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Richard Godden: William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words

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INTRODUCTION

MY TITLE intends no metaphor in its linking of language and economy. Words, as social instruments, exemplifying what Marx calls “practical consciousness,”¹ act upon a reality which they make as much as find. If the real is in a real sense made through words, those words needs must tend to complexity, not least because speakers inherit a language always “already occupied”² by prior and unknown users and usage. Since verbal instrumentalists work with a partially known instrument, and in circumstances not of their own design, they, to adapt Marx, are practically unconscious concerning large portions of their practice. Yet that practice, so much incomplete matter made from words, materializes within an economy whose historical conditions form, and take formal complexity from, linguistic work. Five sentences built upon begged questions, compound assumptions, and parabolic bids which it will take an entire study partially to answer, justify, and elucidate. But introductions may perhaps take liberties and should not give the game away.

In a recent anthology of new economic criticism, the editors, Woodmansee and Osteen, note that many who address the intersection of literature and economy argue from analogy: words have their economies—or so the case goes—because language and economy are both arbitrary systems of exchange: “Thus any adequate theoretics of literary economics must begin with the axioms of Saussurian linguistics and post-structuralist theory, that all signs are arbitrary and related syntagmatically—and then address the similarly fictive and constructed nature of money and finance.”³ In contradistinction, *An Economy of Complex Words* reads

Faulkner from within three linked assumptions, none of which derive from Sausure: that economic relations are a guise worn by social relations;⁴ that social relations are finally a cause of what stories can and cannot be told (and of the manner of their telling); and that, therefore, economic structures may be read as the generative source of fictional forms. Since I seek to establish a causal rather than arbitrary connection between the work of Faulkner's words and the work of an economy, I had best gloss the economy in question.

Between 1933 and 1938, the New Deal interventions of the Agricultural Adjustment Program in the southern plantation states resulted in an unintended revolution in rural labor relations. Faced with a glutted world market for cotton, the federal government offered to pay southern landowners for ploughing their crops under. Fifty-three percent of the south's cotton acreage went out of production. Since a sharecropper, cropping on a half-the-crop agreement, would by rights receive half the federal payment for the sacrifice of his acres, it paid for the landowner not to sign sharecropping contracts for the following year. Instead, he might hire the same cropper, on an occasional basis and for a wage, to plough the crop under, and reap the entire subsidy himself. Between 1930 and 1940, the tenantry declined by 62 percent in Mississippi. What the labor historian Pete Daniel terms "the Southern enclosure" marks the movement from "capital-scarce, labor-intensive plantation production to capital-intensive, labor-surplus neo-plantation production,"⁵ a structural shift most manifest in eviction and black diaspora.

Much of the migration during the thirties was internal, but with the onset of global conflict, the war-driven needs of northern industry ensured that during the 1940s over one million African Americans left the plantation states: Mississippi alone, between 1940 and 1944, experienced a 23 percent decline in its predominantly black farm population. Startling figures for out-migration during the early 1940s should be balanced against equally startling figures for capital inflow during the late 1930s as the enabling condition of that movement of people. Between 1933 and 1939, the federal government's direct expenditure in Mississippi totalled \$450 million, while an additional \$260 million entered state banks through insured loans.⁶

In effect, the landowning class shifted its pattern of dependency from black labor to northern capital, while the tenantry, increasingly landless and welfare-dependent, waited on the pull of northern employment needs to renew its Great Migration. As the African American historian Jay Mandle puts it, "America's entry into World War II marks the principal point of discontinuity in the black experience of the United States."⁷ With blacks less and less in their laboring place and capital more and more in that place, the substance of southern plantation land was transformed—land as "sweat" gave way to land as "capital," though agribusiness and its destruction of "the labor-intensive rural order born of reconstruction" should not be spoken of as fully in place until the 1950s.⁸

Statistics for migration and investment do not adequately convey the impact of

what the economist Paul Shuster Taylor in 1937 termed “the greatest revolution since the civil war in the cotton sections of the South,”⁹ a breakdown in a regime of accumulation described by Jonathan Wiener as “the Second Civil War.”¹⁰ The limitations of figures, and arguably of the agricultural, social, and economic histories from which they are drawn, is that they and their sources abstract from the felt experience of the contradiction central to this particular revolution.

