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JACQUES POTHIER

## France and the American South: Transatlantic Misreadings and Mythmaking

The interest of France for the American South is much older than many people may think. In 1562, a group of French Huguenots led by Jean Ribault sailed from Dieppe to explore and possibly settle in the Floridas, a region that Spain did not seem to be much interested in yet. That summer, Ribault founded an *habitation*, or plantation, Charlesfort, on what is now known as Parris Island, South Carolina. He left thirty men and sailed back to France, promising to return, but back home he got trapped in the religious wars and sought support for his colony from the British crown, vainly counting on the sympathy of fellow Protestants and their queen. The attempt was short-lived: Charlesfort was evacuated by its hapless inhabitants who tried to sail back across the Ocean on a makeshift boat. In 1564 a second expedition, 300 men strong, led by René de Laudonnière, founded Fort Caroline, on the River St. Johns, further south. The new settlement was not faring much better and had even bought a ship from an English captain to sail back to France, when Jean Ribault unexpectedly turned up with ample military reinforcement, prompting the French to dig in after all and the Spaniards to take the French initiative seriously. The King of Spain sent an expeditionary corps; in 1565 they set up a fort at St. Augustine. A short war ensued; it ended with the defeat and massacre of the French Protestant settlers. This was a false start, but not the last one – ironically France's plantation in North America had started more decisively further north: thirty years before, France had founded a stronger bridgehead in Canada, and it was from New France that the French were later to return to the South to settle it. But only in 1682 did René-Robert Cavelier de la Salle sail down the Mississippi and claim Louisiana for Louis XIV.

Is it because of these dramatic beginnings? In the French imagination the South has been contemplated with a kind of tragic fascina-

tion. The Southern experience is not one the French can easily sympathize with, in spite of the closeness between Faulkner and authors rooted in the French South, such as Albert Camus from Algeria or Claude Simon from Roussillon. Finding “unexpected thematic parallels” like the ones Christine Gerhardt has found “between the southern and East German literary traditions” in her contribution to Suzanne Jones and Sarah Monteith’s collection *South to a New Place* (2002) is comparatively easy. But my approach here is mainly to reflect on how the South and France have looked at each other through the eyes of their writers, and what they did it for – the nature of this gaze. In geometrical terms, it is perpendiculars, not parallels that I want to draw.

Perpendicular gazes will often result in parallels, of course. In *The Unvanquished*, Faulkner draws a recurrent parallel between the insurrection of the French Vendée and Brittany against the republic at the time of the French Revolution; and the secession of the Confederate States during the American Civil War. Faulkner’s imagination of this conflict, as I have argued elsewhere, is probably heavily indebted to his reading of a translation of Balzac’s *Les Chouans* in the family library. Ever since he had visited the battlefields of the Somme on his 1925 pilgrimage while he was spending some time in France, Faulkner had had a special sympathy for poor war-torn France, a battlefield that would have to undergo the ordeal of reconstruction as his own country had and still was doing.

So the thematic closeness between French and Southern writings is to be expected, but views of this question have to remain rather sceptical; as Hans Skei argues in his essay, or as Ihab Hassan did a long time ago, who can tell of the mechanics of influences between writers? Didn’t Faulkner himself suggest that writers will use anything they find to build their chicken-coop of a work? Thus ‘influences’ become part of the vast lumber room full of bits and pieces, fragments and ideas which will turn up digested into the artist’s new creations. The affinity between a literary work and what precedes it is problematic, “[f]or if the context modifies the literary work it is in turn by the uniqueness, the recalcitrance, of that literary work modified” (Hassan 73).

Not many years after the composition of *The Unvanquished*, Faulkner had his opportunity to reflect on France in the terms of a defeated nation refusing to be vanquished. One of the first jobs he was assigned to when he returned to Hollywood on the payroll of Warner

