing their muskets unchallenged and unmolested.
A new mob of onion-laden breath, mixed with perspiring African odour, became the symbol of American Democracy.

A new order of society sprouted in this corruption. The old high-bred ways, tastes, and enthusiasms were driven into the hiding-places of a few families and cherished as relics of the past. (155)

Such passages read more like propaganda than part of a story; Dixon tells rather than shows.

The imposition of the narrator’s vision disguises certain ironies that might be brought out in a more introspective text. The Klan’s Grand Scribe proclaims the Klan to be “an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, and Patriotism” created in the interest of “protect[ing] the weak, the innocent, and the defenseless from the indignities [...] of the lawless, the violent, and the brutal” (320-321). As servants of the Constitution, the Klansmen vow to “protect the people from unlawful seizure, and from trial except by their peers” even as the Klansmen—who are the farthest thing from his peers—indict Gus in their illegal vigilante court (321). Perhaps the irony here is too obvious to warrant explication. The Klansmen in this scene are as “lawless” as any other character in the novel, and once they hoist Gus upon a burning cross, they become even more “violent” and “brutal.”

Rather than considering the implications of this, Dixon’s narrator glorifies the Klansman and appeals to the very ideals of Southern chivalry that the Scribe evokes. The narrator describes how the Klansmen “with their tall spiked caps made a picture such as the world had not seen since the Knights of the Middle Ages rode on their Holy Crusades” (Dixon 316). The Klansmen, mounted on their steeds like feudal knights, represent Dixon’s “cherished [...] relics” of the idyllic “high-bred” antebellum society whose existence Faulkner denied (155).
While it is certainly true that the views of a novel’s narrator do not necessarily echo the author’s own personal beliefs, one finds no shortage of evidence that Dixon himself held the racist views which dominated his novels. As a legislator and minister, Dixon was outspoken about his personal political beliefs. At an annual American Bookseller’s Association dinner in 1903, Dixon responded to President Theodore Roosevelt’s suggestion that black Americans deserved a “square deal”:

The prejudice against the negro [sic] is the instinct of self-preservation. […] The words of Lincoln I should have liked Mr. Roosevelt to read are those beginning “with malice toward none and charity to all” and ending “I believe that there exists between the races white and black a physical difference which will forever forbid their living together on a plane of social equality.” (“The Negro a Menace Says Thomas Dixon” 1903)

One finds the same sentiment in 1905 article Dixon wrote about Booker T. Washington:

[N]o amount of education of any kind, industrial, classical or religious, can make a Negro a white man or bridge the chasm of centuries which separate him from the white man in the evolution of human nature. (Roberts 204)

The monologic nature of Dixon’s novel as compared to Faulkner’s polyphonic novels is demonstrated in just how closely the overbearing racial prejudice of Dixon’s narrator, which informs every aspect of characterization in the novel, represents the views of Dixon himself and, in his day, the views of Southern society at large. Where Faulkner often creates a tension between the stated views of the author and those of his protagonists and narrators, Dixon does not attempt to do so.
IV. Community, omniscience, and perspective

*As I Lay Dying* provides perhaps the best example from the Yoknapatawpha County corpus of Faulkner’s interest in giving voice to multiple consciousnesses without binding them under one authorial vision. The novel follows the journey of the Bundren family to bury their matriarch, Addie Bundren, in Jefferson, and Faulkner uses this event to explore the perspectives of fifteen different characters. Addie’s children—Darl, Vardaman, Jewel, Cash, and Dewey Dell—each receive at least one chapter to offer their perspective and tell one portion of the story. Though the siblings seem to have trouble identifying with one another at times and clash over their irreconcilably different manners of coping with the grief wrought by the loss of their mother, the reader, who is uniquely privy to the perspective of each of Addie’s children, comes to understand their behavior.

Daniel Singal describes the effect of including these voices as destabilizing truth and preventing the reader from being able to easily categorize the characters or their stories with convenient tropes:

> [S]ince the characters speak from their own limited vantage points, reflecting their needs and biases, the reader cannot possibly arrive at any assured, objective truth about them. Nor was Faulkner attempting to elicit any preordained moral response in the reader. On the contrary, *As I Lay Dying* eschews heroes and villains. All the characters display both good and bad traits, and we are meant to react to them with an equally complex mixture of laughter, puzzlement, empathy, anger, and admiration, to the point where the boundaries between genres dissolve and it becomes impossible to determine if the story in which they are engaged should be accounted a comedy or tragedy. (Singal 145)
Their stories must be accepted on their own terms; the author does not impose any single authoritative vision of who the reader should trust or root for. With nineteen of the fifty-nine chapters presented from his point of view, Darl might be the character most readily available for the reader to accept as the protagonist or most reliable character. Nonetheless, the reader conditioned to look for a preferred author-endorsed narrator cannot accept Darl because he narrates scenes which he did not experience firsthand—such as Addie’s death—and, by novel’s end, Darl has experienced a psychological breakdown such that he lacks a firm grasp on even his identity.

Much of the power in Faulkner’s writing in *As I Lay Dying* derives from the contrasts Faulkner sets up across chapters which give us insights into the lives of the characters which we would not have access to in a monologic novel and which each other character also has no access to. The mental inventory provided by Cash is followed with the younger child Vardaman’s famous line, “My mother is a fish,” representing his association of his mother with the fish he caught and had “Cooked and et” earlier that day (*As I Lay Dying* 84, 57). Cash’s orderliness is immediately contrasted with the raw emotion of his younger brother. The devastation felt by Addie’s children is set up in contrast to the selfishness of her widower Anse, whose chapters reveal a man mired in self-pity—“It’s a hard country on man; it’s hard,” he says—who thinks to himself in religious platitudes even while questioning their truth: “I am the chosen of the Lord, for who He loveth, so doeth He chastiseth. But I be durn if He dont take some curious ways to show it” (*As I Lay Dying* 110-111). For all his talk of religious piety and his “promise” to Addie, Anse may seem to some readers to be interested in little other than “get[ting] them teeth” to replace his current pair (*As I Lay Dying* 140, 111).³

³ This understanding of Anse may be oversimplified. Singal notes that many critics may accept Darl’s description of Anse’s villainous status too willingly. Darl, after all, is but another subjective narrator, subject to his own prejudices,
Faulkner also gives the reader the voices of the Bundrens’ farmer neighbors Vernon and Cora Tull, a Reverend Whitfield with whom Addie had engaged in an affair, a duplicitous drug store assistant named McGowan who Dewey Dell visits in hopes of finding an abortifacient drug, as well as other minor characters such as Doctor Peabody, Samson, Moseley, and Armstid. Samson provides commentary on Anse’s personality flaws: “[I]t takes a lazy man […] to make the moving or the setting still look hard,” as does Armstid, who observes, “I be durn if he aint a sight” (*As I Lay Dying* 114, 193). Meanwhile, Cora, who repeatedly describes each individual family member’s reaction to Addie’s death as “the sweetest thing I ever saw,” gives the reader a somewhat more detached outsider’s perspective, along with background information on Addie and her family (*As I Lay Dying* 24). Darl is “the one that folks say is queer, lazy, pottering about the place,” while Cash “always [has] more building than he can get around to,” and Jewel is “always doing something that made him some money” (*As I Lay Dying* 24).

When J. Meier-Graefe described Dostoevsky’s attention to “every bit-player,” he could just as easily have been discussing Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (Bakhtin 6). The effect is that *As I Lay Dying* becomes a sort of patchwork quilt which tells the story of a community rather than a single family, which is fitting, of course, given how Southern societies, especially during Faulkner’s day, were often built around close-knit communities.

What happens when that community turns on one of its members? Darl’s first chapters show him first to be a pensive and articulate man and later, following his being committed to an asylum in Jackson, as a man who suffers from an emotional breakdown and talks to himself. In

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and the “most damning evidence usually cited against Anse”—his callous remark “Now I can get them teeth,” made directly after Addie’s passing—is recounted by Darl as a possibly false “reconstruction of the event in Darl’s mind” (Singal 147). Singal reminds us that “Darl is several miles away at the time his mother dies,” and as such, Darl’s word cannot possibly be taken as authoritative (Singal 147).

4 Darl’s troubled monologue shares a few curious similarities with Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Compare:
Darl’s first chapter following his institutionalization, Faulkner mimics Darl’s own scattered outlook by withholding certain details. At first, the reader does not know to whom Darl’s question repeated questions—“What are you laughing at?”, and later, “Why do you laugh? [...] Is it because you hate the sound of laughing?”—are addressed (253-254). Eventually, Darl reveals that he has been interrogating himself:

Darl had a little spy-glass he got in France at the war. In it it had a woman and a pig with two backs and no face. I know what that is. “Is that why you are laughing, Darl?”

“Yes yes yes yes yes yes.” (254)

Having been in Darl’s head throughout the novel, in this chapter the reader experiences alongside Darl a new inability to understand what is going on. As Darl becomes increasingly incoherent, the reader sees what the Bundren family cannot: that madness can be brought on by the severe distress of being labeled as mad. This is a particularly apt example of the power of polyphonic novels to demonstrate the interaction between society’s voices and the voice of the individual. Darl’s ability to understand himself becomes compromised by society’s image of him.

*As I Lay Dying* also provides a particularly interesting instance of polyphony because of the potential telepathic connection that Darl believes he has with some of his siblings. Through a

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One of them had to ride backward because the state’s money has a face to each backside and a backside to each face, and they are riding on the state’s money which is incest. (*As I Lay Dying* 254)

It’s always the idle habits you acquire which you will regret. Father said that. That Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels. That had no sister. (*The Sound and the Fury* 77).