Prior to the New Deal (1930s) and the renewed Great Migration (1940s), ethnic relations in the south, resting on a pre- or semimodern regime of constrained labor (debt peonage), had been typified by dependency, growing out of what Mark Tushnet calls “total relations,”¹¹ that is, relations between owner and cropper that extended to the whole life of the tenant and to the whole life of the landlord. (Under wage labor, employer/employee connections are “partial” in that the wage-payer pays for, and assumes power over, only the working part of the worker’s day). In 1935, Johnson, Embree, and Alexander surveyed cotton tenancy and concluded that “[t]he status of the tenancy demands complete dependence.”¹²

Dependency cuts two ways, though tacitly: that is to say, within such a regime, the white landowning class, owing their substance to black labor, are blacks in whiteface. Such co-dependence must be denied, though by the mid 1940s, the linked impact of federal funding and enforced black mobility had ensured that historical conditions existed for the extraction of black from white. With the decline of tenantry and the relaxation of structures enforcing dependency, white, in the last instance, had less reason to be black. The proprietors of the forties must lose the bound body of black labor. The trick to the “creative destruction” of themselves,¹³ required by a mutation in the form of their capital, is to expel their black substance without self-loss. But where the properties of that selfhood—from face, to skin, to sex, to land—are determined by the laboring other, to lose the other is to lose the self’s best parts. In Joel Williamson’s terms, commenting on the legacy of southern black/white relations at midcentury, for white to release black is to declare, “I am not going to be me anymore.”¹⁴ At which point, federal decisions concerning control of excess cotton production condition the corporeality—the face, sex, skin, and land—of an owning class as it negotiates the expulsion from itself of that which has made it what it is, African American labor.

In *Fictions of Labor* (1997), I argued that Faulkner’s major texts of the long 1930s turned on the denial of a social trauma associated with the recognition that the South’s singular, coercive, and premodern regime of labor forced black into white, and so made each white black. Since black labor constituted the substance of the labor lord, that lord and his class had to retain the black body, while denying the formative centrality of its presence in their own race, sex, skin, land, and language. The contradiction, white is black, had both to be recognized, or else what is southern about the southern landowner, and to be denied, or else how does the southern landowner “remain me some more”? Few devices operate with greater effi-

ciency in the service of denied recognition (its representation and critique), than Faulkner's famous stylistic difficulty. *Fictions of Labor* suggested, for example, that the prose of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) serves its narrators' need to know what they must not know, and not to see what they see. Readers, as they tonally adjust, learn to see its narrators not seeing, and thereby to think what those narrators find unthinkable. Yet during the forties and early fifties, the conceptual habits shared by Quentin Compson and Rosa Coldfield incline to redundancy, as the transformation of their base and motive—a singular regime of labor—required that a class of labor lords become a class of landlords. With African American labor “progressively” forced from the land, onto roads and into cities, landowners no longer found blacks so corporeally in their whiteface. Where *Fictions of Labor* read Faulkner's work of the thirties as thematically and formally generated by a pre-modern labor trauma, *An Economy of Complex Words* (or, for my purposes here, *Fictions of Labor II*), argues that Faulkner spends the next two decades resolving the impact of that founding trauma's loss. To return to Williamson's formulation: release of the black, however protracted and stylistically occluded, begs the mournful question of “ceas[ing] to be.”

