



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

English Faculty Publications

English

2012

William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition (review)

Peter Lurie

University of Richmond, plurie@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lurie, Peter. "William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition (review)." *Modern Fiction Studies* 57, no. 4 (2012): 766-70. doi:10.1353/mfs.2011.0077.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.



David H. Evans. *William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2008. xi + 304 pp.

In his book's final sentence, David Evans is concerned that we "assure a future for Faulkner, and a Faulkner for the future" (236). Taken at a glance, this concern might imply a need to safeguard Faulkner's continuing relevance: pointing to the future and Faulkner together suggests that their mutuality is not, in fact, certain. And in light of shifting critical approaches to this canonical writer, not to mention the diminishing importance of author studies as well as scholarly genres like the monograph, Evans's caution makes a certain critical sense.

Yet the statement's fuller meaning within the context of this new study lies with Faulkner's creative and intellectual affinity with an ostensibly quite different figure. Such is Evans's main contention in *William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition*. This is a rich study, notable for the attention Evans pays to James's prose as well as his ideas, and to the ways he links the Harvard philosopher and member of the gentile New York clan to the Bard of Mississippi. Evans readily admits the unusual nature of this linking. Yet he argues that despite their differences, Faulkner and James share, above all, a commitment to the notion of truth as produced, not found; to the narrative aspect of knowledge; and to the ways in which reality is constructed through communal acts of faith and a willingness to believe—all dimensions of what Evans describes as central pragmatist ideals.

Evans's book appears at an interesting juncture in Faulkner's critical history. Positioning himself against the idyllic approaches of Cleanth Brooks and Warren—what Evans calls "the cotton belt gemeinschaft" (21)—and what he terms the ideological approaches of more recent critics like Myra Jehlen, Richard Godden, and John Duvall, Evans offers us in a sense two books. Greater than the sum of its parts, it nevertheless relies on two distinct interests and, in a certain way, dual projects. The book offers three introductory chapters that treat James in significant depth, followed by chapters devoted to separate Faulkner novels in which James's thought receives ample attention: *The Hamlet*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Evans's explication of James's central ideas and major works (as well as minor ones) is remarkably lucid throughout. While he invokes more contemporary and equally abstruse figures such as Derrida or DeMan, Evans always does so with a notable sense of their specific relevance to his larger interests in James. Where their theories resemble James's—and in the poststructuralists' emphasis on language, indeterminacy, and the play of meaning, they often seem to follow James quite closely—Evans incorporates them with both an ease of clarity and a sure sense of their role within his discussion.

At the center of the first half of Evans's book is a literary and historical entity, the American confidence man. Central to Evans's interest in this figure is his capacity to effect a sense of community where none had existed prior. Confidence, Evans shows, depends on a willingness to believe, not only in another's authenticity, but also in a communal sense of shared values that incorporates other and self and binds their ongoing relationship. This process was particularly vital in a new country or in the space and culture of the American frontier. Despite his willingness to swindle and to exploit another's trust, the con man performs an important and positive social function: revealing

the fact that individuals otherwise unfamiliar with one another can nevertheless fashion belief, a belief that is decidedly social.

Some of the book's more striking moves appear in the close readings of James's prose. Evans finds remarkable traction in James's imaginative writing strategies, for example, his essays' supposed vagueness. In particular, "The Will to Believe" evidences the fact that "James's vagueness can be seen not as an intellectual shortcoming but as a deliberate literary strategy and a way of resisting the illusion created by artificially distinct terms and concepts" (97). Clarity as a philosophical ideal is itself suspect for James, and Evans reveals the density and necessary opacity of James's thinking owing to what he considered the dialectical problem of rationality. Evans quotes James from "The Sentiment of Rationality," asserting that "The reductive [aspect] of absolute knowledge is the constant potentiality of doubt, the notion that the next thought may always correct the present one" (85). The result is not only confusion or doubt. The notion of "truth" such inquiry produces is also deeply alienating, as it asserts that real knowledge always lies outside the self and that, in pursuing it, the subjective cast needs suppressing. Such a denial of subjectivity is of course a staple of late nineteenth century, post-Kantian philosophical discourse, but one that pragmatism, in its emphasis on interest, opposes.