Aside from the obvious interest in incest which becomes much more central to the plot of *The Sound and the Fury*, note how each character’s thoughts move seamlessly from the details of mundane objects—legal tender and the ticking of a watch—to non sequitur statements with considerable philosophical baggage. Notably, each statement is followed up with a puzzling relative clause: “the state’s money *which is incest*” and “a clicking of little wheels. *That had no sister.*”

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5 This chapter reveals for the first time that Darl had served abroad in World War I, which might lead a reader to wonder whether Faulkner intended to describe Darl’s state as partly the result of a post-traumatic stress.
telepathic connection which may or may not be real, Darl himself has access to the interior voices of Vardaman and Dewey Dell.6 Directly preceding Darl’s final chapter, Vardaman thinks:

My brother he went crazy and he went to Jackson too. Jackson is further away than crazy [...] He had to get on the train to go to Jackson. I have not been on the train, but Darl has been on the train. Darl. Darl is my brother. Darl. Darl (252)

On the next page, Darl’s chapter then begins, for the first time, written from a third person perspective as if it is a continuation of Vardaman’s last chapter.

Darl has gone to Jackson. They put him on the train, laughing, down the long car laughing [...] “What are you laughing at?” I said. [...] Two men put him on the train. (253)

As the chapter opens, Darl seems to be continuing Vardaman’s own thought processes, which have overridden his own understanding of himself. For a moment, a Darl who sees himself as “I” seems to have ahold of his senses and asks, “What are you laughing at?” (253). When the reply comes back—an inarticulate and rambling “Yes yes yes yes yes.”—Darl returns to the third person “him” (253). The chapter draws out a tension between the Darl the reader has become familiar with and the new raving Darl whose anxieties show no signs of subsiding any time soon. In the final sentences of his last section, Darl now evokes the words of Dewey Dell and his younger brother Vardaman’s section and refers to himself not as a “him” but as “our brother Darl” (254, 249). This marks the end of his character’s ability to differentiate himself from

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6 And possibly Jewel as well. The text seems ambiguous on this point. In one chapter, Darl questions Jewel repeatedly—“Jewel’, I say, ‘do you know that Addie Bundren is going to die?’”—and the text demarcates these verbal acts with quotation marks (As I Lay Dying 40). Later, when Addie Bundren does pass, Darl echoes his previous questions, albeit this time in italics and with no quotation marks: “Jewel, I say, she is dead. Jewel. Addie Bundren is dead” (52). It is unclear whether he speaks these words, merely thinks them, or conveys them telepathically.
others’ perceptions of him as the polyphony begins to occur in Darl’s own mind rather than in the communal patchwork quilt established by the novel itself.

Darl’s chapters are also made unique by the questions they raise about the source of the text. In reality, Faulkner wrote the novel while working unforgiving shifts at a power plant, and the text came from his own mind. Here, however, it is the conceit of the novel which is in question: how does the reader access the text in the fictional world of the story?

The answer to this question differs from text to text. In novels with third person omniscient narrators (and, to a lesser extent, with third person limited narrators), the reader hears the story from some being who often knows the motivations and actions of one or more characters. In an epistolary novel, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* or Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Poor Folk*, the plot may come only through the presence of letters, personal diaries, or other print media such as newspaper clippings; typically, in these novels, the text itself exists in a tangible form in the same world inhabited by the characters. Other stories, such as “Shower of Gold” in Eudora Welty’s collection *The Golden Apples*, might assume that the reader also occupies the same space as the characters in the text. In Welty’s story, the narrator, Kate Rainey, refers to the reader as a “passer-by” to whom she can “churn and talk” and divulge gossip to without having to worry about seeing the reader again (Welty 263).

Other texts seem to offer no satisfactory or conclusive source, and it may be easier to accept the text without asking. Still, we ask. Unlike the characters who readily supply their first-person points of view to the reader in novels like *Jane Eyre*, the characters in Faulkner’s novels are usually not interested in making an attempt to tell a reader their story in anything remotely

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7 Faulkner plays with the epistolary form when he incorporates Charles Bon’s letter to Judith Sutpen into the text of *Absalom, Absalom!*
resembling a clear narrative. As readers, we appreciate how the characters’ stream of consciousness introspection reveals their motivations. At times, it may seem as if the speakers may be telling their stories to no one in particular for their own cathartic benefit. The voices often seem at first glance to be personal thoughts relayed from their subject to the reader in a more or less unfiltered form.

Take, for instance, Benjy’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*. First, we can rule out that Benjy, like Welty’s Kate Rainey, spoke the words of his story, because Benjy mostly communicates to others through moans and non-lingual sounds. Did Benjy write down his section of *The Sound and the Fury*? As readers, we are not made to understand that Benjy would have the desire, the ability, or the free time without the supervision of others to write down his section as we read it. How, then, do we as readers receive it? The same question arises with Quentin Compson’s section, albeit for different reasons. As a Harvard student, Quentin should be perfectly capable of telling his story to others or writing it down, even though his section is as riddled as Benjy’s with tangents and detours backwards in time. However, several moments in Quentin’s section do seem to come to the reader in real time as they happen: the title of the chapter (and, indeed, every chapter of the novel) taking the form of a specific date encourages this reading of the text as being produced in the moment. Once more, though, how is this text transferred to the reader?

As previously noted, in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner portrays a community through the eyes of individuals rather than through the eyes of a supreme and omniscient narrator from outside of the community. Unlike *Light in August* or even *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* rejects the concept of an omniscient narrator altogether in favor of the limited vantage points of the

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8 Jane Eyre famously opens the last chapter of her eponymous novel with a direct nod to the reader: “Reader, I married him.”
individual characters participating in the world of the story. In his 2004 article “Omniscience,” Jonathan Culler uses *As I Lay Dying* to illustrate Seymour Chatman’s framework for replacing the omniscient narrator. In *Coming to Terms*, Chatman had argued that though “by definition, every narrative has a narrator,” but that the reader could take the narrative agent to be nonhuman, a mere “presenter of the signs” as in the medium of film (Culler 30). Over the past century, it has become common for films to not be accompanied by a narrative voiceover, and in this way, *As I Lay Dying* may remind us of film or photography. To borrow Culler’s paraphrasing of Chatman, “*As I Lay Dying* would not have an omniscient narrator but only a recorder, a presenter of signs, a transmission device” (Culler 29). Like the proscenium of a stage or the lens of a camera, the text grants the reader a privileged view of a character’s internal thoughts.

This analogy seems to provide a productive way of thinking about the construction of *As I Lay Dying*. For instance, in one chapter, the thoughts of Cash—Addie’s son who works as a carpenter and carefully builds his mother’s coffin—take on the form of a list as he hammers out in his mind why he made the choice to build her coffin “on the bevel” (*As I Lay Dying* 82). A fragment of his list follows:

5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.


7. A body is not square like a crosstie.


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9 I do not consider it to be by sheer coincidence that in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 1941 book of Walker Evans’ photography and James Agee’s ruminations on sharecroppers in the American South, Agee adopts a stance which seems to resemble (and may have even been inspired by) Faulkner’s approach in his novels. Of one of Evans’ subjects, Agee writes: “George Gudger is a man, et cetera. But obviously, in the effort to tell of him [...] as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is” (Agee 239).
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel. (*As I Lay Dying* 82-83)

Here Faulkner does not use a narrator to provide the reader with a brief expository sentence along the lines of, “Cash dwelled on the coffin for some time.” Instead, he puts the reader in Cash’s head, and this first-person narration is stylized to mimic Cash’s methodical way of thinking. It does not make sense, strictly speaking, for Cash to list “Except” as its own line because, unlike the enumerated sentences preceding it, “Except” is not a reason. Likewise, “Animal magnetism” seems more like a mental reminder of Cash to himself before he begins to go into detail. The list therefore does not read simply as a transcript of Cash’s internal monologue, in which Cash is saying to himself “Six: Except. Seven: A body…” Rather, here Faulkner gives the reader a stylized depiction of how Cash thinks. Elsewhere, Cash’s chapters feature heavy repetition and sentences which trail off as incomplete thoughts. “[The coffin] won’t balance. If you want it to tote and ride on a balance, we will have—” Cash says to himself before saying as much aloud to Jewel and being cut off by his brother (96). Several chapters later, when the family’s decision not to heed Cash’s advice results in the coffin being knocked loose as they attempt to cross the river, Cash repeats the same sentence to himself, almost verbatim as he dwells on the catastrophe which results in the loss of his tools and a team of mules and hurts his previously injured leg. Throughout this section, Faulkner seats his audience within Cash’s head.

While Cash’s chapters give us a glimpse of his methodical thinking, Darl’s chapters present us with a view of a man who employs elevated diction that one would not expect from a poor, uneducated rural Mississippian:
He tries to smoothe it again, clumsily […] the wrinkles which he made and which continue to emerge beneath his hand with perverse ubiquity, so that at last he desists… *(As I Lay Dying* 52)

Pa looks at him […] as though upon a face carved by a savage caricaturist a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement flowed. (78)

On the long flank of [the board] the rain crashed steadily, myriad, fluctuant. (78)

Squatting, Dewey Dell’s wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and valleys of the earth.

(164)

It is unclear from the novel whether Darl’s thoughts actually use this diction as part of Darl’s interior monologue or whether Faulkner in effect uses these words to translate Darl’s unspoken and perhaps uncollected thoughts into a kind of language the reader can understand. Just as Cash may not say verbatim in his head “Six: Except. Seven: A body…,” perhaps Darl does not use the words “ubiquity” and “myriad,” but these words

Granted, in Yoknapatawpha County, where there seems to be something in the water that makes characters unnaturally predisposed to giving long monologues about time, history, and all manner of philosophical questions, it does not seem outside the realm of possibility that Faulkner intends for the reader to believe that Darl actually has come across each of the words he uses and thinks them himself. After all, sometimes Darl uses these words awkwardly, as if he does not fully understand how to properly use them in context:

Their necks were shaved to a hairline, as though the *recent* and *simultaneous* barbers had had a chalk-line like Cash’s. (253, emphasis added)
From here [the swimming men] do not appear to violate the surface at all […] the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface. (163, emphasis added)

In each of these instances, if the words are Darl’s own, then Darl chooses words that fit clumsily in his sentences. We do not commonly speak of barbers—nouns—in terms of time, as with “recent” and “simultaneous” (253). Likewise, “infinitesimal” and “ludicrous” can both describe the care with which Jewel and Vernon swim in the river, but it seems almost like a non sequitur in context; the reader may not readily understand precisely what Darl means. However, these features of Darl’s diction are common to Faulkner’s own writing as well, and so Darl’s unique use of them may be irrelevant to whether we think Darl or Faulkner has chosen these words. The other evidence that Darl himself may have chosen these words may be found in his repetition of certain words or variations thereof, such as “myriad” and “ludicrous.” Perhaps these repetitions indicate some bound on Darl’s vocabulary that we would not expect of Faulkner as a transmitter and translator of the characters’ thoughts.

