

A Note on Michael Grimwood's *Heart in Conflict*

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In *Heart in Conflict: Faulkner's Struggles with Vocation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), Michael Grimwood uses Erik Erikson's psychobiographical method to study Faulkner's young manhood, when he conceived his vocation of writing; and then his middle years, when, Grimwood maintains, he came increasingly to doubt the validity of his vocation. Such doubting, Greenwood argues, was inevitable because Faulkner's original conception of his vocation was shot through with fraudulence.

Rehearsing the familiar story of Faulkner's cold, yet demanding mother and feckless, distant father, and adding a conception of Oxford and the whole American South as antagonistic to intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, Grimwood examines several youthful works, such as *The Marble Faun*, "Black Music," "Carcassone," and "The Leg," and finds many contradictory impulses--a sense of being paralyzed and yearning for freedom, incest, masochism (crippling wounds) and a solipsistic dream of poetry without words. He thus depicts a youthful poet with a fragile sense of identity which caused him constantly to assume roles, and he concludes, rather puzzlingly, that Faulkner split his conception himself as a writer into two parts: aesthete and farmer.

So central is this concept to Grimwood's argument that he begins his book with a discussion of "Afternoon of a Cow," a heavy-handed joke which Faulkner wrote in 1935. Faulkner pretends the tale was written by his "secretary," Ernest V. Trueblood, who writes in a ludicrously artificial style. "Mr. Faulkner" in the tale is a terse, swearing owner of a pasture, cow, and horses. Grimwood says of the story: "In 'Afternoon of a Cow' Faulkner located the origins of his fiction in the twin acts of self-betrayal. The Trueblood in him--his artistic instrument--had to subordinate his talents to a coarse sensibility he little respected, while the 'farmer' had so little confidence in his own articulateness that he surrendered his experience to an exotic voice . . . [Faulkner] seemed to be confessing, perhaps unconsciously, to the suspicion that his literary career was only a grand impersonation. . ." (9-10).

Grimwood then discusses four of Faulkner's books-- *The Wild Palms*; *The Hamlet*; *Knight's Gambit*; and *Go Down, Moses*--applying his theory of Faulkner's schizophrenic persona and blending it with a theory of pastoralism which he derives, he says, from Empson, Raymond Williams, Renato Poggioli, and Lewis Simpson. The gist of his very involved theory is that Faulkner chose to be a writer not only because of the example of his great-grandfather and the influence of his mother but to defy his native South, which regarded writing as effeminate. But to retain a sense of belonging to his community he had to think of himself as a farmer also. This linking of an unlettered farmer with a highly literate aesthete had a pastoral dimension (pastoralism consisting of a literate person's applying his/her relatively complex perception to the relatively simple experience of a nonliterate person). Pastoralism also was forced on Faulkner by the South because it gave him mostly poor whites and blacks (nonliterate workers) to write about. Since Faulkner was from the upper class in the South, moreover, the split and his pastoralism took on a political dimension.

This split in Faulkner's literary persona lay dormant (302) or even proved fruitful (83) during the years of his great masterpieces, but in the late thirties, aging, his work neglected, unhappily married, Faulkner began to have doubts about the worth of his vocation and about his authority as a writer. Thus in *The Wild Palms* the two stories reflect the two

halves of his persona--Harry Wilbourne, the literate aesthete, and the Convict, the illiterate farmer who endures rather than rebels at his estate. In *The Hamlet*, on the other hand, the peasant Snopses are vertically mobile, and the upperclass Faulkner has his pastoral image of the farmer badly jolted, and struggles brilliantly to transcend the Southwest Humor variety of pastoralism to express his complex emotions.

The first five stories of *Knight's Gambit* were written, Grimwood asserts, by the unaesthetic-farmer half of the persona, which, like Faulkner himself, enjoyed detective fiction. Embarrassed at having written them for money, Faulkner set his Trueblood side to writing the long title story, which not only constitutes a rejection of the detective stories but analyzes and ridicules the kinds of imagination which neglect Faulkner's serious work. In *Go Down, Moses* the persona grapples with another variety of pastoralism: Plantation Literature as it stereotyped blacks. Here Faulkner also struggled brilliantly but finally realized, Grimwood argues, that "writing truthfully about Negroes was for him an enterprise doomed to failure, and that his own literary exhaustion originated in the moral exhaustion of the South" (225).

This outline is both more plausible and, of course, less complete than the book itself; more plausible, in that every effort has been made to eliminate contradictions and illogical assertions; less complete because it is impossible in brief summary to indicate the rich detail of scholarship with which the book is packed. Grimwood is not only steeped in Faulkner scholarship, but he brings to bear knowledge from a wide variety of fields. He is also frequently brilliant in his insights and reasoning.

