

William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*: A Monument to Footprints

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In his study *Beginnings*, Edward Said discusses two terms, *authority* and *molestation*, which for him describe any author's struggle to maintain control of the text he creates. *Authority* suggests to Said not only the traditional "power to enforce obedience," but "a connection as well with *author*--that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, a beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements.¹ Said thus sees the author as a person with considerable power, exerting control over his text and the language from which it is shaped. But that power extends only so far. Once the text is out of the author's hands, it is subject to *molestation*: once the text is published, the author loses his sense of command, surrendering his power over his work to the reader and to time, which change the way a text is read and diminish the author's impression of power over his material. Because of the indeterminate and uncontrollable nature of language itself, that power over the text may have been illusory from the beginning, but the point is that the author loses his sense of control over his materials and feels compelled to begin again with a new text (which is really a reworking of the same text), asserting anew his control over language and experience to produce a literary statement.

Said's concepts of authority and molestation mesh nicely with Robert Alter's discussion of "History and Imagination in the Nineteenth-century Novel" which appeared in the Spring, 1975, issue of *Georgia Review*. Alter argues that early great achievements in the novelistic genre were characterized by self-conscious experimentation with the fictive nature of the novel itself. Thus, authors such as Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, and Diderot were much more intrigued by the fictive status of their medium than they were with an effort to imitate reality. In Said's terms, they chose to exert authority over the text by holding reality at a distance and manipulating language in self-conscious awareness of the fictive status of their text. Alter goes on to assert that a major change occurred in the nineteenth century when authors like Dickens and Balzac felt so threatened by the impingement of reality on their consciousness that they exerted authority in their novels by shaping their texts into statements which gave form and meaning to life as it had come to be experienced in industrial society. To combine Said's terminology with Alter's concept, the consequence of the nineteenth-century novelists' fear of molestation was an effort to make their fictions appear as realistic as possible, to prove that they could master reality by making sense of a threateningly chaotic barrage of experience.

Alter ends his article with the intriguing assertion that "the resurgent self-conscious novel of our own century, at least in its most memorable achievements, would ingeniously contrive to have the mirror held to art show forth the face of history . . . even as history increasingly challenged the artist and any value his art might attain" (59-60). Contained within Alter's statement is the suggestion that accomplished modern novelists are at once aware of the power they hold over the written text (Said's *authority*) and the concomitant inevitability of loss of control over language, the text, and reality (Said's *molestation*). The

¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 83. My thinking owes a considerable debt to other modern theorists, most notably Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. On Faulkner, I am influenced by David Minter and Wesley Morris.

skillful modern artist, Said and Alter might argue, takes advantage of the impression of authority and the inevitability of molestation by crafting a text which both asserts control over reality by carefully depicting it and at the same time self-consciously plays with the fictive status and the inevitable molestation of the text. Such is the case with William Faulkner's Snopes trilogy in general and with *The Hamlet* in particular.

The New Criticism, with its emphasis on harmony and wholeness in literary works, increases the reader's expectations of structure in a text. As Frank Kermode puts it, in "making sense of the world we still feel a need, harder than ever to satisfy because of an accumulated skepticism, to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions."² The human longing for order makes structure highly desired. Given this perspective, *The Hamlet*--a maze of narrative shifts, imbedded short stories, and daringly bizarre interludes juxtaposed against a quasi-historical documentation of the "rise of the redneck" in Yoknapatawpha County--seems at best problematic and at worst downright unsatisfying. Hence, much of the critical effort directed at *The Hamlet*, from Cleanth Brooks's discussion of the intricacies of bartering and love in the novel³ to Walter Brylowski's description of Faulkner's use of mythology, focuses on the "critical difficulty justifying *The Hamlet* as a unified novel."⁴ While these discussions heighten our perception of the richness of the texture of the novel, they ignore the possibility that Faulkner deliberately plays the reader's expectations of structure and unity off against the real, fragmentary nature of experience. As Wesley Morris points out in his discussion of *Go Down, Moses*, another of Faulkner's bafflingly complex and problematic texts, it is not a certain structure but the "possibility of structure" that is universal.⁵ By defying his reader's expectation for order and unity, Faulkner asserts even more fully his control as author. Thus, what is said of Flem Snopes in *The Town* may be taken to characterize Faulkner's technique in *The Hamlet* as well as the rest of the Snopes trilogy: "A monument only says *At least I got this far* while a footprint says *This is where I was when I moved again*."⁶ Preferring literary footprints to monuments, Faulkner leaves apparently misleading tracks throughout *The Hamlet*. At one point, he enters into his description of Ike Snopes's interlude with a cow--which the residents of Frenchman's Bend matter-of-factly dismiss as a case of "stock-diddling"--with a fervor approaching complete identification. And he juxtaposes a realistic description of Ratliff's return to Frenchmen's Bend against a surrealist depiction of Flem Snopes outwitting the Prince of Darkness.