However, a common interpretation of Darl’s chapters—and the narration of As I Lay Dying generally—assumes that the words in each chapter are Faulkner’s while the emotions and thoughts they describe come from the character’s own mind. This impression of Faulkner’s work informed James Franco’s adaption of the novel:

Each chapter is told from the first person perspective of a different character, there are inner monologues that are very dense and use a much higher level of diction than these characters would actually be able to use. So the inner monologues become something more than just an inner voice, it’s almost as if Faulkner is giving words to their feelings. These characters wouldn’t articulate in...
the way the monologues do, but maybe they would have feelings as complex as
the inner monologues, so Faulkner is giving voice to them.10 (Hertzfeld 2013)

Essentially, on this reading, each character has certain thoughts and feelings, and Faulkner
chooses how to render them in the pages of the novel with his own choice of words.

There is textual evidence in Faulkner’s novels that Faulkner had the ephemeral nature of
our wordless interior thoughts on his mind. In the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, two
Quentin Compsons—one “preparing for Harvard in the South […] listening, having to listen to
one of the ghosts [Rosa Coldfield] which had refused to lie still even longer than most had,
telling him about old ghost-times” and another “who was still too young to deserve yet to be a
ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that”—communicate to one another “in the long
silence of notpeople in notlanguage” (*Absalom, Absalom!* 4-5). In this scene, as “hearing […]
reconcile[s]” during Rosa Coldfield’s tirade against Colonel Sutpen, Faulkner paradoxically
assigns words to this “notlanguage” (4). While interpretations of who these two Quentins
represent may vary, the importance of this scene lies in Faulkner’s insistence on writing out that
which is not naturally communicated through words.11

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10 Without assuming a conceit along these lines, it may be difficult to account for Addie’s posthumous chapter.
Given that Addie is dead and her brain has ceased thinking by the time her chapter takes place, the chapter cannot be
a transcript of her interior monologue. In fact, even with this conceit, the chapter is hard to fully fathom. The reader
still needs to assume either (1.) that ghosts or spirits exist or (2.) that her psyche, stored in perhaps some ethereal
place, is being read and filtered to the reader through Faulkner’s pen. If one attempts to keep all of Faulkner’s
characters on the same timeline in the same universe, then Quentin’s ability to posthumously narrate “That Evening
Sun” with foreknowledge of events that happened after his death seems to suggest that Addie might be able to
narrate her chapter from her casket (though not yet “from the grave,” as the idiom goes).

11 As for the competing interpretations, it does not seem certain that one can be sure one way or the other whether
the two Quentins Faulkner describes represent (1.) two torn versions of Quentin listening to the story in the present
moment of this scene with Rosa on a “hot weary dead September afternoon” in Coldfield’s “office”; (2.) one
Quentin in the future, recollecting the story with Shreve at Harvard and trying to get the details straight as he
remembers what he heard when he was the Quentin in September hearing Coldfield; or (3.) one Quentin in the
future and dead conversing through some supernatural “silence of notpeople,” the details of which we are not made
to understand (4-5). That Faulkner describes Quentin listening “to two separate Quentins now,” as Rosa tells her
story, it is tempting to think that the two Quentins represent two selves in the present moment which are in conflict
inside of Quentin’s head over how they receive or how much they care about Rosa’s “ghost-times” (4, emphasis
added). The (almost certainly intentional) ambiguity of “ghosts” frustrates our ability to make a conclusive decision
one way or the other: as readers of *The Sound and the Fury* know, Quentin will be a ghost in the not so distant
Faulkner’s statements about his fiction and his writing process also lend credence to the idea that the words Faulkner gives to certain characters may not be the words on the tongue or in the mind of his characters but rather a close approximation of sorts. When discussing the 1931 short story “That Evening Sun” with Robert Kellogg at the University of Virginia, Faulkner explained that Quentin’s “point of view is still that of his age” of nine years “even though his diction may not be” (“‘What’s the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”). To say that the essential “point of view” related through the text is a character’s even though the “diction may not be” is to say that Faulkner’s prose may at times be taken as a figurative representation of a character’s thoughts rather than a sort of literal transcript of a character’s internal monologue; this supports the case that Cash’s list in *As I Lay Dying* is a sketch of Cash’s methodical thought process which becomes a list as it is translated from intangible uncollected thoughts to the page. That said, Faulkner’s memory may be suspect. It may be the case that Faulkner did misremember how the final draft of “That Evening Sun” panned out. Faulkner described the story as being told from the perspective of the child Quentin even though the story begins with the twenty-four year old Quentin describing events which happened “fifteen years ago” (“That Evening Sun” 289).

Of course, in *The Sound and the Fury*, published two years before “That Evening Sun” was published in *These Thirteen*, Quentin Compson dies in Cambridge at age nineteen. The narrator of “That Evening Sun” may be living in an alternate-universe Yoknapatawpha, but the explanation most consistent with Faulkner’s corpus would be that the Quentin of “That Evening Sun” is speaking from beyond the grave like Addie Bundren. This would explain Quentin’s description in the first paragraph of the “iron poles bearing clusters of bloated and ghostly and bloodless grapes” suggestive of death and how “the soiled wearing of a whole week now flees future. Furthermore, Quentin-as-ghost narrates “That Evening Sun,” making the otherwise fantastic concept of a future, dead Quentin conversing with the alive Quentin seem plausible in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha.
apparition-like” (“That Evening Sun” 289, emphasis added). Here, at least at the beginning of the story, the point of view is not that of the child Quentin but an adult, and Quentin employs the kind of language a reader of *The Sound and the Fury* might expect of him (“That Evening Sun” 289).

It would seem that at the University of Virginia Faulkner was remembering a shift in perspective as “That Evening Sun” progresses. On my reading, the story begins with Quentin describing his surroundings from the perspective of a world-weary specter. Later, as Quentin relates the story of an event from his childhood, his language becomes simpler:

She came and sat down in a chair before the hearth. There was some fire there; she built it up; it was already hot. You didn't need a fire. She built a good blaze.

She told a story. (“That Evening Sun” 302)

Quentin withdraws into the perspective of his younger self and his sentences become, in the words of then-instructor and later Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Robert Kellogg, “short and perhaps the way a child might speak them” (“What's the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”). Contrary to Faulkner’s statement, the parts of the story told from Quentin’s perspective do sound much like the voice and diction of a child. For the reader interested in Faulkner’s use of polyphony, this story is notable for how Faulkner signals Quentin’s retreat into the psyche of his childhood self through language as Quentin tells the story.

Despite the possibility that Faulkner was mistaken about the specifics of this story in particular, his statements do provide us with an illuminating insight into his writing process. When Faulkner says Quentin’s “point of view is still that of his age” of nine years “even though his diction may not be,” Faulkner separates the character’s voice from his point of view. Even if
this does not apply to “That Evening Sun,” Faulkner’s account suggests that he would give a
ine-year-old child the more complex words an older man might use in order to best portray the
child’s thoughts.

This being the case, the role of the Faulknerian narrator can be more fully understood.
The silent narrator who binds together the accounts of each individual point of view character in
*As I Lay Dying*—as well as, for that matter, the narrator who brings together the first three
sections of *The Sound and the Fury* and finally contributes his own section focusing on the black
servant Dilsey—each can be understood as acting as a sort of filter or lens through which we
understand the individual characters.¹² This is an active role on the part of the narrator, but not
an authoritative one, as we will come to see with *Light in August* and the Appendix to *The Sound
and the Fury*.

V. Foreground and background in *Light in August*

Before looking at the authority of narrators in *Light in August*, we will return to the way that
Faulkner uses polyphony to establish a sense of a community as a whole. Just as *As I Lay Dying*
ocasionally gives the spotlight to minor background characters, *Light in August* heavily features
the perspectives of Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Gail Hightower, and other background characters
who are notable for the roles they play in other Faulkner novels, such as Armstid. Even though
the trials and triumphs of Grove, Bunch, and Hightower qualify them for the status of a ‘main
character,’ the tragic story of Joe Christmas serves as the unifying thread of *Light in August*. The
narratives dealing with Grove’s pregnancy, Bunch’s romance, Hightower’s crisis, and

¹² When one considers the similarities between *Light in August* and the *Gospel of St. John*, helpfully outlined in
Virginia V. Hlavsa’s article “The Crucifixion in *Light in August*: Suspending Rules at the Post,” in which Hlavsa
notes how the twenty-one chapters of Faulkner’s novel align with the twenty-one chapters of the St. John Gospel, it
becomes rather easy to imagine Faulkner’s decision to write about Caddy from four different points of view—no
one of which can be taken as the “gospel truth”—as being inspired by the Biblical account of Christ.
Christmas’ tragedy are intertwined and not ancillary to one or the other; the events of one story happen in the background of the other.

For instance, the shocking announcement of Christmas’ death comes in a chapter which focuses on the perspectives of two other characters, each caught up in their own crises. In Chapter Eighteen, Faulkner alternates between three perspectives. First, the narrator follows Byron Bunch as he searches for Joe Brown, the father of Lena Grove’s child. Meanwhile, Brown himself jumps from a train car after being confronted by Lena and lying to her about his abandonment of her during her pregnancy. Finally, throughout their meeting, the narrator gives the reader access to Lena’s perspective as she ponders Brown’s “having no more shame than to lie” (*Light in August* 430). On the last page of this chapter, Bunch overhears a frustrated bystander complaining. “Durn the luck,” he says, because he will arrive home late due to some “excitement” in town (*Light in August* 442). As it turns out, this “excitement” is the so far off-stage death of Joe Christmas: “That nigger, Christmas. They killed him” (*Light in August* 442). Here the reader experiences the death of the man who is arguably the novel’s main character through the distanced eyes of another character. Christmas’ tragic death in Reverend Hightower’s home, which is described in detail later in the novel, is seen as nothing more than “excitement” in town and a minor nuisance to the bystander on the train. Though the novel is built around Christmas’ narrative, his story is little more than background noise from others’ perspectives.