In partial response to Williamson's question, my study seeks to trace the demise and reformation of a class by anatomizing the varieties of mourning exhibited by Faulkner's white landowners as they grasped the consequences of modernity in the New Deal's reconstruction of their depressed region. For smaller landowners, grief attended the loss of productive contact with the earth and the descent into wage labor: hence my choice of *The Hamlet* (1940). For larger landowners, grief, in barely acknowledged forms, accompanied the departure of a black work force for the North, as mechanization and agribusiness combined to consolidate land ownership and to demolish the sharecropped plantation, itself a remnant of slavery. I read *Go Down, Moses* (1942) as structured by griefs and longings which dare not state their names. Modernity, so long deferred by a plantocracy whose regime of accumulation (rooted in labor coercion), constituted a counterrevolution running from Emancipation to Depression, was finally confirmed in the South by World War II as it militarized the region's economy. Necessarily, therefore, *An Economy of Complex Words* closes with a reading of *A Fable* (1954), in which the persistent but barely discernible figure of the black jew allows Faulkner a final exercise in swallowed grief on behalf of a class that has ceased to exist.

Malcolm Bull identifies late modernity, of which migration and global conflict are surely features, with an emancipatory impulse through which aspects of the world are “de-alienated” or “drawn closer.”¹⁵ So defined, the products of late modernity, among which I would include Faulkner's later fictions, seek to see “unseeable totality,”¹⁶ where sight involves recognition rather than possession. The seen need not be distant (a colony: Tibet in *A Fable*); indeed, sight may involve seeing the already visible in a different way (a black on a southern road: Rider in “Pantaloons in

Black"). The seer who sees in such a manner transforms the different into kin, the far into near, and the near into the intimate, and in so doing suffers all manner of maladies attendant upon emancipation. A brief symptomology may serve to suggest that late modernity, so defined, is inseparable from the contradictory. I would stress that what follows is a worst-case scenario. So to see is to see one's self come apart: to sense oneself as existing on both sides of a divide, whether of race, class, nation, or gender. So to see is to see double and to doubt the coherence, desirability, or relevance of one's own subject position. So to see is to see blind spots: glimpses of the barely known bear witness to the unknown as it comes not into sight, but into hiding,¹⁷ where, an irritant opacity, it "eludes subsumption under ideas."¹⁸ So to see is to suffer "epistemic abjection,"¹⁹ traceable to the recognition that the incompatibility between the seer's reality and that of the newly recognized exists as a contradiction, within which available knowledge serves only to demonstrate that it should no longer serve to sustain the knower. Diagnosis: duplicity, opacity, and contradiction—and the greatest of these is contradiction.

I paraphrase Malcolm Bull's study of late modernity in order to set the experience and formal implications of contradiction at the center of later Faulkner. *An Economy of Complex Words* brings Bull's finally epistemological concerns to an instance of delayed modernization. Until the New Deal, southern planters had effectively refused emancipation, choosing to perpetuate a premodern labor system. The Agricultural Adjustment Program cast them severally toward late modernity in terms of their founding relation to labor; to capital itself, suddenly deprived of human form, as well as to land recast from worked matter to collateral. I read *The Hamlet* (1940), *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and *A Fable* (1954) as studies in deferred modernization and its aftermath, and as such as products of an economic contradiction. To modernize itself the southern landowning class, and Faulkner as its contemporary and historian, had to experience its lived forms—face, skin, sex, land, language—as archaic limits, available either for recuperation (modernity refused) or negation (modernity accepted as "creative destruction"). Since modernization was both abrupt in terms of the initial political intervention (1933–38), and protracted in terms of the lived forms that had to be lived down (1877–1933), refusal and acceptance might occur simultaneously, or, in Faulkner's terms, within the same plot device, character, or turn of word.

Immanuel Wallerstein, historian of capital, catches the intensifying quality of the contradictory in his observation that "contradictions not only provide the dynamic force of historical systems; they also reveal their essential features."²⁰ So, for example, in 1941, the historical system or regime of accumulation called "the plantation" stood structurally exposed in the south insofar as its largely black and largely bound labor force had been released from dependency by fiscal intervention on a federal scale. Since the "dynamic force" behind the postbellum plantation amounted to the coerced extraction of labor from barely free workers, or, in

Jay Mandle's formulation, from those who were "not slave, not free,"²¹ the abrupt discarding of the profit source exposed both coercer and coerced to their own "essential features," even as those features and the system that sustained them changed.