Bros Pictures in 1942 was a script about General de Gaulle, who was emerging as the leader of the French *résistance* but had not yet worn out the patience of the American administration. Faulkner's reading of Balzac in the family library resurfaced: in his treatment of the *De Gaulle Story* he proposed to set a family of *résistants* in the same Brittany that had been the stage for Balzac's novel. His Breton village rebelled against Nazi occupation because their fondness for independence from the capital stemmed from a less adulterated sense of what the Republican ideal of freedom stood for. Associating the unvanquished French *résistance* with Breton exceptionalism was natural for a Southerner. He even appropriated some of the quaint nicknames that Balzac had imagined for his peasants: names like "Coupe-Tête" which had Henri Diamant-Berger, De Gaulle's representative in Hollywood but visibly not a keen reader of Balzac, quite puzzled.<sup>1</sup> Whether he was borrowing from Balzac or imagining a postage stamp of a French village as "a symbol of home, security, happiness and peace which is man's inheritance," Faulkner was pursuing the same discourse on the human condition – only the French setting allowed him a metaphoric displacement. The film was to serve an idea, in Faulkner's own words "a thesis that lust and greed and force can never conquer the human spirit" (Brodsky 335). Through De Gaulle, Faulkner elaborated on an idea which was to recur in his works – that the regional South, because of its exceptionalism, was better suited to defend what the whole nation stood for. The French consultant had to remark that Breton nationalism, never remotely on a par with the South's insistence on states' rights, had never meant that.

With de Gaulle's public reticence over the USA having its way with NATO, it was the Southern spirit which drew sympathy from France. Typical is the position taken by Marc Saporta in an introduction to a special issue of a journal devoted to Faulkner in 1985: after describing the Southern aristocratic vainglory as a universal trait, he goes on to admit that intruders in the South like the Snopeses eventually become conquered by the Southern spirit: "the vanquished South has vanquished its wild conqueror" (Saporta 5). As many of us would note, this romantic vision agrees with the wishful thinking of the French who think that they have a very special relation to culture, but it is inaccurate, since the Snopeses as they appear in Faulkner are not conquerors from the North, and so the suggestion that they should be contaminated by the Southern vainglorious habits makes no sense. But this reading is a good example of the way influence between na-

tional and regional imaginations works: they can be based as much on misreadings, so that the myth of the other regional or national imagination becomes as rich as its reality.

Is it true, as Michel Gresset – not only a great scholar but a devoted translator and interpreter of American literature into French – put it, that every translation of a great literary work has to be done again for each generation? How come that a great book should be immortal in the original but should age when it is carefully translated into another language? As other contributors to this symposium have shown by outlining the landscape of the availability of Southern writers in their own national languages, the French must be lucky, contemplating the possibility of a dusted up second translation for the major works. Faulkner, translated in the thirties by Maurice-Edgar Coindreau, sounds doubly strange to a contemporary ear. In order to assimilate a ground-breaking work, the genius of one language has to assimilate it to its own present set of references. If the original work is ground-breaking in the original culture, it must be made to create the same sense of rupture in the culture of arrival – a very fine line to walk. Great works defamiliarize the landscape of imagination and change it for ever. As Pierre Bergounioux puts it about Faulkner: “the worth of great works stems from their return effect. We do not inhabit the same world after an artist has shown us what we could not see but what was so blindingly obvious that afterwards we wonder how we could have ignored it.”<sup>2</sup>

Writing is reading. When writers read other writers’ great works, they naturally learn to write; sometimes they write about it; sometimes they translate. This is true even among readers from the same literary tradition: half way through the nineteenth century, Herman Melville found his model in Hawthorne, whom he dubbed the American Shakespeare because he wanted to be the American Shakespeare. And when the works to be read are in another language, the writer/reader either has to read in the original, or rely on the mediation of the translator. Quite often the reader/writer becomes the translator and he/she mediates the foreign work to his/her national public. A contemporary of Melville, the French poet Charles Baudelaire defined his poetry against that of Edgar Allan Poe, or, as we call him in France, “Edgar Poe.” In the introductory essay to his translation of a first selection of “Histoires Extraordinaires,” “Edgar Poe, his Life and Works,” Baudelaire squarely linked Poe’s achievement to his tragic destiny. To him, Poe was the archetypal “poète maudit,” or cursed

poet. Baudelaire's reading was prematurely cultural: in his view the United States as he had read about them could only be a prison for the poet, his life in them a woeful tragedy. Democracy introduced the love of freedom, and with it Baudelaire saw a new tyranny, the tyranny of the illiterate 'beasts.'