By introducing the death of Christmas in such a summary, anti-climactic fashion, Faulkner asks his readers to reconsider their own perspectives in relation to the tragedies they read in the newspaper. For every headline about some murder which amounts to no more than “excitement” to us, there are real people out there who have their own lifetime of experiences.
By showing this bystander treating Christmas—who we as readers have come to understand through the novel—as an unnamed non-person, Faulkner asks us to recognize that the background characters in our own lives are the protagonists in the foreground of their own stories. No one perspective is favored over the other.

VI. Challenges to authorial authority

In *Light in August*, Faulkner continues his rebellion against an authoritative narrative voice. With the exception of the silent and implicit actor who brings the voices of each individual speaker together, *As I Lay Dying* does away with the omniscient narrator of traditional novels.¹³ *Light in August* features a narrator, but one who is not quite omniscient. In some texts the omniscient narrator’s voice might be taken to be objective and authoritative. In the polyphonic novel, such an assumption is mistaken. This destruction of authority is, in part, the manner by which the polyphonic novel accomplishes its purpose. Faulkner complicates the question of authority by giving the reader narrators who themselves are unsure of distances and when and how certain events occurred. The narrator of *Light in August*, who might otherwise be presumed to be omniscient, sometimes gives approximations or neglects to specify certain details of the story. “There were *perhaps* five families there,” the narrator says of Lena Grove’s milling town home, and more than once the narrator says that Brown has made an “*indescribable* gesture” that the narrator cannot relate to a reader who was not present (*Light in August* 5, 434-435, emphasis added). When the narrator tells the reader about Reverend Hightower’s beating at the hands of Klansmen, the narrator tells the story as a townsperson might:

¹³ The “silent and implicit actor” refers here to Seymour Chatman’s argument that “by definition, every narrative has a narrator” (Culler 30). Though *As I Lay Dying* does not feature the kind of narrator we would be familiar with in traditional novels, one might imagine a narrator who collects these stories together into the text that forms the novel, and one might imagine the narrator who renders the characters’ thoughts as text on the page.
Anyway, the minister couldn’t—or didn’t—get another [black] woman cook.

Possibly the men scared all the other negro women in town that same night. So he did his own cooking for a while, until they heard one day that he had a negro man to cook for him. And that finished him, sure enough. (Light in August 72, emphasis added)

Note the narrator’s casual familiarity with the reader (“Anyway”; “sure enough”) and the narrator’s uncertainty about details (“Possibly”; “one day”), as if the narrator is not omniscient but has, like a towns person, heard the story second-hand.

In Faulkner’s 1931 story “Dry September”—which, like Light in August, deals with the tragedy and aftermath of a lynching—the narrator similarly lacks access to the whole truth of the situation:

Through the bloody September twilight, aftermath of sixty-two rainless days, it had gone like a fire in dry grass—the rumor, the story, whatever it was.

Something about Miss Minnie Cooper and a Negro. Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them, gathered in the barber shop on that Saturday evening […] knew exactly what had happened. (“Dry September” 169)

The narrator has local concerns—he certainly cares about the weather they town has suffered through over the past two months—and uses local language—while any narrator could say “like fire in dry grass,” the phrase seems particularly relevant to this narrator who is in the middle of a dry spell in a rural region—but he does not know what happened between Miss Cooper and Will Mayes or even how to describe the resulting drama. He does not know any more than the men in the barbershop know. Telling the story with the voice of a narrator who is not detached and all-knowing advances the project of the polyphonic novel by further challenging the idea that a story
can or should be told from a wholly detached perspective. By miring his narrators’ claims in the uncertainty of the community, Faulkner evens the playing field and reduces the narrator’s voice to one among many.

Narrators assume the voice of a local person elsewhere in Faulkner’s corpus. In “Was,” the first chapter of *Go Down, Moses*, the narrator describes how the character “Black John came out of the trees, driving, *soupled* out flat and level as a hawk” (*Go Down, Moses* 10, emphasis added). Faulkner’s commentary on his word choice in this scene provides an excellent example of how his omniscient narrators seem to have a distinct regional identity:

Edward Stephenson: And another place, Mr. Faulkner, “Black John came out of the trees, driving, *soupled* [sic] out flat and level as a hawk.” Is that a verb made from the adjective “supple”?

William Faulkner: Yes, they pronounce “supple,” “soople.” (“University Radio Show, tape 1, 7 May 1957”)

Here Faulkner includes his narrator in the “they” of the native Mississippians he is referring to. His story is not told by a detached observer but by a person living in and caught up in the culture of the region.

We might assume that a narrator who speaks in a specific dialect has a certain regional identity we are expected to associate with the narrator’s voice. Once a narrator begins to use dialect or language associated with a particular region, the narrator assumes a personality. Then, the narrator no longer exists only behind the ethereal curtain of the fourth wall but has, in our minds, the corporeal form of someone who lives in a region in a particular place and time. The narrator is not a distant observer but a storyteller we might encounter in the world of the story.
However, it may be curious that we as readers would find it odd for an omniscient narrator to speak a nonstandard form of English. Even the most proper English is itself inextricably regional, so perhaps Faulkner intends to play with our assumptions. If we find ourselves asking, “Why does the narrator use Southern colloquial language?”, perhaps the answer is: “Why not?” Faulkner may be challenging the idea that a novel should be written in the strictest proper English here when his narrator talks like his characters. If we find ourselves thinking that the narrator of a Faulkner novel has a certain identity and is prey to certain attitudes, perhaps we should note that every novel’s narrator might as well. Without allowing his narrators to have free rein over a novel’s characters, Faulkner allows his narrators to have at least a semblance of their own voice. The move is a challenge to our notions of the normative.

The narrator’s relationship with the region has an impact on more than the aesthetics of Faulkner’s novels. It begins to have consequences in racial politics when the narrator of Light in August participates in the racist atmosphere of Yoknapatawpha County by describing African Americans in terms of animals and focusing on their “smells.” For example, as noted by critic Owen Robinson in “‘Liable to be anything’: The Creation of Joe Christmas in Faulkner’s ‘Light in August,’” the thoughtful reader feels supreme “discomfort” upon reading the narrator’s description of a “black nursemaid [and] ‘the vacuous idiocy of her idle and illiterate kind’” (Robinson 135). In Light in August, the reader must choose whether to pull back the curtains or accept the proscenium of the narrator’s vision. To Robinson, the imposition of this discomfort is central to the novel’s conceit: “Nobody escapes interrogation, and that very much includes the author and the reader” (Robinson 133).

Another instance where Faulkner forces his reader to choose between competing understandings comes with the racial identity of Joe Christmas. Joe’s mother, Milly Hines,
claims that her lover was a Mexican man, but her father—who believes he can “see in
[Christmas’] face the black curse of God Almighty”—insists that the man “never fooled [him]”
into believing that he was not actually black (*Light in August* 374, 377). Christmas believes
himself to be part black based on hearsay and allows his entire life—from his own behavior and
search for employment to his understanding of women and black people—to be influenced by
this notion of his own heritage. As noted by Robinson, when Christmas says that he “hear[s] a
myriad sounds” of “voices, murmurs, whispers: of trees, darkness, earth; people: his own voice;
other voices evocative of names and times and places […] which were his life,” Christmas
acknowledges that he has been “created” through a sort of “linguistic democracy,” that he exists
as “a product of voices, including his own, all of whom are contingent in themselves and none of
which have individual authority” (*Light in August* 80; Robinson 120). Christmas and Faulkner
are both attuned to the way that others’ voices construct our own identities and others’.

Toward the end of the novel, Faulkner includes the voice of the steely-haired lawyer
Gavin Stevens in the dispute over Christmas’ “blood.” Stevens, whose station in life as a white
man in Mississippi could be comparable to Faulkner’s own, might be taken as a reliable figure if
he were given this part in another novel. Indeed, Stevens is a recurring character in Faulkner’s
work and occasionally a leading man. The final chapter of *Go Down, Moses* (1942) tells the story
of how Stevens, harboring a paternalistic sense of duty toward the African American character
Mollie Beauchamp, contributes money to bring Mrs. Beauchamp’s grandson home for burial in
Jefferson after he is executed for the murder of a policeman in Chicago (Go Down, Moses 356).
Faulkner continued to chronicle Stevens' life later in that decade: Stevens plays a sympathetic
supporting role in the 1948 novel *Intruder in the Dust* and plays the role of the detective
protagonist in Faulkner’s 1949 short story collection *Knight’s Gambit* (‘English Department
Faculty and Wives, 13 May 1957”). In the 1957 novel The Town, which is set two decades before Light in August, Faulkner casts a younger Stevens as a self-imagined and naïve “knight” who, like Quentin Compson, in Faulkner's own words, “goes out to defend somebody who don't want to be defended and don’t need it” (“English Department Faculty and Wives, 13 May 1957”).

In Light in August, Stevens plays a far less sympathetic role than in Faulkner's later works. Rather than providing the objective account one might expect from a man with the authority of legal expertise at his disposal, Stevens offers a simplistic appraisal of the situation of the black and white “chimaera” of Christmas and describes how the “white blood drove [Christmas]” in one direction while the “black blood […] swept him into that ecstasy out of a black jungle,” leading him to a life of violence (Light in August 449). Stevens’ “reductive and racist” assessment has been taken as evidence of Faulkner’s “battle” with racism by some critics who take him to be “Faulkner’s surrogate” (Kinney 272, 277). However, given Faulkner’s tendency to write unreliable characters and the fact that he discussed how Gavin Stevens “develop[ed]” as a character between novels, it seems unfair to assume that Stevens’ account represents Faulkner’s own fatalistic view of race (“English Department Faculty and Wives, 13 May 1957”). In fact, Faulkner came across as particularly critical of Stevens when he discussed the novel at the University of Virginia. Faulkner described Gavin Stevens’ blood narrative as “an assumption, a rationalization which Stevens made,” and to make it clear just how complicit Stevens was in the racism of his society, Faulkner elaborated on the point: “That is, the people that destroyed [Joe Christmas] made rationalizations about what he was. They decided what he was” (“Blotner and Gwynn’s Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957”).
By the time Stevens delivers his speculation-driven monologue in Chapter Nineteen of *Light in August*, Faulkner has already given the reader enough insight into Christmas’ motivations—such as the fact that Joanna Burden, who Christmas is accused of murdering, held Christmas at gunpoint—for the reader to reject Stevens’ absurd perception of the events even without Faulkner’s gloss provided at the University of Virginia. The reader is forced to reconcile his or her own reading of the text with that of characters in the novel who might be given positions of authority in other texts or in the real world.

