

Faulkner's Treatment of the Racial Problem: Typical Examples

By Cleanth Brooks

This article consists of a lecture, given at the Otnäs conference in 1967, by Cleanth Brooks, professor at Yale University, where he applies the techniques of »close reading» on some of William Faulkner's works, especially dealing with racial problems.

The racial problem is, in the first place, only one of the many problems that America faces at the present time. Indeed, we share in the problems that seem endemic to the twentieth-century societies of the West, particularly those societies that have been industrialized for a considerable time. In the second place, the racial problem has its own relation to the whole complex of such larger problems and, in my opinion, cannot be fully understood in isolation from them. But race has been much in the headlines of late. The problems of race are certainly urgent, and it is these problems that have attracted the special attention of some of our finest literary minds.

Moreover, in this matter of the racial problem a »close» reading of texts may be particularly useful, if we are really concerned with what the writer in question is saying in his fiction, and especially if that writer is William Faulkner. Because of its very urgency, of its topicality, and of the emotional charge that it carries for a great many Americans of the present time, the reader may very well attribute to Faulkner's texts meanings that are not actually there. Such a reader, if challenged, can of course reply that what he finds is surely what Faulkner ought to be saying since a sensitive and imaginative writer like Faulkner must surely be as enlightened a man as the reader himself is.

Such reasoning is very human, and who am I to say that this or that particular reader has not seen the truth and that whenever we have doubts as to what Faulkner meant we should read the passage in question by the clear light of that privileged reader's perceptions. That, however, is not the way that literary criticism works — or perhaps I should say that I am so oldfashioned that I think that is not the way it ought to work. For every reason, it seems to me important to try to see what Faulkner's text actually says. If we value Faulkner as an artist, we are obligated to do this. Insofar as we really believe that the insights provided by a sensitive artist may tell us something about the state of society in a particular historical period, it is all the more important to determine as precisely as we can what the import of the work actually is.

Before taking up the concrete examples, however, I think I ought to make one brief preliminary comment on »close reading.». Some actors and actresses strenuously object to being »typed» — as the ingenue or the witless and zany comic or the wise and fatherly counselor or whatever, for the actor who is so typed may be condemned to play that same role forever after. I sometimes feel that I too have been typed in something like this fashion — as the rather myopic »close reader», the indefatigable exegete. In fact I am interested in a great many other things besides close reading. But I do believe that if we are not to talk nonsense about literary texts, we must have accomplished an adequate reading of them. What is an adequate reading? How »closely» must one read a Hemingway story? Or a Shakespearian tragedy? Or the childhood lyric, »Twinkle, twinkle, little star»? The degree of closeness will depend upon a number of things. I have no dogmatic prescription to offer. But I am convinced that a closer reading of Faulkner's novels — to cite a specific example — would have saved certain critics from egregious mistakes. It would, for instance, have prevented Leslie Fiedler's writing that the mother of Joe Christmas tried to convince the doctor who delivered her child that the child's father was a Mexican and not a Negro. But there was no attending physician at the birth of this child. The girl's grimly fanatical father was nicknamed »Doc». But Old Doc Hines is not Dr. Hines, and it is Mr. Fiedler's own imagination that has supplied him with his medical degree.

Again, a more careful reading of Faulkner's page would have prevented Mrs. Olga Vickery from attributing to Temple Drake, the daughter of a judge, an episode which actually occurs to Ruby Goodwin, the wife of a moonshiner. This mistake as to who is telling the story badly distorts Mrs. Vickery's whole conception of the character of Teinple. (I ought to add, however, that Mrs. Vickery, in revising her book has corrected this error. Her book, by the way, has many very sensible and sometimes even acute things to say about Faulkner's novels.)