Closer to us, the interest of Jean-Paul Sartre in Faulkner can be seen to repeat a familiar pattern: Sartre's famous analysis of *The Sound and the Fury*, "Time in the Work of Faulkner," begins with general remarks about the disruptions of chronology in the narrative patterns of the novel, to bring about the focus of the essay – that "a fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former. Now, it is immediately obvious that Faulkner's metaphysics is a metaphysics of time." Like Quentin and his father, Sartre focuses on the tragedy of temporality, on how man's misfortunes come from his being time-bound. As he gradually fuses Quentin's tragic sense with Faulkner's metaphysics, Sartre eventually leaves off the other three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* to expose Faulkner's sense of time as he synthesizes it, blocked in the past and without a future. Faulkner's philosophy of time is, he concludes, untenable: "Man spends his life struggling against time, and time, like an acid, eats away at man, eats him away from himself and prevents him from fulfilling his human character. Everything is absurd. 'Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'" In the last paragraph of the essay, Sartre turns around to criticize this view, drawing on Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*: he emphasizes that consciousness exists because man projects himself into the future: "man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he might have." The absurdity that Faulkner finds in human life is then, Sartre argues, inauthentic, something he himself has put there.

The last paragraph of Sartre's essay harks back to the time when it was being written, in the impending certainty of the Second World War (the essay came out in 1939):

Why have Faulkner and so many writers chosen this particular absurdity which is so un-novelistic and so untrue? I think we should have to look for the reasons in the social conditions of our present life. Faulkner's despair seems to me to precede his metaphysics. For him, as for all of us, the future is closed. . . . We are living in a time of impossible revolutions, and Faulkner uses his extraordinary art to describe our suffocation and a world dying of old age. I like his art, but I do not believe in his metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> A closed future is still a future.

For Sartre, the consciousness of what might be, even of what might have been, is still a way to *be* through what one *becomes*. This could sum up the core idea of his philosophy of existentialism, as it was going to be developed in *L'Être et le Néant* (1943). Although he disregards Faulkner's ironic distancing – his strategy to draw away from Quentin's suicidal outlook in which, of course, there is no future –, although he ignores the counterpointing effect of the other three sections of the novel, Sartre's brilliant essay is famous – but it is a good example of how a writer can creatively misread another author to hone his own intellectual and philosophical tools. As Sartre was going to argue in a famous 1945 lecture, “existentialism is a humanism.” The universality of man's condition is to meet his limits, to try to overcome them or to come to terms with them through action. But Sartre's reading of Faulkner typifies the French approach to Faulkner as primarily a novelist with a tragic vision of man's condition – the term “tragedy” is also in the concluding sentence of André Malraux's preface to the French translation of *Sanctuary*, defining the novel as “the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the detective story.” After *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's most popular novels in France are *Sanctuary* and *Light in August*, with the plight of Joe Christmas trapped in the uncertainty of his racial identity, uprooted from his past and seeking to fulfill the secret destiny it contains.

Sartre is not the last philosopher who honed his theory on examples from Faulkner. More recently, in his *Le chant de la vie, phénoménologie de Faulkner [The Song of Life, a Phenomenology of Faulkner]*, Claude Romano provided an approach which is not so much a reading of Faulkner's work as it is an approach to the world through the phenomenological lens provided by Faulkner's imagination. After fathering French existentialism with Sartre, Faulkner continues to nourish French philosophy, but he is not the only one: let us remember the use Jacques Lacan made of Poe's “Purloined Letter,” an essential moment in the forging of his theory, the preamble for his one volume of *Écrits*. In Southern literature, it seems, French intellectuals find exposed a rawer, more genuine expression of human experience.

Between literary criticism, philosophical theory and fiction, French literature interacts with the literature of the American South through a variety of works which do not quite make up a post-modern genre, but which span a hybrid zone. Closer to literary criticism is Edouard Glissant's *Faulkner, Mississippi*. Glissant is a great poet and novelist, but he is also a noted professor and critic, so although his work does

not follow all the rules of scholarly documentation, it is nonetheless a critical study of Faulkner – an author with a prominent role in the definition of a *creolized* world literature which he tries to define.