Several of the latter chapters of *Intruder in the Dust* feature Stevens' extended diatribes against the perceived intrusion of Northerners into Southern politics and their handling of the civil rights of “Sambo.” If Stevens is truly Faulkner's “surrogate” in Yoknapatawpha, then it may be tempting to take his political beliefs as Faulkner's own. Stevens always maintains the upper hand in his rants, often presented as conversations with an imagined, spiteful Yankee interlocutor. In chapter ten, Stevens may sound like a mouthpiece for Faulkner himself when he says,

[Southerners] must do it and we alone without help or interference or even (thank you) advice since only we can if Lucas's equality is to be anything more than its own prisoner inside an impregnable barricade of the direct heirs of the victory of 1861-1865 which probably did more than even John Brown to stalemate Lucas's freedom.” (*Intruder in the Dust* 211)

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14 Though “Sambo” has a history of use as an umbrella term for those with mixed African and Native American ancestry, Stevens’ use of the word to describe the archetypal black person in his discussion of Civil Rights seems paternalistic and perhaps suggestive of the children’s book series “Little Black Sambo,” which was nominally about a South Indian boy but nonetheless used the iconography of blackface.
In this same rant, Stevens' comments sound almost like Faulkner's attempt to rebut the criticisms of H.L. Mencken and others who identified the South as the source of national disunity:

“[I] say to you Come down here and look at us before you make up your mind and you reply No thanks the smell is bad enough from here and we say Surely you will at least look at the dog you plan to housebreak.” (Intruder in the Dust 21,

emphasis in the original text)

For the sake of argument, let us assume that Stevens’ admonition to let the South deal with its own problems does present Faulkner's private view.\(^{15}\) After all, Faulkner and Stevens do not give us a particularly sympathetic view of the modern carpetbaggers Stevens criticizes, and Faulkner’s own statements regarding Civil Rights in the decade after he wrote Intruder in the Dust may suggest that Stevens’ view was his own:

[Faulkner engaged in a] courageous, embattled attempt in the 1950s to stake out a public compromise position between impatient northern interventionism and southern intransigence in particular over the Civil Rights crisis and in general over the role and place of African-Americans in the predominantly Euro-American modern South and indeed in the rest of the United States of America. If Faulkner's solution, a liberal version of gradualism, strikes us today as conservative, we would do well to remember that he was privately and publicly vilified by family, friends, and others for advocating it. (Cohen 109-110)

\(^{15}\) Though it is helpful for us to make this assumption, we must be careful to remember that Faulkner’s statements themselves often read like his fiction. That is to say, either Faulkner strived so hard to maintain his reputation as a “good ol’ boy” country farmer that he made statements blatantly contradicting his more nuanced understanding of the world, or he held terribly inconsistent contradictory views during his life.
This assumption allows us to see how Faulkner complicates his own characters’ arguments and to test whether Faulkner’s novels qualify as polyphonic under the standards Bakhtin applied to Dostoevsky.

Bakhtin suggests that Dostoevsky does not allow judgments of his characters to make their way into the text. Wellek questions whether Bakhtin overstates his case regarding the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's novels because Dostoevsky is “objective” in the sense that he knows how to expound ideas of which he disapproves … but there cannot be any doubt that, for instance, in *Crime and Punishment* we know what Dostoevsky considers good and what evil, that [Dostoevsky] agrees with the Biblical command: “Thou shalt not kill” even a “louse,” even an old useless and even harmful usurer. (Wellek 33)

Though Faulkner may create a space for his own viewpoints in his work (a disapproving reader may argue that Faulkner shoehorns the diatribes into his novel without any regard for its pacing), he carefully complicates these perspectives. Faulkner’s characters act realistically in the sense that their behavior is not necessarily linked to ideals. Bakhtin's assertion that “Dostoevsky’s hero is a man of an idea; not a character or temperament, not a social or psychological type” does not seem to also be true of Faulkner (Wellek 34).

Faulkner’s commentary on his work demonstrates his commitment to precisely this manner of characterization. When a participant asked the author whether he found himself having to “resist” the temptation to “identify” with characters such as Gavin Stevens or “the old man in the last pages of *A Fable,*” Faulkner’s novel which most resembles allegory, Faulkner replied:

...
you don't really have time to identify yourself with a character, except at certain
moments when the character is in a position to—to express truthfully things
which you yourself believe to be true. Then you'll put your own ideas in his
mouth, but they—when you do that, they'll become his. I think that you're not
trying to—to preach through the character, that you're too busy writing about
people. It just happens that this man agrees with you on this particular point, and
so he says it. (“Coleman's Writing Class, 25 February 1957”).

Faulkner's characters cannot represent ideas because, like real people, they are swayed by and
fall prey to contradictory notions, and Faulkner carefully built this fact into his work. Even if one
is inclined to agree with Stevens' argument that the South can only bring about lasting change on
its own terms, the reader of Faulkner's corpus cannot take Stevens’ statements at face value
because the reader has seen that Stevens is exceedingly unreliable. Like Quentin, Stevens has
trouble understanding women in Knight's Gambit, and he jumps to dangerously unfair
conclusions about Joe Christmas. With Stevens, perhaps Faulkner tells the reader, “This is what I
think, as a man in this social position, but you have to be careful when you listen to what I think,
because I have also had these experiences, and I have been wrong.”

The authority of the authorial voice is perhaps most significantly challenged in the
Appendix to Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury. The first section of the novel is, in a very
important sense, ‘about’ Caddy Compson, but is told from the perspective of the ‘idiot’ Benjy
Compson, whose birth was considered such a curse that he was denied his name and who is
castrated after a misunderstanding. The second section features the voice of his brother Quentin,
who is so obsessed with his notions of his sister’s honor that he cannot reconcile her behavior
with his ideal of her and later commits suicide. The third perspective comes from her bitter
brother Jason, who has been hoarding the money Caddy has been sending to her daughter. The final section describes a day in the life of the black servant Dilsey as she takes care of Benjy and attends church, but unlike the others, it is not told from her perspective.

In 1946, Faulkner followed up the novel with an appendix whose narrator, like the narrator of *Light in August*, participates in the same mistaken notions of identity as his characters. When considering the polyphony of Faulkner’s novels, his narrators’ voices must always also be taken into account, because it is not quite clear that any narrator can be considered a proxy for Faulkner’s own voice. The third-person narrator of the novels should not be taken to be Faulkner himself. Faulkner, having once told Malcolm Cowley that he wished he had left his works anonymous, attempted to ensure that his own identity was elusive (*Selected Letters of William Faulkner* 285). When speaking publicly, the well-spoken author would ignore grammar and adopt the colloquialisms of his home state. Of Dave Beck, the president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters from 1952 to 1957, Faulkner offered the following folksy commentary: “I imagine a man like Dave Beck ain’t very interested in respectability. He don’t symbolize respectability, but he's got a lot of money” (“Blotner and Gwynn's Classes, tape 2, 13 May 1957”). When asked about whether his “curious and rather remarkable” insistence upon incorporating “bad grammar” into his manner of speaking was a conscious decision on his part, Faulkner replied, “To me that's not really too important, that a little bad grammar don’t hurt anything” (“‘What's the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”). Compare Faulkner’s baroque third person prose to his dialect in first-person pieces and his own presentation of himself in interviews, and you will struggle to find a satisfying consistency.16

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16 Faulkner’s lectures at the University of Virginia demonstrate that he gave a lot of attention to the detail of each character’s speech. For instance, Wash Jones use of “‘air’ for ‘are,’ ‘yit’ for ‘yet,’ and ‘hit’ for ‘it,’” distinguishing his “hill country” speech from that of Jefferson natives (“‘What's the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”).
As for the inconsistencies in Faulkner’s third person narrators, Caddy’s section of the Appendix reads as if it were written by someone who idealizes Caddy in much the way that Quentin does and wishes to turn her into a romantic figure rather than a real person caught in the drama of the novel. In “Explanation as Composition: Faulkner's Public Comments on His Fiction,” critic Mick Gidley notes that “Faulkner's post-publication statements about *The Sound and the Fury* swaddle the book in maidenheads” as if the author himself shared Quentin’s sexual anxieties (Burton 610). However, one might not expect Faulkner himself to be particularly concerned with Caddy’s sexuality, given that he agreed that Quentin behaved much like an overly romantic Don Quixote (“English Department Faculty and Wives. 13 May 1957”). Nonetheless, both Quentin’s and Caddy’s sections of the Appendix focus on “the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead” or “the frail physical stricture which to her was no more than a hangnail would have been” (*The Sound and the Fury* 331-332). It seems possible that the Appendix, rather than providing an objective outlook, instead places the reader into the mindset of the novel’s characters. In Quentin’s entry and the first part of Caddy’s, it would seem that Quentin’s voice sneaks in.

In “Rereading Faulkner: Authority, Criticism, and ‘The Sound and the Fury,’” Stacy Burton criticizes the outlook provided by the Appendix:

> Here we are told with certainty that Quentin “loved death above all, loved only death,” that Jason was “[t]he first sane Compson since before Culloden... Logical rational contained,” that Benjy “could not remember his sister but only the loss of

Similarly, Faulkner describes Sartoris’ dialect in “Ad Astra” as having been “colored just a little by what he had listened to serving with English troops probably” (“‘What's the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”). Faulkner was, however, hesitant to describe dialect as being overly important: “I think you can't draw a character simply by putting dialect into his mouth. It is important as a part of the picture of the man, an indigenous picture of the individual. In that sense it's important, that is a man will speak according to his nature, his degree and his geography” (“‘What’s the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”).
her,” and that Caddy, “[d]oomed and knew it, accepted the doom without either seeking or fleeing it.” The brothers appear as more rigid versions of their earlier selves, and Jason's own voice echoes throughout the Appendix account of him.