Where shall we begin? It is tempting to choose a problem from Faulkner's masterpiece, »*Absalom! Absalom!*» What is Thomas Sutpen's real attitude toward the Negro? In what sense is he a racist? He refuses to acknowledge his own son because the son has a trace of Negro blood and yet in effect he acknowledges a daughter whom he has begotten on one of his slaves and he brings her up in the household along with his legitimate son and daughter. Again, he invites his neighbors to watch him fight with one of his slaves. He fights with the slave not at all to punish him, but simply to keep fit and as a kind of test of his own manhood. Such actions scandalize the Mississippi community in which he lives.

What is the attitude of Sutpen's son by the quadroon wife, Charles Ron, the son whom Sutpen will not acknowledge? What is Bon's own attitude toward race and specifically toward his quadroon mistress and their little son? How much is his attitude toward them, and toward his white brother and sister, affected by race? I've heard Charles Bon referred to as the first »freedom rider«, and his quiet but stubborn pressure upon his father to acknowledge him might make the epithet seem apt to. But is it? Could one not argue that, in abandoning his own little son, he is simply repeating his own father's behavior toward himself? There are problems here, and whatever the final answer some of the confident assertions made about Charles Bon and Sutpen are called in question' by the richness and the complexity of the novel.

On the other hand, it is also tempting to look into the character of Lucas Beauchamp, the man with Negro blood who is a descendant of old Carothers McCaslin. Lucas plays a prominent part in *Go Down, Moses* and he is the acknowledged hero of *Intruder in the Dust*. Thus, though the character of Lucas is very different from

that of Charles Bon, he too has been praised as a champion of Negro rights. Lucas insists upon his own dignity. He refuses to be pushed around by some of his rough white neighbors.

Yet Lucas seems to be actually proud of his white ancestry and regards as weak and perhaps pusillanimous Issac McCaslin's repudiation of his heritage because of his sense of guilt at what the white man has done to the Negro and specifically because of the ruthless cruelty of his grandfather, old Carothers McCaslin. What is Lucas Beauchamp's attitude toward the white man? What is his attitude toward the other Negroes? What is his attitude toward race?

These are matters that I am tempted to discuss; yet I think that I shall begin with a simpler problem. In »That Evening Sun,« Nancy, a Negro woman who has served as a temporary cook for the Compson family, lives in mortal fear of her husband Jesus. Nancy has prostituted herself to a white man and is now carrying his child. Though Jesus has left town some months before, Nancy has become convinced that he has returned and means to cut her throat.

Apparently many readers of this story have not known how to deal with Mr. Compson. Why doesn't he do more to help Nancy? Why doesn't he offer a more effective response to her plight? A note published in *The Explicator* by Mr. William Toole will provide a typical expression of this point of view. Mr. Toole remarks that in this story none of the white characters come off very well. Even Mr. Compson, whom Toole describes as the »finest (of the) white character(s),« fails Nancy and through that failure becomes »strangely diminished in moral stature.« By contrast, Nancy grows in moral stature. As Mr. Toole puts it, »the debauched and ignorant Negro woman is elevated all the more as she awaits a grim and primitive punishment of her sins.«

On one level I suppose that his judgment makes a kind of sense. Mr. Compson cannot allay Nancy's fears and Faulkner does indeed succeed in evoking in his reader a very sensitive awareness of Nancy's plight — of her helpless desperation. It is Nancy's story and not Mr. Compson's, and it is proper that our sympathies should be focused on her and that the other characters in the story should serve finally as mere foils to her. But a somewhat more careful reading of the text will indicate that it would be difficult

— if not impossible — for anyone to free Nancy from her terror and that most men would have acted pretty much as Mr. Compson did. Whether or not we think well of Mr. Compson doesn't, I suppose, matter very much, but if we are to comprehend the story, it is important that we understand Nancy. That is the issue of consequence.