Faulkner's shifts from studied realism to freewheeling expressionism may not give the impression of unified, comfortable transitions in the novel, but they do enhance the reader's illusion of the author's confidence in his control of the text. The framework of the narrative is just chronological and realistic enough to make the reader expect a continuation of that perspective. When Faulkner abruptly breaks chronology or violates the reader's expectations of realistic description, the author reasserts his authority over the text. At the same time that they reinforce Faulkner's power over his text, these violations of the reader's expectations ensure the molestation of the text as readers and critics attempt to make sense of the novel before them. If the attempts at creating unity fail, they may conclude that *The Hamlet* does not "work" or does not "hold together," that it too is

² Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 35-36.

³ Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

⁴ Walter Brylowski, *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968) 144.

⁵ Wesley Morris, *Friday's Footprint: Structuralism and the Articulated Text* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979) 51.

⁶ William Faulkner, *The Town* (New York: Vintage, 1961) 29.

a failure. But it is at least possible that the appearance of failure at achieving unity is built intentionally into the text. (Of course, given Faulkner's recent acceptance as one of the leading voices in American fiction, readers are much more willing than they once were to acknowledge his control over his texts.)⁷ To use Derrida's terminology, it is possible not just that *The Hamlet* deconstructs itself but that it deconstructs itself intentionally. Faulkner frustrates molestation by anticipating it, forcing the reader to share some of the pain of ordering his text.

Faulkner openly raises the issue of molestation in a note at the beginning of *The Mansion*: "Since the author likes to believe, hopes that his entire life's work is a part of a living literature, and since 'living' is motion, and 'motion' is change and alteration and therefore the only alternative to motion is un-motion, stasis, death, there will be found discrepancies and contradictions in the thirty-four-year progress of this particular chronicle; the purpose of this note is simply to notify the reader that the author has already found more discrepancies and contradictions than he hopes the reader will." There is more to this statement than a simple attempt to excuse inadequate revision. Implicit here is Faulkner's recognition that, because of the impact of time, he inevitably has violated his own text, just as his audience molests it with every reading.

Molestation of texts can take curious forms. By submitting his work to publication, Faulkner allowed his novels to become public, accessible to anyone with a desire to read the books and vulnerable to interpretation dictated by the inevitable biases of his readers. In fact, molestations occur in settings generally characterized by high seriousness and solemn pedantry. To her book entitled *William Faulkner's Craft of Revision*, for example, Joanne V. Creighton prefaces the following "textual note": "All quotations from Faulkner's unpublished works in my text are verbatim. I did not take the liberty to correct his typographical errors."⁸ Yet the meticulous Ms. Creighton often renders Jody Varner's name as *Joby* (21, for example), instantly calling into question all of her renderings of Faulkner's language. Nor is she even consistent in her molestations; at times, the name is *Jody*.