(616)

In Bakhtin’s terms, Burton might argue that in the Appendix the characters of *The Sound and the Fury* become objects rather than the subjects they can be in the polyphonic body of the novel. Philip Novak took the Appendix to be one entry in a string of “invariably less interesting and less sophisticated” statements and commentaries provided by Faulkner about his own work (Burton 607). As he composed *The Portable Faulkner*, Malcolm Cowley commissioned Faulkner to write the Appendix to clarify plot points for the reader, but the Appendix, which gives long digressions about Caddy and other principal characters and a mere “They endured” for Dilsey, complicates the novel rather than clarifying any of the text (*The Sound and the Fury* 343). The reader has experienced Benjy’s memories and seen Jason’s irrationalities, neither of which the Appendix recognizes. It may be said that the narrator of the Appendix does not seem to understand the nuances of any of characters. On this view, the Appendix represents Faulkner’s attempt to settle the questions integral to the novel and his failure to accomplish his goal.

However, perhaps this reading is also mistaken. The section of the Appendix devoted to Jason IV does characterize him as “[t]he first sane Compson” in generations and “even a philosopher in the old stoic tradition” (338). It also refers to the “niggard savings” left for Jason after his sister’s wedding and Quentin’s college career and relates how Jason, who believed that other people were “in no sense whatever to be trusted,” “assumed the entire burden of the rotting family” and “sacrific[ed] what pleasures might have been [his] right and just due” (339). In short, Jason’s section of the Appendix does paint him as a much more intellectual and heroic
figure than he is in the novel, but that’s because the perspective of this Appendix, like his section of the novel, takes a moment to present an image of Jason straight from Jason’s own paranoid mind. That cannot be said for Benjy’s section, since Benjy did not recognize that he was “Gelded [in] 1913” though the Appendix does. Ultimately, the Appendix, rather than providing a clear and dependable authorial voice instead adds more voices into the novel’s vocal amalgamation for the reader to question.

Though Bakhtin presents Dostoevsky's polyphony as unique in the way that the voices of his works remain independent and “do not serve the ideological position of the author,” Wellek argues that “Bakhtin is simply wrong if he pushes [his argument] so far as to deny the authorial voice of Dostoevsky, his personal angle of vision” (Wellek 32). According to Wellek, Dostoevsky provides “plenty of direct authorial comment” in his novels, even occasionally inserting his words “into the mouth of a chronicler or narrator,” as in his first novel Poor Folk or in The Raw Youth (Wellek 32). In the Faulknerian context, it suffices to say that when Faulkner's own voice sneaks in—either through the words of the omniscient narrator, a surrogate character, an appendix, or his lectures at the University of Virginia—his voice becomes just another among many. Faulkner himself seems to be encouraging such a reading of his works.

VII. Style and the thirteen facets of a blackbird

When asked why he chose to tell his earliest stories from first person rather than third person perspective, Faulkner explained that his younger self had been

trying to tell about people, trying to create a—a man which would have the solidity of—of a living man, that is, would be capable of anguish and—and courage and compassion or baseness, be human, so that he too would throw a
shadow behind him, not a transparency, that the others are just a—a matter of
which tool to use” (“Coleman’s Writing Class, 25 February 1957”).

Following this complicated statement, which offers an illuminating insight but could be said to
raise more questions than it answers, Faulkner more or less dismissed the question entirely:
“It's—it's not—not too important” (“Coleman’s Writing Class, 25 February 1957”).

One finds this sentiment—whether it can be called bashfulness or evasiveness is hard to
say—throughout Faulkner’s discussions with students and faculty during his tenure as a Writer-
in-Residence at the University of Virginia. Faulkner would not admit to having thought out his
depictions as meticulously as my analysis in these pages might suggest. The author was inclined
to dismiss all narrative “tricks”: “I don’t know anything about style. I don’t—I think a writer
with—with a lot to—pushing inside him to get out hasn’t got time to bother with style” (“Blotner
and Gwynn's Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957”). Faulkner’s statements about his craft seem
peculiar and perhaps disingenuous coming from an author so renowned for his experimental
prose, but it was a story he stuck to consistently. Nearly a year later, Faulkner denied that he had
ever used alliteration consciously: “No, I don't have time. […] I mean by that the writer is too
busy getting the story down before he forgets it to bother too much about his grammar or his
style or the tricks he might use” (“What’s the Good Word’ Radio Program, 6 May 1958”).

Likewise, numerous times through the series of interviews and lectures at the University
of Virginia, Faulkner told the audience that he could not remember certain specific details from
even his most celebrated novels.

Frederick Gwynn: Sir, when in Absalom, Absalom!, after the killing of Charles Bon,
Clytie tries to keep Rosa Coldfield from—from coming in, does Clytie realize that
Charles Bon is her own half-brother? Is that the reason that she's trying to keep Rosa out, do you think? Does she feel any relationship?

William Faulkner: I don't remember. I don't remember that. Let me think a minute. I—I don't remember whether Clytie was any relation to Charles Bon's mother. That's so long ago, too.

Unidentified participant: They have the same father.

William Faulkner: Well, then, yes, that would be the reason, of course. ("Blotner and Gwynn's Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957")

Here, Faulkner’s forgetting seems egregious: he has not only forgotten important details about a character’s backstory but also her motivations. In another lecture, the author admitted, “I myself can't distinguish one book from another sometimes. I think not of books but of characters, and I can’t remember which book has which characters in it” ("Gwynn's Literature Class. 15 February 1957").

While it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Faulkner genuinely could not recall the relevant information from his past novels, Faulkner could have had other reasons for his reticence. As one listens to the interviews or reads the transcripts, one often finds Faulkner’s responses followed my laughter from the audience. The performative aspect of Faulkner’s public image hinders our ability to understand which of his statements we can take as true. Faulkner repeatedly makes jokes at his own expense as he fosters his “good ol’ boy” country farmer image.

Joseph Blotner: Mr. Faulkner, do you think that a comparison can justly be made between Joe Christmas and Charles Bon’s son? Is there much in their behavior you think that’s similar?
William Faulkner: There again you have me. I don't remember. They’re both so long ago, and that’s one good thing about being a writer. You can get rid of one book you don’t have to read again. [audience laughter] (“Blotner and Gwynn's Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957”)

Still, while Faulkner certainly does seem interested in entertaining his audience with self-deprecating humor, there may be another motive at play. Just as Faulkner had refused to provide reliable and authoritative commentary in his Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, perhaps Faulkner did not want to have his own discussion of the works intrude on others’ readings, as any answer Faulkner could have provided in this case would have done.

However, Faulkner did willingly open up about one key feature of his style: his preference for multiple narrators. To Faulkner, the author holds no privileged status: he is fallible, and in fact, the artist is prone to failure. Of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner said

I tried first to tell [Caddy’s story] with one brother, and that wasn’t enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn’t enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to—to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more—more passionate to see her through somebody else’s eyes, I thought. And that failed, and I tried myself, the fourth section, to tell what happened, and I still failed. (“Gwynn’s American Fiction Class, 15 February 1957”)

Notice that throughout the drafting of the novel Faulkner called his “most splendid failure,” Faulkner places himself on the same level as the three brothers whose perspectives he adopts to tell Caddy’s story. According to Faulkner, it took all three of the brothers plus the voice of a
third person narrator to provide an image of Caddy, but this final result still failed to capture the whole truth.

Borrowing and perhaps misusing the metaphor of Wallace Stephens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” a participant asked Faulkner whether a synthesis of all the characters’ perceptions of Sutpen would provide the reader to understand his character in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner accepted the metaphor and ran with it:

That's it exactly. I think that—that no one individual can—can look at truth. It—it blins you. You look at it, and—and you—you see one phase of it.

Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it, but taken all together, the truth is—is in what they saw, though nobody saw the truth intact.

[…] But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird, which I would like to think is the true one.

(“Combined Literature Classes, tape 1, 8 May 1958“)17

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17 As tends to be the case with Faulkner’s public statements, Faulkner’s example proves problematic in its own right when one considers the specific novel he is discussing. In the omitted portion of this answer, Faulkner states:

Quentin's father saw what—what he believed was truth. That was all he saw. But the old man [Colonel Sutpen] was—was himself a little too big for—for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to see all at once. It would've taken, probably, a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him as he was.

For my purposes, these details are not immediately relevant, but Faulkner complicates his statement in two important ways.

First, Faulkner refers to “the old man,” Sutpen, as being “too big for […] people no greater in stature” than the novel’s principle characters. For all her bitterness, Miss Rosa can be seen as the moral core of the novel, and so it seems problematic that Faulkner measures her “stature” as being beneath that of Sutpen. While it is understandable that Faulkner perceives Sutpen as a sort of mythological figure for these characters, the metaphor still seems as if Faulkner might aggrandize the callous plantation master a bit too much when one considers Sutpen’s immorality.

Second, Faulkner offers the possibility that someone “wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful” could overcome the need to see the Colonel through the multifaceted lens of different voices. It is not necessarily clear whether Faulkner thinks that only the specific characters he chose were too limited and that it was because his narrators were not great enough in “stature” that the “thirteen different ways” were required or whether the perspective of *every* potential character or narrator is so limited that more “different ways of looking” will always be required to get a clearer picture. In the former case, one could read Faulkner’s statement as suggesting that an authoritative view of Sutpen *could* potentially exist; this perspective simply would not belong to Quentin,
Though Faulkner’s statement here applies locally to Sutpen, it seems to provide a framework for understanding Faulkner’s motivation in constructing so many of his novels around the inclusion of numerous discordant voices to give a multi-faceted picture of “truth.”