One of Mr. Compson's real difficulties is that there is no proof that Jesus has returned. Nancy produces no specific evidence. She does say that she has been sent a sign, but is the sign, this »hogbone, with blood on it,» as Nancy describes it, the product of Nancy's perfervid imagination? Or if it did exist, is it meant to be a portent of death? And was it left in Nancy's cabin by her estranged husband? Nobody has yet had a glimpse of him, not even Nancy, and when she is asked for proof that he is now in Jefferson, all that she can offer is her irrational sense of his vengeful presence. (I say »irrational», for it is interesting that before he left town Jesus already knew that Nancy was carrying Mr. Stovall's child and yet at that time had made no move against her.) Mr. Compson, therefore, in expressing his skepticism that Jesus really means to return and kill Nancy, is not being fatuously reassuring. In fact I see no reason to doubt Mr. Compson's sincerity when he tells Nancy that Jesus is »probably in St. Louis now. Probably got another wife by now and forgot all about you». But even if he thinks her terror irrational and her fears imaginary, he does recognize that for her they are real and so he tries to help her.

The reader also ought to notice that it is not merely the white people who are skeptical about Jesus's return. So are the Negroes. Dilsey asks Nancy: »How do you know he's back? You ain't seen him» and Nancy can only reply »I can feel him. I can feel him laying yonder in the ditch».

Dilsey then comes at the matter from a somewhat different angle, by asking Nancy how she knows that Jesus is »out there tonight? How come you know it's tonight?», Nancy has no evidence apart from the profound intuition that has gripped her whole being. She tells Dilsey: »He's there, waiting. I know. I done lived with him too long. I know what he is fixing to do fore he know it himself,».

Later, Dilsey asks Nancy why she won't let Mr. Jason — this is her way of referring to Mr. Compson — telephone the marshal.

Then Dilsey tries to persuade Nancy to go on down to her own cabin. Frony, Dilsey's daughter »will fix you a pallet and I'll be there soon«. But Nancy replies that no mere Negro can stop Jesus. She can be safe only in the house of a white man, though as we shall see, by the end of the story Nancy believes that a white man's house would provide no protection either. When Mr. Compson offers to take her to stay with Aunt Rachel, another Negro, Nancy tells him that »it wont do no good. When even your own kitchen wouldn't do no good. When even if I was sleeping on the floor in the room with your chillen, and the next morning there I am, and blood — — —».

Preoccupation with Mr. Compson's adequacy or inadequacy in the situation has tended to obscure another complicating of the story, one that I believe has never been mentioned by any of the numerous commentators. It is this: Nancy's own sense of guilt and the strong emotional ties that still bind her to Jesus make her feel that she deserves to suffer at his hands.

I don't believe that we should press this issue very hard, but the ambivalence of Nancy's feelings toward Jesus and the fact that she still feels strongly possessive toward him is put very emphatically in the story. When Mr. Compson, trying to quiet her fears by telling her that Jesus is now in St. Louis and has probably got himself another wife, what does Nancy say? »If he has, I Letter not find out about it. I'd stand there right over them, and every time he wropped her, I'd cut that aam off. I'd out his head off and I'd slit her belly and I'd shove — — —» Mr. Compson conscious that the children are present, tries to make her hush, but not in time to prevent the little girl's asking: »Slit whose belly, Nancy?« Nancy is indeed afraid of Jesus, but she is still fiercely possessive and her feeling that he still belongs to her whether or not she belongs to him, obviously has something to do with her obsession with the notion of his return. So too does her sense of guilt. When the five-year-old Jason, fascinated with the conversation going on between Dilsey and Nancy, asks: »Art you a nigger, Nancy?«, Nancy answers: »I hellborn, child. I wont be nothing soon. I going back where I come from soon.»

As the story ends, Mr. Compson arrives at Nancy's cabin. He is looking for the children who are here because Nancy has enticed

them to come home with her. Whether or not she thinks that the presence of the children — the eldest is only nine years old — would be a protection against Jesus, in her misery she craves some kind — indeed any kind — of company. Mr. Compson is still sympathetic but now he is at his wit's end. Nancy won't go with him to Aunt Rachel's to spend the night. She won't lock up her house; and he asks her: »Then what do you want to do?» Nancy tells him: »I don't know. I cant do nothing. Just put if off. And that don't do no good. I reckon it belong to me. I reckon what I going to get ain't no more than mine.»