At the same time, he is often self-contradictory, and his brilliance often succumbs to over-ingenuity. The central concept of the Trueblood-"Mr. Faulkner" persona is a case in point. Aside from the evidence of the facile role-playing Faulkner did in his youth, and continued to do at times all his life, should not his astonishing breadth and subtlety of insight into a huge gallery of characters warn Grimwood not to clamp him into the narrow perspective of only two outlooks? Curiously enough, Grimwood himself admits more than once that Faulkner had "more than . . . two inner voices" (157, 172).

Besides, the whole idea that Faulkner even unconsciously identified his aesthetic side with Trueblood is ridiculous. He wrote the joke in 1935, while struggling to complete *Absalom, Absalom!*, and behind him lay *The Sound and the Fury*; *As I Lay Dying*; *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*. Yet Grimwood argues that, two years later, when Faulkner read the jape to Maurice Coindreau and others, he had looked back "toward his literary posterity and recoiled at what he saw" (xiv). At the same time, Grimwood himself describes those works Faulkner looked back toward as masterpieces (302) which were "stylistically restrained in comparison with what came later" (10). Why would Faulkner recoil at masterpieces and satirize a restrained style with a ludicrously prissy style which was not like that of any of the works in question nor any he ever used?

But these are just a few of the many questions this book leaves unanswered. Among other important ones: Why name the book *Heart in Conflict* and quote as epigraph Faulkner's famous statement that "The problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . alone can make good writing," then devote the whole book, unironically, to the premise that "Faulkner's 'decline' resulted less from financial worry and public neglect . . . than from his recognition of contradictions within himself and within his cultural heritage" (xvi)? Again, if the "contradictions" in Faulkner's cultural heritage include, as Grimwood maintains, the South's contempt for aesthetes and, more important, its varieties of the "duplicit[ous]" pastoral tradition (xv), does one simply throw out the whole Southern Renaissance, as Grimwood's comments about it seem to suggest (166)?

As to over-ingenuity, one is accustomed, if not resigned, to the Freudian habit of reading dire significance into apparently unrelated events. Thus one merely laughs upon reading that because Faulkner's mother did not love him enough *and* made him wear a back brace--which Grimwood features in a chapter heading as "Maud's Corset"--Faulkner was constantly hurting his back by falling off horses for the rest of his life and once even

fell out of his boat and ran it over his back, in order, Grimwood says, either to rebel against his mother, or punish her, or punish himself, or to regain "her brace--or her embrace," or "most likely," all of the above (39).

When this kind of ingenuity is combined with that of sophisticated modern critiques of pastoralism to lose sight of the realities of Faulkner's achievement, however, one wishes that Grimwood had paid more heed to Faulkner's own distrust of the head and preference for the truths of the heart, his skepticism of ideologies. Grimwood demonstrates better than anyone who has written on the subject how Faulkner's genius drove him to reject stereotype after stereotype in depicting blacks in *Go Down, Moses*. Yet, apparently because Faulkner created an achingly true picture of race relations in the South in the early forties, one which failed to "solve" the situation; because he chose to write, not just about the South, but about the "heedlessness, rapacity, and greed" of the human race, qualities which are still ruining our world, in the South as well as all over the globe, Grimwood concludes he failed to write truly about blacks and--whatever this might mean--that his literary exhaustion originated in the moral exhaustion of the South.

The South was morally wrong but not exhausted, as events since Faulkner's death have shown. And Jacques Derrida has raised interesting questions about the presumption of original plenitude which a concept like moral exhaustion implies. As for Faulkner, read Grimwood's discussion of how he wrote and rewrote, rejecting received untruth after untruth about blacks to create one of the most searching elegies of the human condition. This is exhaustion?

But Grimwood was distracted by ingenious psychiatrizing, thus: In an epilogue to "Lion" Faulkner describes Boon Hogganbeck sitting under a tree full of squirrels with his jammed gun disassembled. Faulkner writes that Boon was "hunched over, hammering at the part in his lap, his walnut face wild and urgent and streaming" (281). Boon, of course, is acting out the mindless greed Faulkner is writing about. He is trying to repair his gun and kill all the squirrels. But Grimwood finds Faulkner's description "a curiously masturbatory image," then in the following paragraph writes: "When Faulkner converted 'Lion' into 'The Bear,' the masturbatory connotations of Boon's destructiveness became self-referential, for he preceded the scene of the epilogue with the notorious fourth section of 'The Bear,' in which he made the decline of the wilderness emblematic of human history and of his own prospects as a writer. In the end the hunt came to serve as a remote metaphor for the act of writing, for pursuing through the perishable Big Woods of his depleted talent the spirit-buck of past achievement. The dead bear (called Old Ben in the story)--Old *Has Been*--[his italics] stands as a loose equivalent to such unsurpassable trophies as *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Boon's scattered gun suggests the dismantling of Faulkner's creativity" (281). Poor Faulkner. No wonder he drank so much. With his imagination, he probably anticipated criticism like this.