Just as Faulkner violates his audience's expectations of unity in *The Hamlet*, so also does he frustrate his reader's desire for narrative consistency. At times, Faulkner speaks rather directly through V.K. Ratliff, who was witness to the events he describes. At other times the narrator is still Ratliff, but he tells his story at one or more removes from the event itself. For example, when Ratliff confronts Eck with the story of the death of the spotted pony the Texan gave him, it is by retelling the story as Ratliff got it from Mrs. Freeman.⁹ Ratliff's narration gives the book a folksy flavor that smacks of the oral narrative tradition, with all of its fondness for exaggeration and elaboration into tall tale and picaresque. In contrast to this, there are times when the narrator is distantly and reportorially omniscient, giving a panoramic view of events in Frenchman's Bend. At other times, as in Ike's interlude with the cow, the narrative is pastorally mock-heroic. At yet other times, as in Flem's confrontation with the Prince of Darkness, the narrative is dramatically expressionistic. This collage of narrative techniques reasserts Faulkner's authority over the text as controller of voice and point of view, but it also forces the reader to enter into the text to attempt to make sense of conflicting accounts and contrasting styles. In this manner, Faulkner invites and even insists upon molestation of his text, as he does

⁷ Recent interest in Faulkner's early poetry and his filmscripts attests to the scholarly community's awe of his status. Though Faulkner did not excel at either, we look at his poetry and his screenwriting for what we think they reveal to us about his fiction.

⁸ Joanne V. Creighton, *William Faulkner's Craft of Revision: The Snopes Trilogy, The Unvanquished, and Go Down, Moses* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977) 10.

⁹ William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Vintage, 1964) 324-25.

in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, challenging his reader to sort out the narrated detail and arrive at some conclusions about causation and motivation.

The Hamlet's frustration of its reader's desire for narrative unity is akin to its frustration of its reader's longing for a hero. *The Hamlet* contains no heroes in a traditional sense. Perhaps Flem Snopes could be described as a strange kind of antihero, but he seems to be too successful in his enterprises to be a candidate for antihero status. The only possible hero in a traditional sense is Ratliff, for whom Faulkner confessed a great liking.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Faulkner holds Ratliff at a distance, bringing him into the story and removing him from it at will. As soon as his reader is prepared to accept Ratliff as hero, Faulkner takes him away from the story for a time. In the end, lest the reader go away with the impression that Ratliff is the hero after all, Faulkner allows him to be duped by Flem Snopes into buying the Old Frenchman's place and searching for buried treasure. Through most of this episode, Ratliff is just as greedy as Bookwright and almost as maniacal as Armstid. Once again, Faulkner's pattern is to establish expectations in his reader's mind, only to violate those expectations at every turn. The desire for a hero becomes linked to the reader's longing for a unified text; Faulkner plays both longings off against the randomness of experience and the universal weakness of human nature.

The form of *The Hamlet* is no more traditional than its narrative structure or its characters. Is it a novel, an episodic narrative, or a concoction of short stories imbedded into a hastily formulated text? Some readers speculate on the genesis of the Snopes trilogy in "Father Abraham" and the relationship of early Snopes stories to the finished novels. Since the stories are not entirely consistent with the novels (for example, "Barn Burning" centers in the consciousness of Colonel Sartoris Snopes, the young boy whom Ratliff hardly mentions in his account of the same events in *The Hamlet*) each reader has the difficult task of reconciling the accounts. To most of the dozens of students whom I have introduced to William Faulkner through the short story "Barn Burning," the Snopes trilogy is an impossibility because they feel certain that Major DeSpain kills Ab and Flem in the short story. Since no one can assimilate the entire body of Faulkner's fiction at once, the order in which a person reads the Yoknapatawpha stories is crucial to his interpretation of the novels. This raises the question of the status of form in general. Once again, novelistic form is largely a function of the reader's expectations. By dealing with the same characters throughout his fiction, Faulkner calls into question traditional definitions of the term *literary work*. Is the Snopes trilogy just a trilogy, or does it include every mention of Snopeses throughout the Yoknapatawpha fiction?