In a sense one feels that Nancy may even be anxious to get it over with, but she doesn't want it to happen in the dark. As she tells Mr. Compson: »I scaired of the dark. I scaired for it to happen in the dark.» The story ends with Mr. Compson and the children departing, the younger children not comprehending the situation, prattling to each other as they go. But the eldest of the children, Quentin looks back to see Nancy sitting by the fire with her kerosene lamp turned as high as she can turn it, and the door of the cabin left wide open, waiting for Jesus to enter, but hoping that it won't happen in the dark.

It is a beautifully told story, a brilliantly told story, and it must be judged so even if Jesus did not come that night or on any subsequent night. For this story is concerned to render the terror and the helplessness of a human being who feels that she is to die. This feeling is transmitted with utter conviction.

Well, what did happen? Did Jesus come that night and cut Nancy's throat? We simply don't know. Malcolm Cowley, in his brilliant introduction to the Portable *Faulkner*, a work that did so much to revive Faulkner's reputation in the United States after most of Faulkner's books were out of print, remarks that we do learn in another story, the novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, that Nancy had her throat cut and that her husband left her body in a ditch for the turkey vultures to eat. Dut Cowley, as several people have since pointed out, had confused the bones of Nancy, the mare once owned by the Compsons, with Nancy, the heroine of this story. As far as Faulkner is concerned, there is no way to tell whether we are to regard Nancy's fears as a delusion or as well founded.

It is true that in Faulkner's novel *Requiem for a Nun*, Nancy reappears as Nancy Manigoe. The same incident about Nancy's having her teeth kicked in by the white man to whom she has prostituted herself is also told of Nancy Manigoe, and the author has acknowledged (in *Faulkner in the University*) that the two women are the same. But this in itself does not prove very much. It would not be the first time that Faulkner had changed his mind about a character; Faulkner is not at all above summoning a character like some Lazarus from the tomb to serve his turn in another story or novel. Therefore I shall not claim that the fact that Nancy occurs in a later novel proves that Jesus did not kill her, and that therefore her fears were merely a delusion, though the author of a well regarded book on Faulkner, Mrs. Olgo Vickery, has been willing to do so. She writes that in view of Nancy's disconcerting resurrection in *Requiem for a Nun*, a careful rereading (of »That Evening Sun») discovers how much emphasis is placed upon the foolishness of her fears.»

Perhaps so, but I think that we are on safer ground as far as literary criticism is concerned if we say that the worth of »That Evening Sun» is independent of later events about which we can only speculate and which are no part of the story itself. If a painting is properly composed and has its own unity, it can convey its meaning within the section of canvass to which the painter has confined his brush. We are not required to try to trace a portion of a picture on out beyond the picture frame. Yet I dare say that writers like Mr. Toole might have been inclined to be less hard on Mr. Compson if they had borne in mind that Nancy lives beyond the time of »That Evening Sun,» if not like Falstaff to live and fight another day, at any rate, to suffer and die on another occasion.

Now I should like to turn to a more complicated problem, one that arises with reference to that massive novel, *Light in August*, surely one of Faulkner's masterpieces. The problem can be put briefly in this fashion. What is Joe Christmas's attitude toward the Negro? What is his attitude toward the white man? What is his attitude toward himself? Many critics have insisted that in the end Joe dies as a Negro and as a conscious representative of the Negro race. In that sense, if any, can one say that he does?

I had first planned to discuss in some detail a related question: is Joe Christmas really a Negro? What evidence — in spite of the fact that commentators occasionally refer to him as a *mulatto* — what evidence is there for believing that he possesses any Negro blood at all? But I must confine this paper, if I can, to the amount of pages prescribed for, and besides I have already dealt with this matter of Joe's racial inheritance in a book on Faulkner. At this time, I shall do no more than offer a brief summary of the argument that I offered there.