VIII. Polyphony outside of the novel

Importantly, Bakhtin describes polyphony as a feature unique to the novel. According to Bakhtin, in theater, each actor expresses his or her character’s voice, but the world set on the stage still tends to be unified under one singular vision. In the case of Shakespeare, for instance, Bakhtin argues that “each play contains only one fully valid voice, the voice of the hero” (Bakhtin 34). Polyphony cannot exist under such circumstances because it “presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work” (Bakhtin 34). This opens up opportunities for looking at short story collections, which are typically single pieces featuring multiple voices, as polyphonic in much the same sense as the novel.

For instance, in *The Golden Apples* by Eudora Welty achieves a sort of polyphony not by weaving together a patchwork narrative of various voices but rather by presenting various narratives from multiple lead characters from different walks of life who inhabit the same physical space. In the case of Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, the town of Morgana, Mississippi, was created for her work much like Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. The characters inhabit the same space, but, as in *Light in August*, one character’s problems exist in the background to others’. To illustrate: *The Golden Apples* opens with the story “Shower of Gold” in which Kate Rainey describes the relationship between King McLain and his wife Snowdie; the final story in the collection, “The Wanderers,” opens with Kate's death from the perspective of a neighbor Miss Rosa, or Mr. Compson. For the purposes of discussing polyphony as a means of disassembling authorial narrative authority, I would support the latter case; that is, the reader will always benefit from having additional perspectives to come closer to the truth.
mentioned in gossip in “Shower of Gold” (Welty 263, 427). Even more than some novels which have a unified plot, short story collections like *The Golden Apples* allow for “[t]he possibility of simultaneous coexistence [among characters], the possibility of being side by side or one against the other,” as we saw in *Light in August* (Bakhtin 29).

Much of Faulkner’s corpus is similar in this regard: his independent short stories “That Evening Sun,” “Barn Burning,” and “Wash” each serve to add another layer to characters featured in his novels *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Hamlet* and *Absalom, Absalom!* by telling a story about those characters from another perspective. In “That Evening Sun,” Quentin tells the story of the Compson servant Nancy and her possible death. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin alludes to the story by asking Caddy about Nancy’s bones (153). Faulkner’s short story “Barn Burning” more or less serves as a prologue to *The Hamlet*, while the short story “Wash” presents the climactic scene of Thomas Sutpen’s death in *Absalom, Absalom!* with more attention to the perspective of his murderer, complete with echoes of the exact lines from the novel: “Well, Milly […] too bad you’re not a mare. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (“Wash” 535, *Absalom, Absalom!* 229). Indeed, the context for one of Faulkner’s most famous lines comes from the connection between two novels: in the 1950 novel *Requiem for a Nun*, Temple Drake discusses her tragic past and her brutal rape at the hands of a moonshiner in the 1931 novel *Sanctuary*, with Gavin Stevens responding to her claim that she died that year with, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (*Requiem for a Nun* 73).

However, despite the connections, it would not be entirely unreasonable to oppose a reading that assumes all of Faulkner’s works which take place in Yoknapatawpha County inhabit the same fictional universe. After all, there are some irresolvable inconsistencies in the timeline of Faulkner’s works. The appearance of the bones of the servant Nancy in *The Sound and the*
Fury, mentioned earlier, conflicts with her reappearance as a living person in Requiem for a Nun; Faulkner himself hand-waved the discrepancy away by saying that his characters “belong to [him], and [he has] the right to move them about in time” (The Sound and the Fury 153; “Blotner and Gwynn’s Classes, tape 2, 13 May 1957”). Similarly, in 1949 Faulkner requested that Random House insert a passage in future printings of Intruder in the Dust which would quote Absalom, Absalom! and refer to the fictional characters of Quentin and Shreve as having been written by “the successfully mild little bloke over yonder at Oxford”—in other words, Faulkner himself (Intruder in the Dust 246). This would have torn the Yoknapawtpha canon asunder, leaving two fictional universes with considerable overlap: one in which Faulkner is present as an author of books about the Compsons, and one inhabited by the Compsons and their neighbors.

However, the numerous allusions between works do seem to make the assumption that all of Faulkner’s works more or less inhabit the same universe worthwhile. For instance, the voice of the Mr. Compson of The Sound and the Fury is echoed in the advice he offers in Absalom, Absalom! In the former, Mr. Compson assures his son that “nothing is even worth the changing of it,” and that virginity, “like death,” is “only a state in which the others are left” (The Sound and the Fury 78). The same mind seems to be at work in Absalom, Absalom! when Mr. Compson observes that Henry could have coped with his sister’s marriage by “realizing that the sister’s virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all” (77). In both scenes, Mr. Compson treats virginity as a state defined by its opposite, and the subtext of Mr. Compson’s monologue in Absalom, Absalom! might be lost if the reader refuses to see both Mr. Compsons as being essentially the same person across the texts.

Meanwhile, Go Down, Moses was called a novel by Faulkner, but critics have sometimes seen it more as a collection of disparate short stories which require one to have already been to
Yoknapatawpha a few times before to make all the connections. All bound within the same book, the reader finds a poker game over someone’s welfare, the black man Lucas Beauchamp treating his daughter’s black suitor like he is a racial stereotype, and links between stories that take place eighty years apart. As a polyphonic novel containing different perspectives inevitably comes to be about different stories from different people, the distinction between novel and collection can easily be blurred in a polyphonic text. Faulkner’s insistence that *Go Down, Moses*—which included stories which had previously been published separately—should be read as a novel brings to light his own understanding of polyphony present in his novels (“Gwynn's Literature Class. 15 February 1957”). For Faulkner, providing access to that “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” seems to have been an integral feature of the composition of his major works, such as *As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury,* and *Light in August* (Bakhtin 6). Indeed, considering how Faulkner repeatedly took characters from one story and placed them in another, it would seem that Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha canon, taken as a whole, takes on its own polyphonic tenor.

IX. Universalizing the Southern legacy of racism

When Faulkner presents the reader with characters who represent the worst excesses of the idealized antebellum South worshiped by Lost Cause apologists, one might feel that Faulkner's fiction takes on a didactic tone, that Faulkner is attempting to use his authorial soapbox to actively tell the reader that the romanticized South never existed at all and that our cultural yearnings for it are misplaced. Likewise, even Faulkner's novels set in twentieth century may feel like a more overt “savage indictment of the contemporary scene” than the author should be permitted to include in the polyphonic novel.
In a 1945 letter to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner refers to Percy Grimm, the man who ultimately kills Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, as “the Fascist galahad who saved the white race by murdering Christmas” (Ruppersburg 256). With tongue in cheek, Faulkner told Cowley, “I invented him in 1931. I didn’t realise until after Hitler got into the newspapers that I had created a Nazi before he did” (Ruppersburg 256). Two aspects of these words to Cowley are particularly notable. First, notice Faulkner's typical sarcasm: Grimm’s name—derived from “Percival,” the name of one of King Arthur's knights involved in the Grail quest—and Faulkner's identifying him as a sort of “galahad” both call into question the purity and gallantry associated with Southern “gentlemen.” Faulkner's saying that Grimm “saved the white race” creates the same kind of dissonance between reader knowledge and the characters’ own understandings of themselves that one finds in the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*. Again, we see how in Faulkner's commentaries on his texts, he sarcastically speaks from the perspective of his characters rather than his own authorial perch.

Second, by labeling this red-blooded Southern national guardsman a “Nazi,” Faulkner is making a startling claim about Southern culture: the hatred that guides Nazi extermination policies is the same hatred of African Americans that persists in the South. Faulkner's implication, then, could be that we should be careful about how much pride we take in defeated Hitler's fascism when our own brand of Nazism endures at home. Quite a “savage indictment” indeed.

The characters of Faulkner's novels, villains and protagonists alike, are often manifestations of all the worst stereotypes and ills of Southern culture: incestuous, backwards, xenophobic, impoverished, grotesque. And yet, he pushes us to care about them, daresay to

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18 Interestingly, Faulkner’s own characters have become their own stereotypes in the literary community. When Eudora Welty realized that she had been wrong about the social background of a murderer she wrote about in her
understand and identify with them. Though Faulkner called attention to the evil underlying Southern racial attitudes, at the University of Virginia he was hesitant to agree with an unidentified undergraduate that Percy Grimm “exemplified” a type of person “prevalent in the South today, perhaps in White Citizens Councils” (“Undergraduate Literature Class, 9 March 1957”). Faulkner wavered:

I wouldn’t say prevalent. [Percy Grimm] exists everywhere. I wrote that—that book in 1932, before I’d ever heard of Hitler's Storm Troopers. What he was was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but then I'd never heard of one then, and he's not prevalent, but he's everywhere. I wouldn’t say that there are more of him in the South, but … I think you find him everywhere, in all countries, in all people. (“Undergraduate Literature Class, 9 March 1957”)

Despite his disgust for the likes of Percy Grimm, Faulkner refused to engage in a broad indictment of the South. His statement in the letter to Cowley seems to have a double-edge: Faulkner is not just saying that the hatred that guided Nazism can be found in the South, but that it can be found in all cultures. Hitler’s Nazism was not a new evil of the twentieth century, and the racism of the South is not an abiding evil of the South, but a fundamental problem of humanity.

Faulkner's answer here highlights his own struggles with the South when he denies that the racial hatred of Grimm is “prevalent” in the South or that one might find “more of him” there. That the statement ran contrary to fact in Faulkner's day—and perhaps even ours—may seem patently obvious; after all, the thread of Southern racism runs deep through many, if not most, of Faulkner's works. But Faulkner is careful not to allow the moral of Grimm’s story to be

short story, “Where Is that Voice Coming From?,” her friend joked, “You thought it was a Snopes, and it was a Compson,” referring to Faulkner’s family of impoverished, idiosyncratic outcasts in Yoknapatawpha (Keuhl 1972).
about the depravity of the South. He wants to universalize the issue, and he also, I think, wants to keep the reader from immediately accepting certain common images of the South. Faulkner might think it too easy to say, “That is how they act in the South” and thereby ignore the bigger issue: “That is how we act everywhere else, as well.” Faulkner does not want his “enlightened,” revolted reader to think about the violent racist as simply a monster and nothing more. This is important not only because it prevents us from reducing murderers and killers to subhumans, but also because it prevents us from erecting walls between ourselves and those who commit evil wrongs. We cannot feel safe in feeling that we are above monstrous deeds just because we do not consider ourselves monsters.