The most intriguing of the stories imbedded in *The Hamlet* is "Afternoon of a Cow," which was written in 1937 but not published in English until ten years later in *Furioso*. Because they seem offended at the implication that the character "William Faulkner" in "Afternoon of a Cow" could be related to Ike Snopes, most critics refuse to treat this story along with others in a discussion of *The Hamlet*. Michael Millgate says that "Afternoon of a Cow" has only "incidental similarities with the Ike Snopes episodes and nothing textually in common with them."¹¹ Joanne V. Creighton agrees, saying "the two versions are so radically different that I do not consider a comparison fruitful" (163). Nonetheless, the narrative thread of "Afternoon of a Cow" is similar enough to Ike Snopes's rescue of a cow from fire in *The Hamlet* to link the two episodes permanently in my mind. Significantly, both episodes are stylistically examples of Faulkner at highly assertive and authoritative moments. Elevating a description of stock-diddling to the level of pastoral elegy is probably the most daring of Faulkner's narrative ploys in *The Hamlet*. It invites the reader to pass judgment on Ike's sexual preferences; then, later episodes implicitly link disapproving readers with the residents of Frenchman's Bend who turn Ike and his cow

¹⁰ Joseph Blotner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977) 196-98.

¹¹ Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966) 327.

into a peepshow attraction. "Afternoon of a Cow" is authoritatively daring in Faulkner's willingness to make himself a character in one of his stories. Furthermore, the "William Faulkner" of the story is depicted by Ernest V. Trueblood, the purported author of this and the ghostwriter of all of Faulkner's fictions, as a sedentary, profane, inarticulate bumpkin who gets defecated upon by a cow he attempts to rescue from a fire.¹² This is brash, confident stuff coming from a man who at other times yearned so desperately and so uncertainly for recognition.

All of this is in keeping with Faulkner's simultaneous sense of his need to exert authority through his fiction and his recognition of the inevitability of molestation of his texts. Throughout his career, Faulkner experienced alternating feelings of euphoria and depression about his work. In an early letter to his mother, he described his own reaction to a piece of his prose as follows: "But now it is perfect--a jewel. I am going to put it away for a week, then show it to someone for an opinion. So tomorrow I will wake up feeling rotten, I expect. Reaction. But its worth it, to have done a thing like this."¹³ This was the man who struggled so hard, as he once wrote Robert K. Haas, to "scratch the face of the supreme Obliteration and leave a decipherable scar of some sort."¹⁴ He must have felt that he was succeeding with *The Hamlet*, for, at the bottom of a letter to Haas written during the heat of his work on this first of the Snopes novels, he wrote the bold assertion, "I am the best in America, by God."¹⁵ Yet soon he was to plunge into another of his periods of supreme depression.

If the risks of authorship are so great, then the seeking of an audience can only be explained as a compulsion to tell a story, to get it right, to gain some assurance that writers can use language to say something definite to readers. But, as Said explains, few authors are satisfied when they see their words on paper; codification of discourse in print begins the inevitable process of decay, molestation, and deconstruction which takes an author's words away from him, twisting them to the capricious uses of his reader. Rewriting, retelling the same story of "the human heart in conflict with itself," compulsively occupies the attention of authors without satisfying their desire for permanence and fulfillment. Perhaps it is only through such a self-conscious anticipation of molestation of texts as *The Hamlet* that an author asserts his authority in anything like a permanent way. Perhaps fulfillment comes only through deliberately leaving literary footprints for readers to organize for themselves into momentary, constantly shifting monuments--making the reader an accomplice to the author, forcing the reader to take some responsibility for and feel some of the pain of molestation of the writer's text.

¹² Ernest V. Trueblood [pseud. of William Faulkner]. "Afternoon of a Cow," *Furioso* 2 (1942): 5-17.

¹³ Blotner 17.

¹⁴ Blotner 125.

¹⁵ Blotner 113.