A careful reading of *Light in August* suggests the unlikelihood of Joe's possessing any Negro genes. The evidence that he has even a trace of Negro blood rests on the assertion of Joe's crazed old grandfather, Eupheus Hines. Joe's grandmother, Mrs Hines, is thoroughly aware that her husband is an obsessed man and she herself doubts that Joe has any Negro blood. But in any case, it is plain that Joe becomes what he becomes, not by any biological inheritance but by the way in which society regards him and the way in which he is constrained to regard himself.

Two terrifying passages in the novel make this point with great power. They are both short and I shall read them here. The first (on p. 105 of the Penguin edition) describes Joe as a child in the orphanage, conscious of the way in which the janitor, old Hines, keeps him under observation.

»He knew that he was never on the playground for an instant that the man was not watching him... with a profound and unflagging attention. If the child had been older he would perhaps have thought *He hates me and fears me. So much so that he cannot let me out of his sight [.]* With more vocabulary but no more age he might have thought *That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time [.]*»

The second passage (p. 288) describes the child's own intent observation of a Negro workman in the orphanage yard. Old Doc Hines tells of how Joe »was watching the nigger working in the yard, following him around the yard while he worked, until at last the nigger said, »What you watching me for, boy?' and he said, 'How come you are a nigger?' And the nigger said, 'Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?' and he says, 'I aint a nigger, and the nigger says, 'You are worse than that. You

dont know what you are. And than that, you wont never know. You'll live and you'll die and wont never know.'»

What does Joe Christmas himself think of his Negro blood? Obviously he hopes to shock the woman in the brothel by telling her that he is part-Negro. Later, perhaps as a test of her love, he confides to the waitress-prostitute Bobbie Allen, the first girl with whom he was ever in love, that he thinks he has some Negro blood. But when Joanna Burden asks him one evening whether he has any idea who his parents are, he tells her that he doesn't know »Except that one of them was part nigger. Like I told you before.,,

»She was still looking at him: her voice told him that. It was quiet, impersonal, interested without being curious. 'How do you know that?'

»He didnt answer for some time. Then he said: 'I dont know it.' Again his voice ceased; by its sound she knew that he was looking away, toward the door. His face was sullen, quite still. Then he spoke again, moving; his voice now had an overtone, unmirthful yet quizzical, at once humorless and sardonic: 'If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a let of time.',,

The occasion of this conversation is a rather special one. It occurs in a period in which Joe seems moderately happy in his relationship with Joanna. Faulkner has gone to some pains to suggest an atmosphere of confidence between two people talking about themselves and his mention of the overtone in Joe's voice, »unmirthful yet quizzical,» suggests that here Joe is speaking sincerely. He doesn't really know whether or not he has Negro blood. Incidentally, had old Doc Hines ever told him that his father was partly Negro, Joe probably would said »my father was part nigger,» not what he does say: »One of them was part nigger.» Joe does not know but has been simply acting out his alienation, carrying on his shoulder, like a chip of defiance, the imagined stigma of black blood. (see p. 192)

Did Joe persist in his defiance to the end? Or did he, just before his death, finally accept the Negro as his brooher? In a recent book, Mr. Melvin Backman interprets Joe's final actions of fate as a Negro — that is, Backman argues that Joe voluntarily returns to Jefferson and puts himself in the hands of the law because he has resolved to die at its hands as a Negro murderer.

Backman's interpretation acquires a certain plausibility in the light of certain passages that occur in Chapter 14. For example, Joe, dazed and lightheaded from hunger, goes into a Negro house where he smells food. (p. 252) But the Negroes immediately recognize Joe as the wanted murderer and flee in panic. There Joe seats himself at the table, »waiting, thinking of nothing in an emptiness, a silence filled with flight. Then there was food before him, appearing suddenly between long, limber black hands fleeing too in the setting down the dishes. It seemed to him that he could hear without hearing them, wails of terror mod distress quieter than sighs all about him, with the sound of the chewing and the swallowing. 'It was a cabin that time,' he thought. 'And they were afraid. Of their brother afraid.'»