In an ingenious turn, Evans links James's critique of representation as truth, or the "copy view" (133), with early twentieth-century debates about the gold standard. This emerges in Evans's discussion of *The Hamlet*. Here, Evans finds efforts throughout Frenchman's Bend, and epitomized by Ratliff, to "re-tail" (or re-tale) truth (108), to effect community and belief through acts of narrative. He also nervily suggests that even so fulsome an entity as Eula Varner acts—like the symbolic value of currency—as a projection of communal longing and need rather than as a solid, permanent, or transcendent value in herself. Such readings allow a different kind of historicism. Unlike a subtly Marxian reading like Richard Godden's or a more blunt version, like Jehlen's, Evans finds in the Bend and a figure like Flem Snopes what we might call a kind of slow or "quiet" historicism. Flem's appearance in Yoknapatawpha and his function in Varner's store, Evans claims, introduces not simply a mercantile mentality into the rural and agrarian South. Flem's powerful strangeness and unsettling "fascination" (131) in the community, his seemingly unnatural silence and his capacity to reside everywhere and nowhere, derives from his manifestation of an entity that few in Faulkner's South had encountered: the corporation and its managerial, invisible workings. This observation, not unlike Alan Trachtenberg's about late-nineteenth century American life, allows Evans to turn to the

1910s–1920s "money question" and bimetallism. Gold offered its adherents an economic value similar to traditional epistemology and its belief in one transcendent and objective truth. Ratliff's capitulation to land-owning becomes, in the context of this reading, a turn not merely toward the other characters' obsessive and venal pursuit of fortune. It operates as a turn toward seeking "a stable, objective truth calibrated in a coinage more secure than promissory notes on the future" (140).

From a novel version of historicism, Evans takes a metahistoricist turn, an extension that finds purchase in his understanding of the Gothic. This literary subgenre posits both a theory of history and exemplifies the familial circumstance of a forced bearing of the weight, not just of the past, but the father's demands and expectations. Evans's reading extends one of the major strains of his approach to James, in whom Evans finds a genuinely tragic case of a son's pressure to abandon his professional and intellectual interests in the service of his father's own ambitions.

Evans's approach, however, goes further than the standard attention in Gothic studies to the sins of the father. His attention to James and Faulkner allows his conclusion that traditional philosophy itself bears a Gothic aspect, namely, its need to reveal a truth, whether of the past or of a general knowledge, however dark or troubling that truth might be. Moreover, Evans points out, the return of the father or his sins' manifestations in the present implies a static view of time and history as well as of truth. The traditional philosophic view of truth emphasizes its singular and eternal nature: truth does not change. Such a view sees the philosopher's task as discovering a truth that awaits our efforts to reveal and, also problematically, represent it. Such a belief in representation amounts to what Evans terms the "copy-view": the idea that the subject owes a "sense of responsibility to what is external to one's self, whether the ground of reality or the burden of the past" (160).

Challenging traditional philosophy for its own Gothic approach to the truth, Evans shows how James and Faulkner posit an approach to both truth and history that sees the two concepts as continually invented, reinvented, and revised. This is indeed a new way of making the familiar claim that Faulkner's narrators fashion their own individual and personal approach to the Sutpen narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* This is probably the book's strongest chapter, one in which Evans adds meaningfully to the already burdened question of Faulkner's historicity.

Faulkner's purposeful openness and lack of clear solutions to the problems he confronts further informs Evans's approach to the last novel of his study. The meaningful lack of seeming wholeness

or structural integrity to *Go Down, Moses* stands as both a formal example of Faulkner's work's openness and as a complement to this novel's racial thematics. Such fragmentation serves "an intractable racial problem that continues to trouble American history" (232) in that, rather than furnish even a provisional end or containing wholeness, *Go Down, Moses* remains, in important ways, unfinished. Or at least it remains in need of persuasive narrators and a believing, faithful reader who, like Faulkner's characters—or like adherents to the confidence man—continues to "make" meaning in our own time.

Looking ahead is something that Evans sees James and Faulkner imploring us to do but that many readings of Faulkner avoid. In so doing they risk consigning Faulkner—and their own critical positions—to a rearward position, or at least one identified more narrowly with its critical or cultural moment. Another way of saying this is to submit that the stakes in reading Faulkner through James may not be limited to proving the relevance of the latter or serving the needs of the former. Approaching Faulkner as Evans does assures a new sense of the future, and not only for Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha County, but for those of us who, professionally or otherwise, continue to need him.

PETER LURIE

University of Richmond



**Richard Godden. *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words*.
Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007. x + 251 pp.**

Critical writing on William Faulkner has long served as a register, and at key moments a bellwether, for larger trends in literary criticism and theory, from the earliest new critical studies to pioneering poststructural treatments to the recent turn toward historicism. The proliferation of recent work on Faulkner indicates two major trends. First, the historicist approach continues to reign, especially in pursuit of the continually vexed status of race, gender, sexuality, and class in Faulkner's texts. Second, increasing interest has emerged in the South as a region, particularly in multidisciplinary studies and considerations of the region's borders in wider national and hemispheric contexts.

Within this frame, Richard Godden's *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* proves to be a timely study, both in its interdisciplinary interest in the convergence of economic conditions and literary production, and in its careful attention to the seismic shifts