Pierre Bergounioux's recent essay-book, *Jusqu'à Faulkner (Until Faulkner)*, is less academic. The book is not just about Faulkner, but spans three thousand years of literary masterpieces, going back to Homer, and of course until Faulkner. Bergounioux emphasizes a paradox that had interested Baudelaire about Poe: the artist seems to be alien in America – an idea Faulkner himself emphasized in his project for an introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*. But this dilemma has become an asset: the artist benefits from the new world full of roughness, beyond the seas, that is the New World. He revives the old fascination for the American imagination that D. H. Lawrence had expressed:

The old American art-speech contains an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else. But, of course, so long as we insist on reading the books as children's tales, we miss all that.

One wonders what the proper high-brow Romans of the third and fourth or later centuries read into the strange utterances of Lucretius or Apuleius or Tertullian, Augustine or Athanasius. The uncanny voice of Iberian Spain, the weirdness of old Carthage, the passion of Libya and North Africa; you may bet the proper old Romans never heard these at all. They read old Latin inference over the top of it, as we read old European inference over the top of Poe or Hawthorne.

It is hard to hear a new voice, as hard as it is to listen to an unknown language. We just don't listen. There is a new voice in the old American classics. The world has declined to hear it, and has babbled about children's stories. (Lawrence 7)

Almost a century later, as American literature has become much more diverse than Lawrence saw it, Faulkner's South seems to embody this fundamental authenticity. Faulkner is as different from the traditional, European figure of the writer, as Oxford, Miss., is from the old capital cities. In this climate, Faulkner escaped the educated sophistication of European cities and connected with the essential, material, primary work with the soil. "Oxford (Miss.), if appearances are to be trusted, is akin to the Gallo-Roman colonies just before the great invasions, to the backcountry clearance where serfs wield the axe in the medieval night," Bergounioux writes, waxing lyrical.<sup>4</sup> "Faulkner will not have to go back to the basic things, as Husserl invites the philosophers to do. He is within them, as in heroic times, as in the primitive stage when urban civilization barely emerged from the woods and marshes."<sup>5</sup> This American writer provides an immediate approach to the unmediated, genuine character of experience that in Europe can

now only be glimpsed at by the most serious phenomenologist – he gives access to an immanence of existence untempered by reflexion. Which leads Bergounioux, slightly carried away, to volunteer that Faulkner was all but uneducated – definitely not much of a reader anyway (114)!

Moving further away from literary criticism comes a type of books which really falls halfway between fiction and non-fiction: Michèle Desbordes's *Un été de glycine [A Wisteria Summer]* may be defined by its publisher as a novel, but the book's blurb denies this status: "This is not an essay, this is not a novel either," Michèle Desbordes claims. Straddling the Loire valley and the banks of the Mississippi, this 112-page book works as a prose-poem – a meditation on Faulkner's work, on Faulkner's life and characters in a style heavily and unashamedly contaminated by his own manner –, a very striking pastiche of Faulkner. The author shows how much Faulkner's literary world has become her own. Such books are written by writers about a literary South which has become their imaginary home-country. They make up a myth of the South that is not seriously rooted in any geographical or cultural identity, so that it is easily transferred to the myth of the West and the big sky in Tony Hillerman's Indian thrillers. Few Southern writers have made the French pantheon of mythical glamour as Poe and Faulkner have.<sup>6</sup>

Another example of this literary trend – an interesting one, because it concerns an author that the French find it very difficult to relate to, except by reading her aggressively against her religious grain: Flannery O'Connor. For a French readership, O'Connor is really odd, outlandish. This could seem surprising: unlike most American writers, she is a Catholic, and France is a country with a Catholic tradition. But the French have become a very secular people, who imagine American religion through the fundamentalist bias which has been so visible in the last few years. It is more difficult to think of Americans as Catholics, and then O'Connor's Thomist Catholicism is very remote from the French variety, with its emphasis on economic charity and good works. Yet ironically O'Connor was an avid reader of French theologians such as Nicolas Malebranche or Jacques Maritain, a Catholic writer who flew to New York at the time of the German invasion. Or Pascal, in spite of his Jansenism. Later, her attention was drawn to Teilhard de Chardin, although this was more a convergence than an influence.<sup>7</sup> The influence of European thought on O'Connor was huge, but she was breathing the same global air, the same "unrecorded hum

of implication” of the period – as Lionel Trilling could have put it – as the theologians who were paving the way toward Vatican II, and she could symbolize this intellectual community rising from an intensification of transatlantic exchanges.