The last phrase may be thought to count powerfully in favor of Backman's case, particularly if we put beside it Joe's reflection (three pages earlier on p. 249), as he pulls on a pair of black shoes that had belonged to a Negro man. As he does so, Joe »could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying, for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and iniradicable gauge of its upward moving.»

It is in this passage in particular that Mr. Backman finds justification for his belief that Joe's actions do testify to his acceptance of himself as a Negro. Backman writes that »paradoxically, it is only after the murder that [Joe] felt ready to become one with his black brother. He put on the 'black shoes' even though he 'could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss...'.»

The suggestion that Joe's putting on the shoes signifies that he is ready to become one with his black brother may, however, seem much less plausible if one will recall his (motive for putting on these shoes »smelling of Negro., Joe was being tracked by the sheriff's bloodhounds and he wishes to confuse the dogs. In fact, as we are told on p. 248, he persuades a Negro woman to accept his own shoes in exchange for her husbands.

The stratagem works. The bloodhounds rush to the Negro cabin and have to be pulled by main strength away from the Negro

woman who is now wearing Joe's shoes. Now it is perfectly true that when Joe puts on the Negro's brogans, there does arise in his mind a vision of himself »being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting.» Joe is so poised between the white world and the black world that he is hypersensitive to the implications of any action as tending toward, or away from, the one or the other of those worlds. Joe is thus alive to all the ironies implied in enveloping himself if only momentarily in the Negro odor. One takes a step down into the black abyss in order to escape being swallowed up in it. But having taken the first step downward, will one be able to escape?

Some days later, Joe, still wearing the Negro's shoes does start back of his own accord to Jefferson. But why? Mr. Backman, as we have already remarked, associates Joe's return with an acceptance of himself as a Negro. Mr. Lawrence Thompson has his own variation on this theme: Joe's return is »his' inasochistic bid for torture.» Thus, Joe wants to be killed and since Thompson uses the word »torture,» apparently Joe foresees and yearns for Percy Grimm's butcher knife. Thompson writes: »After the murder and after the escape [Christmas] chooses to circle back, within the larger of his runnings, to avail himself of that ultimate and masochistic luxury of death at the hands of his enemies — the death he expects and wants.» But this is a clumsy and foreshortened account of Joe's action. Joe's motivation is more than this. Moreover, Joe at this moment is not any more or less masochistic than he has been for years past. But in any case, Joe has not laid aside his defiance. What I hope will constitute the proof of this last statement will be forthcoming in what I shall say a little later.

After invading the Negro cabin and eating some cooked food — we are told what it is the first decent food that Joe had eaten for a long time — Joe feels a compulsive need to ascertain the day of the week as though »at last he had an actual urgent need to strike off the accomplished days toward some purpose, some definite day or act, without either falling short or overshooting.» From this time onwards he becomes irritated when the people whom he accosts run away from him in terror. He says to himself »Any of them could have captured me, if that's what they want. Since that's what they all want: for me to be captured. But they all run first. They all

want me to be captured, and then when I come up ready to say here I am *Yes I would say Here I am I am tired of running of) having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs they all run away.*»

Joe is evidently now fully resolved: he knows precisely what he is going to do. When he elicits from a terrified Negro the information that it is Friday, he immediately sets off toward Jefferson. We are told that Joe's »direction is straight as a surveyor's line, disregarding hill and valley and bog.» Yet we are also told, »he is not hurrying. He is like a man who knows where he is and where he wants to go and how much time to the exact minute he has to get there in. It is as though he desires to see his native earth in all its phases for the first or the last time.»