X. “I dont hate it!”

In 1957, a woman in the audience at the University of Virginia asked Faulkner, “Who is the central character of Absalom, Absalom!” He agreed with her that the novel had been written primarily as a story about Sutpen but added that it was “incidentally the story of—of Quentin Compson’s hatred of the—the bad qualities in the country he loves” (“Blotner and Gwynn’s Classes, tape 1, 13 April 1957”). When he offered this response, Faulkner very well might have seen a bit of himself in Quentin. Faulkner’s novels do not always read as love letters to the South, but the region was the place he called home. Though he might have personally recognized the “bad qualities” of the South he loved, Faulkner’s personal statements and actions

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19 The novel concludes with Quentin’s Canadian roommate asking “Why do you hate the South?” and Quentin, “panting in the cold air,” responding “I dont hate it” (Absalom, Absalom! 303). With the novels closing words, Quentin’s reply echoes in his mind: “I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (303).

20 I would imagine that very few Faulkner aficionados have not at some point heard the anecdote in which Faulkner, working as a screenwriter in Hollywood, tells a Warner Brothers studio head that he would like to return home to write, and several days later, when the studio head goes to Faulkner’s California home to find the writer, he finds that Faulkner has gone home—all the way back to Oxford.
reveal that he did not—and perhaps could not—always muster the courage to stand up to Southern norms.

In the titular story of *Go Down, Moses*, the familiar attorney Gavin Stevens assists Mollie Beauchamp with providing a proper funeral in Jefferson for her grandson, Samuel, after he is executed for murder in Illinois. Stevens’ internal monologue reveals that he has an abiding sympathy for “Aunt Mollie” and seems to understand her desire to confirm her grandson’s humanity in one last act:

*She just wanted him home, but she wanted him to come home right. She wanted that casket and those flowers and the hearse and she wanted to ride through town behind it in a car.* (Go Down Moses 365)

Yet when he when talks to the editor of a local paper, Stevens speaks of her in much simpler terms: “[Samuel] will come in on Number Four the day after tomorrow and we will meet it, Miss Worsham and his grandmother, the old nigger…” (359). Likewise, when Stevens goes around Jefferson asking for donations to pay for his favor to Mollie Beauchamp, he speaks crassly to his neighbors about town as he asks for money to help “bring a dead nigger home” (360). Even while he attempts to aid Mollie Beauchamp for only a token fee, Stevens submits to the racist norms around him when talking to his white peers.

Faulkner seems to have been guilty of as much himself. Faulkner wrote several stories about the innocent victims of Southern lynch mobs—*Sanctuary*, “Dry September,” and to a degree, *Light in August*—which would seem to condemn the practice. Indeed, in “Dry September,” the lynch mob’s behavior seems almost comically absurd. Despite the absence of any conclusive evidence that a crime took place, much less that the alleged assailant—a black male named Will Mayes—was the culprit, a crowd at a barbershop begins to condemn anyone
hesitant to punish Mayes as a “damn niggerlover” (“Dry September” 170). When a man asks “Did it really happen?” a veteran named McLendon, who had “commanded troops at the front in France” and later been “decorated for valor,” responds nonsensically: “Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?” (172). As the crew assembles to lynch Mayes for a crime that even their de facto ringleader McLendon acknowledges to be the product of paranoia, anyone who dissents is accused of “excus[ing] a nigger attacking a white man” and urged to “go back North where [he] came from” because “The South dont want [his] kind here” (171). As the story ends, after Mayes has presumably been murdered after he “went on a little trip” with the lynch mob and after the alleged victim herself has a nervous breakdown during a night out on the town as she realizes what she has done, McLendon returns home to his wife. The man who has just murdered another man for failing to respect white womanhood now screams at his wife for staying up late and waiting on him to come back in and grabs her shoulder in such a way that she begins to plead, “Please, John. You’re hurting me” (182). In “Dry September,” Faulkner reveals the values system of McLendon and his Southern peers to be a dangerously hypocritical farce.

Yet the very same Faulkner who wrote “Dry September,” identified by Philip Cohen as “one of the strongest critiques of lynch law and mob rule yet offered by a Southern writer,” also wrote a letter that same year contending that there had been “no need for lynching until after reconstruction days” and that he, Faulkner, had “yet to hear … of a man of any color and with a record beyond reproach, suffering violence at the hands of men who knew him” (McMillen 4; Cohen 110). As Cohen notes, though Faulkner had also horrified readers with the unjust “lynching of Lee Goodwin, a white man, in both the original and the published versions of Sanctuary (1929, 1931), “Faulkner concludes his 1931 letter by saying, ‘[T]here is one curious
thing about mobs. Like our juries, they have a way of being right” (Cohen 110). Here the public words of Faulkner the man blatantly contradict the story told by Faulkner the author.

Throughout his career, Faulkner wrote sympathetic African American characters and explored the interiority of those whose entire lives had been defined by racial prejudices. On occasion, one can identify a thread of Faulkner’s stated beliefs in the texts of his works and vice versa. Arthur F. Kinney notes that Faulkner published an article in *Ebony* magazine precisely echo[ing] Ike McCaslin in “Delta Autumn”: he argued that the South should go slowly and independently on matters of race, taking perhaps a hundred, perhaps a thousand years to assimilate everyone into a single race. (Kinney 277)

In the chapter of *Go Down, Moses* which Kinney references, McCaslin describes a world which seems to be progressing toward a post-racial society:

> This Delta. *This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires’ mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals […] Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares...* (Go Down, Moses 346)

Though McCaslin, who regrets his family’s sins against African Americans, describes the scenario with resigned melancholy, and Faulkner evidently hoped for a world along the lines of the one described in this closing scene, the same image of a world without starkly defined races haunts Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* when his Canadian roommate Shreve describes how the progeny of mixed relationships are destined to
conquer the western hemisphere. [...] Of course it wont quite be in our time and
of curse as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits
and birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. [...] and so in a
few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of
African kings. (Absalom, Absalom! 302)

The reappearance of this scene throughout Faulkner’s life and the way that it evokes different
reactions in each instance illustrates Faulkner’s elusiveness. Shreve evokes the image in
Absalom, Absalom! to make Quentin uncomfortable, not necessarily to suggest an ideal
trajectory for race relations.

On other matters, Faulkner’s personal statements seem to reveal a more bigoted
individual. Richard Godden described Light in August as “a thriller whose villain is the word
‘nigger,’” a reading which Faulkner himself might support given his statement at the University
of Virginia that Joe Christmas had been destroyed by the labels people put on him (Godden 238).
And yet, in his personal writings, Faulkner—like Gavin Stevens—showed little compunction
about using the word “nigger” himself. In a 1921 letter to his father, Faulkner questioned
whether race relations in the North were as smooth as Northerners would have Southerners
believe:

You cant tell me these niggers are as happy and contented as ours are, all this freedom does is to make
them miserable because they are not white, so that they hate white people more than ever, and the whites
are afraid of them. There's only one sensible way to treat them, like we treat Brad Farmer and Calvin and
Uncle George. (Cohen 108) One might dismiss this sentiment as the posturing of a son in front of
his father, but it seems that even in 1958, Faulkner was not afraid to use the word casually. That
year, Faulkner had been at Princeton for student conferences and reluctantly attended a Princeton
University party in his honor attended by members of the Institute for Advanced Study. Though
surrounded by people who had come to see the Nobel Prize winner, Faulkner told the widow of Princeton editor Saxe Commins that he could not “understand their world” (Faulkner: A Biography 656). Faulkner reportedly dodged conversation at the party with simples “yeses and noes,” but his exchange with physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer is infamous (656). When Oppenheimer asked for Faulkner’s opinion on “television as a medium for the artist,” Faulkner replied, “Television is for niggers” (656). As Blotner notes in his biography, Faulkner frequently watched television himself to keep up with horse races, professional football, and “a favorite comedy series” (656).

As with his statements about his writing process at the University of Virginia, it is difficult to take Faulkner’s public statements at face value. Of course, one does not want to take up for Faulkner and run the risk of sounding like an apologist for a man who clearly had racist impulses. However, the context of his words to Oppenheimer do seem to suggest that Faulkner made his statement in a setting in which Faulkner felt out of place, aloof, and standoffish, all while possibly under the influence of alcohol. Regardless of whether Faulkner intended to shock Oppenheimer of give off some other impression of himself, the fact remains that he proved himself capable of making such a statement in the public sphere, and Faulkner had a history of such statements.

Where does this leave us as readers?

Faulkner’s personal and public statements do not reveal an image of a single individual Faulkner but rather seem to provide us with a set of different versions of Faulkner, none of which seem completely compatible with the others. As the photographs he posed for attest, Faulkner was both a pipe-smoking Bohemian and an archetypal mustachioed Southern gentleman. He was a man who claimed that As I Lay Dying was a tour-de-force that had tackled the “two greatest
catastrophes which man can suffer—flood and fire” and then claimed to know nothing about style (Fargnoli, Golay, and Hamblin 46). He was a man who identified the worst aspects of racism and then spoke like his racist characters. Reading Faulkner’s letters and novels provides no satisfactory glimpse of the author as one man without contradictions; rather it demonstrates his commitment to polyphony and the dismantling of the author. In an interesting way, Faulkner seems to have anticipated Roland Barthes “Death of the Author,” in which Barthes argues that critics should approach the text as “not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146). While Barthes refers to the literary history that produced the text as his “multi-dimensional space,” the same “blend and clash” occurs between the voices in Faulkner’s novels, and Faulkner—in his commentary at the University of Virginia, his Appendix to The Sound and the Fury, and the voices of the narrators he constructed—denies the divinity of the Author-God in favor of a vision of the author as a failed artist telling a story through a series of failed narrators, none of whom can succeed alone but which might, taken together, provide an approximation of the truth.
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