But, to step back for a moment: what does it mean to say that a contradiction *within* bound labor, or *within* the labor lord who binds, provides the dynamism of the plantation system? After Althusser, I would suggest that "dependency," as a cultural logic or ideology, provides "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."²² Stated crudely, "real conditions" on the postbellum plantation were coercive: yet "dependency," an imaginary proposal of mutual benefit between labor and labor lord, suggested that the "not free" were "not slave," insofar as they had a degree of autonomy over their crop; whilst adding that the lord was himself bound, at least for the length of the growing season, to take responsibility, at a prearranged level, for the subsistence of his labor force. The "representation" is "dynamic" in that it involves both parties in recognized misrecognitions: that is to say, both parties play double and consequently view themselves as surrounded by divided things (split referents), each of which posits alternative and contradictory realities. So, the "not slave" is free (autonomous), but must display deference (dependency): his crop, as that which he has made, he assigns to himself as a signal of his autonomy; yet his signature (if he can write) is nominal, in that he signs as cosignatory, thereby assigning his crop (and the laboring body that made it), to division by the labor lord (and his literacy). The crop and its labor are marked as scenes of contestation. Equally, and within the same "representation," the labor lord experiences lordship *and* contractual obligation; he reads the product of his land as simultaneously his own *and* as the extension of a body of labor, which is, in effect, "being his body for him."²³

It would, I think, be a mistake to understand Althusser's "representation" as a displacement of a real social contradiction, or in Jameson's terms, as a "purely formal resolution" through which the "insurmountable" force of the contradiction is ameliorated.²⁴ Rather, because the "representation" retains, even as it misrecognizes, the contradiction which generates it, the forms and practices of the "representation" (to adapt Adorno) wear the lines of their construction in their features.²⁵ "Representation" may be said to exemplify contradiction's "dynamic force" insofar as it secretes (in both senses of that term) the system's "essential features." A regime of accumulation, even one whose premodern labor form is linked only by its products to global markets, and so to capital's inherent tendency to progress through competition,²⁶ must transform itself from within. Contradiction, as an impulse to "creative [self-] destruction," drives the system and its transformation. Marx defines "creative destruction" as that tendency whereby an economy dispenses with its own unproductive elements: "the violent destruction of capital, not

by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self preservation . . . advice to begone and to [make way] for a higher state of social production.”²⁷ As a labor lord, to preserve his land, declares himself unproductive, he divides: as a cropper “cries begone” to Memphis or Chicago, and to a “higher stage of social production,” he splits. Both figures, in their duplicities, must master a stylistics for doubt and self-loss; a melancholy aporetic, featuring parataxis, alterity, and ellipsis, not merely as tropes but as practices of mind and hand. To live in contradiction is to be doubled, divided and grieving; to set oneself beside one’s self, as she who handles worked things that palpably become other things through her very work. Among those worked items, words and their forms loom large.

At which point, several who address the intersection of literature and economy, reaching for “Saussurian linguistics and poststructuralist theory,” will discern heresy. Where I posit language as “practical consciousness,” delivering split referents, doubled and divided by specifiable contradiction, they might posit a semantics of deferral and undecidability, within which an epistemic aporia, rather than an historical contradiction, serves best to explain the tendency of language to refer in a complex and incomplete manner. For Derrida, and with him a major strand of contemporary theory, a deep suspicion of referentiality ensures that language cannot deliver the signified as any kind of social index, since it replaces things and ideas with linguistic forms. What replaces “defers” and “differs” from the replaced, establishing (in Derridean terms) the supplementarity of language. For example, the Greek noun “pharmakon” means, “the drug; medicine and/or poison”:²⁸ Derrida argues that the semantic split prompts “indefinite pivoting,”²⁹ since each option, whatever its context, must allude to, defer, and supplement its opposite, rendering the meaning of “pharmakon” ever undecidable. For Derrida, the semantics of “pharmakon” typify linguistic reference more generally. So perceived, undecidability inheres structurally in linguistic reference—symptom of an epistemological uncertainty which pivots each usage on an absence to which, in the last instance, it must defer. To reiterate: Derrida’s version of referential undecidability is an epistemic given.