Does this last sentence imply that Joe is finally accepting his homeland and nature itself? The next sentence might seem to indicate as much: »He had grown to manhood in the country, where like the unswimming sailor his physical shape and this thought had been molded by its compulsions without his learning anything about its actual shape and heel. For a week now he has lurked and crept among its secret places, yet he remained a foreigner to the very immutable laws which earth must obey. For some time as he walks steadily on, he thinks that this is what it is — the looking and seeing — which gives him peace and unhaste and quiet.. > But it is not an acceptance of his homeland as home or his reconciliation with nature that accounts for his present sense of »unhaste and quiet,» for the passage goes on to say: »suddenly the true answer comes to him. He feels dry and light. 'I dont have to bother about having to eat anymore,' he thinks. 'That's what it is.'»

If the account of Joe's state of mind had not taken this last turn, one would be tempted to say that something like the instinct that directs the homing bee has put Joe on his >bee-liner course back toward Jefferson or that Joe's compulsion as he moves back toward Jefferson is like that of the salmon fighting its way up the falls, back to the pool in which it had been spawned. Joe now feels, no more than the salmon, any need to bother about eating: his body has enough stored energy to reach the destination sought and that destination is sensed as final.

Yet what urges Joe to return to Jefferson is something more

than the blind compulsion that determines the movements of a natural creature. What is this »true answer» that suddenly comes to Joe, this answer that makes him feel suddenly »dry and light.» It has not been spelled out for us by Faulkner, but surely it has been implied by what Joe is to say to himself a little later, as he sits in the wagon headed toward Mottstown and Jefferson: he tells himself that he has been »farther in these seven days than in all the thirty years before ... But... [he says to himself] 'I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo...'.» The course on which Joe instinctively sets off on toward Jefferson, a course as »straight as a surveyor's line, disregarding hill and valley and bog» denies the circle in which he has been running for thirty years. His »unhaste and quiet» — the fact that he is not hurrying — denies the running to which he has condemned himself through those thirty years. He is tired of running and if this going back to Jefferson to face the consequences means, as Joe knows it must mean, death, well, Joe is tired of having to handle life as if it were a basket of eggs. His life will have to take its chances though Joe as a realist can make an informed estimate of what those chances are.

The bee's return to the hive, »straight as a surveyor's line,», is a powerful assertion of Joe's desire to break out of the circle, but Joe's motive for returning deserves an analogy more nearly adequate to himself as a conscious being. I find the analogy that seems to me best in a speech that Milton in his *Paradise Regained* assigns to Lucifer. Christ has just chided Lucifer for offering him his aid in assuming the throne of David, for, as Christ points out to Lucifer, »my promotion will be thy destruction.» But the great Adversary has his answer. He will welcome his destruction when it comes.

Let that come when it comes; all hope is lost
Of my reception into grace; what worse?
For where no hope is left, is left no fear;
If there be worse, the expectation more
Of worse torments me than the feeling can.
I would be at the worst; worst is my Port,
My harbour and my ultimate repose,
The end I would attain, my final good.

Yet if Joe does decide to return to Jefferson where, as he must know, he will meet his death, does this final decision indeed signify his acceptance of himself as a Negro? Does he feel ready, as Mr. Backman has put it, »to become one with his black brother,? Or as Mrs. Olga Vickery states it, »to assume the role of Negro which Jefferson has prepared for him»? We may be tempted to think so because of the last sentence in Chapter 14 (p. 255) where Joe is described as sitting on the seat of the wagon, with, »planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes smelling of Negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving fram his feet upward as death moves.»

Yet if we turn to the next chapter and read (on p. 263) the account of how Joe was captured, we will find that Joe does not really »give» himself up at all. He does not go up to the sheriff and say I am the Negro murderer whom you are seeking. Far from it. There is a brilliant passage in which we are allowed to overhear the account of the capture of Joe as reported by a countryman who had come into Jefferson to market on Saturday. He tells us that when Christmas arrived in Jefferson, he »went into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him. Even when the bootblack saw how he had on a pair of second hand brogans that were too big for him, they never suspected. They shaved him and cut his hair and he paid them and walked out and then went right into a store and brought a new shirt and a tie and a straw hat, with some of the very money he stole from the woman he murdered.» Finally someone did recognize him and asked him »Aint your name Christmas?)>and Christmas made no ado about admitting that he was. As the countryman puts it, »He never denied it. He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too.»