To introduce her to the French readers in *Loin du Paradis: Flannery O'Connor*, Geneviève Brisac uses a polyphonic technique, mixing commentaries, paraphrases, borrowings from O'Connor's correspondence and passages in which she pretends to be Flannery O'Connor, speaking to the reader with a pungent and sharp humor very much like that of her model.

The writers from the South I have dealt with are sometimes seen as writers' writers, but our contemporaries like to deal with them as literary saints, not so different from the way Flaubert had reinterpreted the legend of Saint Julien l'hospitalier lifted from a stained glass window seen in the cathedral of Rouen in his *Trois Contes*, which so much influenced the hieratic style of another Southerner worth mentioning in the context of the French and Southern connection, Willa Cather in her *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. It is what the French writers who have admired Poe, Faulkner or O'Connor are trying to deal with, “this literature in which air is rarefied,” as Baudelaire put it, referring to Poe – the essential “becoming other” that literature worth global fame is about, if a writer is claiming full citizenship in what Pascale Casanova has called “*La République mondiale des Lettres*.” The penultimate chapter of this book is devoted to the place of Faulkner, proposing that writers such as he have made it possible for peripheral, ‘eccentric’ writers from small or recent literary traditions to claim their place. The last words she leaves to Proust, and they would beautifully describe the use our literary readers of Faulkner make of his vantage-point to define the horizon of their literary ambition: “I had a more modest opinion of my book and it would be incorrect to say even that I was thinking of those who might read it as ‘my readers.’ For, as I have already shewn, they would not be my readers but readers of themselves, my book serving merely as a sort of magnifying glass, such as the optician of Combray used to offer to a customer, so that through my book I would give them the means of reading in their own selves” (Proust 1113). Proust's modesty, applied to our material, was appropriate: the South as a looking-glass projects a distorted image of itself, but it is a potent and empowering myth.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Henri Diamant-Berger, [critique of the first draft of Faulkner's "The De Gaulle Story"] in Brodsky and Hamblin 383. Diamant-Berger, very probably missing the borrowing from Balzac, doubted that there could ever have been "a name like that in France." It is quaint even as a nickname, but in this early novel of his, Balzac was engaged in an earlier stage of a transatlantic dialogue spanning two centuries: an admirer of Walter Scott's historical novel, Balzac emulated James Fenimore Cooper, the American follower of Scott and a visitor in France. The original title of his novel – *The Last of the Chouans, or Brittany in 1800* – echoed the style of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, and in his descriptions of the Breton free-fighters Balzac compared them to redskin Indians. Nick-names like "Coupe-Tête" contributed to the characterization of the Chouans as wild natives. The transatlantic literary dialogue has indeed been going on for centuries.
- <sup>2</sup> "Les grandes œuvres valent par leur effet en retour. Nous n'habitons plus le même univers après qu'un artiste nous a montré ce qui crevait si bien les yeux qu'on ne le voyait pas et qu'on se demande, après, comment ça a bien pu nous échapper" (Bergounioux 121-122; my translation).
- <sup>3</sup> Incidentally this resounding judgment seems to belie what the critic had asserted before – that art is metaphysics.
- <sup>4</sup> "Oxford (Miss.), si l'on se fie aux apparences, tient de la colonie gallo-romaine juste avant les grandes invasions, de l'essart ou les serfs jouent de la cognée, dans la nuit du Moyen Age" (Bergounioux 102; my translation).
- <sup>5</sup> "Faulkner n'aura pas à revenir aux choses mêmes, comme Husserl invite les philosophes à le faire. Il est dedans, comme aux temps héroïques, comme au stade primitif où la civilisation urbaine émerge difficilement des bois et des marais" (Bergounioux 108; my translation).
- <sup>6</sup> Or as Flaubert may have. The literary sub-genre I am exploring could include Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*.
- <sup>7</sup> Although some of the short stories in O'Connor's second collection were written before, it was only in December 1959 that Flannery O'Connor read Teilhard de Chardin's *Phenomenon of Man*, from which she drew the formula she used as a title *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. See O'Connor, *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* 361, 366.

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