To follow Vygotsky, Vološinov, and Bakhtin away from Derrida is to recognize that language refers, in the manifest absence of a *corresponding* referent, to that which is anything but absent. Instead, language intends toward the world via the social assumptions and purposes of its user. Linguistic usage, whether as thought, script, or speech, drives a material trace through that toward which, with varying degrees of ontological vehemence, it directs its words. Within a materialist paradigm, the referent is inextricable from the material process of its construction, among which processes language, as “practical consciousness,” is pervasive.

Of course, the speaker, living a life “on the borders of someone else’s consciousness,”³⁰ encounters, within her medium, material traces from the linguistic

work of others, perhaps long since sedimented into extant social artifacts, activities, and institutions, themselves predicating future utterances and actions. Necessarily, therefore, a user's inflection expresses a divided or, in some circumstances, a contradictory intent. Bakhtin provides a useful summary of the divided nature of the socially indexical sign:

The word is not a tangible object, but an always shifting, always changing means of social communication. It never rests with one consciousness, one voice. Its dynamism consists in movement from speaker to speaker, from one context to another, from one generation to another. Through it all, the word . . . cannot completely free itself from the concrete contexts into which it has entered. By no means does each member of the community apprehend the word as a neutral medium of the language system, free from intentions and untenanted by the voices of its previous users. Instead, he receives the word from another voice, a word full of that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the intentions of other speakers. His own intention finds the word already occupied.³¹

Divided signs yield split referents, but the dynamic of any motion between semantic variables pivots not on epistemic absence, but on a determinable historical trajectory or tension between archaic and emergent social positions. For example, the imperative "go down," in *Go Down, Moses*, by the first decade of the twentieth century might refer either to "fellatio" or to "cunnilingus":³² Faulkner scholarship, reaching quite properly for an intertextual reference to the spiritual, "Let My People Go: A Song of the Contrabands,"³³ does not hear an alternative inflection. Hearing sexual slang in the title depends on recognizing the allusive and pervasive presence of an erotic African American male body in the subsemantics of *Go Down, Moses*. That body, once glimpsed, justifies and elicits a titular oscillation between "Go Down, Moses" as a political injunction, prompting the renewed outmigration (or exodus) of recently bound black labor (or Jew) from the South (or Egypt); and "Go Down, [on] Moses" as a deeply covert and even unsounded sexual plea.

I fear, at this point, that too much of my game is in evidence. Even so, briefly to continue: contra Derrida's "pharmakon," Faulkner's "go down" is not undecidable. Although it elicits extreme motion between semantic options, the movement can be traced to the contradictory positioning of the divided body of black labor in 1941, a body federally rendered surplus to labor need, but nonetheless much needed in deniable forms.

By way, more typically of less dramatically split instruments, Faulkner, like any verbal instrumentalist, seeks to project singular effects, marking and making the real as a coherent project. Yet in the plantation South, between 1940 and 1954, the real, in economic terms, inclined to incoherence. Consequently, the project of Faulkner's later fiction, a project made partially from words, whose very partiality

marks that project with underheard objections and contraries, must wear in the lines on its face the features of contradictions borne . . . must, semantically speaking, whisper with antipathies.

At which point, with the game I trust not quite given away, I give up on my introduction—in order closely to read, through the semantics of Faulkner's complex words, those particular economic complexities from which words in the last instance (an instance that must not endlessly be delayed) take their forms.