The important matter here is that even though Joe has decided to stop running away, he has not made his peace with either the

white or the black community. He is still the defiant rebel. His alienation is the most important thing just as his search to find himself is perhaps the most admirable thing about him. He refuses to be distracted from that search or to accept any compromise with his real identity. Because his formative years were spent in the American South, and because of the special circumstances of his childhood, his alienation is intimately involved with the Southern caste system and crucially so. But we shall miss the terrifying poignance of Joe's situation and the richness of the whole novel if we treat *Light in August* as simply a footnote on the racial situation in the United States. Because Joe evidently cannot honestly say, he does not say: the Negro is my brother and I accept brotherhood with him. This modern Ishmael recognizes no brothers and he is no nearer to the Negro consciousness than he is to the white.

Indeed, Joe's problem is a more complicated affair. It is connected with his latent homosexuality — his fear of women and his fear of Nature. But to pursue some of these connections would require at least another hour's lecture — perhaps two — and I have already exhausted the time allowed.

To pursue these matters might also seem to lead us away from any positive moral judgment and away from any specific incitement to social and political action. But these objections, before they are to be accepted as valid, call for further scrutiny. I concede that the reader of a novel is a moral being and that as such he must be ultimately willing to make a moral commitment. But surely his actions and the actions of all of us ought to be taken in the light of the fullest moral calculus to which we can attain and, again, surely the prime virtue of a good novel is not that it should prove to be effective *agit-pop* but that it should provide us with a profound revelation of reality.

T. S. Eliot somewhere makes a helpful distinction between prose and verse. He observes that though it is legitimate that a writer should in his prose reflect upon his ideals, in his verse he must deal with reality. In his discursive prose — that is to say, in his speeches and essays, now recently collected into one volume by Mr. James Meriwether — Faulkner speaks out positively and emphatically in favor of racial justice and according to the Negro his full civil rights. But in his fiction — which at his best attains the subtlety

American Civilisation

is the title of a recently published book. The book is edited by A.N.J. den Hollander and Sigmund Skard at the request of The European Association for American Studies. The book is meant to fill a need of textbooks on America, »written by and for Europeans», and specially devised for university students. It covers a great variety of subjects such as geography, history, literature, language, social and economic structure, art, schools etc. Finally Sigmund Skard gives a survey of the Image of America in Europe. *American Civilisation* is richly illustrated and published at Longmans, London.

American Periodicals in Nordic Libraries is the title of the great bibliographical work, which was started by the late Prof. Lars Åh-

nebrink. His work has now been continued by Birgitta Mostrom, librarian, and the first part of the bibliography entitled *Language and Literature*, containing names and data on one thousand periodicals in Nordic libraries, will probably appear this autumn.

On the 15th of Novembr 1968, Prof. Olov Fryckstedt was installed as the first permanent holder of the chair in American literature in Uppsala, which was established in the same year. At the installation ceremony Prof. Fryckstedt lectured on an interesting period in Nathaniel Hawthornes life, his futile attempt to participate in the Rev. Georg Ripley's »ideal society» and the consequences of this for his later life.

and the massive concreteness of poetry — Faulkner is concerned with reality — in its richness, its manifold complications, and even in its ambiguities. In his *Light in August*, the plight of Joe Christmas is revealed in all its yoignance but it is made to transcend the topicalities of our day. Faulkner relates Joe's tragic alienation to universal issues and to predicaments of the human spirit that transcend the agonies and frustrations of the American South and the special problems of our troubled twentieth century.