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**“MEMORY BELIEVES BEFORE KNOWING  
REMEMBERS”:  
EVANESCENCE AND/OR ENDURANCE IN WILLIAM FAULKNER**

*Keywords: darkness, Africanism, ambiguity, race, gender, religion, self, otherness, identity, temporality*  
*Abstract: My paper focuses on one of William Faulkner’s masterpieces, Light in August (1932). Literary ambiguity employed at its best renders this text inexhaustible. Aspects of identity - race, gender, religion – may offer various approaches; yet, as I would like to argue, they will not work as absolute clues to this enigmatic book. For a critical and theoretic background, I shall resort here to Toni Morrison’s set of academic essays (and former lectures) Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992). The strange thing about this tiny volume of Toni Morrison’s – the professor – is that it never mentions Faulkner’s Light in August; and yet it is here that her demonstration finds the most compelling set of arguments, as if the two books were in some mysterious resonance with each other.*

Memory is not (so much) about Time: it is (more) about Vision. A backward vision plus a necessary anticipation. Likewise, this paper is not (so much) about William Faulkner: it is (rather) about Toni Morrison – a Faulkner scholar once dealing in (aspects of) suicide. An acknowledged major writer herself, a Nobel Prize winner herself, a visionary herself and – last but not least – a truly convincing teacher herself, of slant told bits of truth.

The quotation in the title of this paper (mis)leads us to *Light in August*, William Faulkner’s 1932 masterpiece. But even this book is about something else than we have come to think it might be about. For one thing, *Light in August* is about some notion of *Playing in the Dark* - anticipating Toni Morrison’s visionary study.

But *Playing in the Dark* is not about *Light in August* – and yet it does concern itself with great American books, some of which do belong to William Faulkner (e.g. *Absalom, Absalom!* – his next published masterpiece, in terms of literary history, within four years of *Light in August*).

In “The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations” - an earlier famous essay, originally a lecture, too, Toni Morrison states: “*Time, it seems, has no future*” – warning against misuse of history to diminish expectations of the future.

We seem to get trapped in a web of catch-phrases – or aphorisms, for more pedantic readers. For one cannot help remembering William Faulkner’s quip here: “The past is never dead: it is not even past...”

Hence, memory and anticipation – whether feared or hoped for – will rather function on a *vision* basis than on a *time* basis. Perhaps this is why Faulkner, introducing the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 21 chapters of *Light in August*, reverses the verbs supposed to fit such sacred words as *memory* and *knowing*. Because we were wrong to think that it is *memory* that *remembers* and *knowing* that *believes*. As what follows all along this chapter is a classic – almost Dickensian – story of a poor lost boy. Its stages fit not only classic 19<sup>th</sup> century novel plotting, but also the stages of *Playing in the Dark* – Toni Morrison’s visionary study.

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I find it very strange that *Playing in the Dark* is not about *Light in August*, as Toni Morrison seems to have written all her three essays (and former lectures) with *Light in August* on her mind. I have

been encouraged in this supposition by her repeated remark about her “reading like a writer” (3). And this can (also) explain the originality of her *vision*: i.e. that it was *in opposition to the reality of slavery*, as a necessary Enlightenment background – and not as a pure and noble ideal of freedom – that the American concept of (and urge for) democracy took shape; that it was as a way of coping with terrible *fear* that the myth of the bold and brave frontier hero was invented; that it was from the *terror* inspired by the *wild nature* of a *vast foreign country* that the (obstinate & ridiculous) myth of the *winner* took consistency. All these make-believe impulses have come to work as means and strategies of *self-making*, by the safe old way of *self-suggestion, self-teaching, self-improvement*. *The American Dream* projects the terrified vision of a *self-made man*, having to cope with the unknown, with indifferent nature and with a hostile human environment – all by himself. *Romance* is the most suitable fiction-pattern that he can use: his only tool/weapon from back home (the repudiated Europe) that his vision/*imagination* can resort to. And this projection requires a screen; hence, if *the hero* must be *white*, the *screen* will be *dark*. For the screen itself is more than just a background for the projected *shadow*: it *is* the shadow.

What Toni Morrison brings *new* to this *vision of the shadow*<sup>1</sup> is the notion of *Africanism* – or “an invented Africa”, that should absorb all *sense of failure & despair* of the (lonely) white master race. This is how she defines it:

My curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this *carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence* has become an informal study of what I call *American Africanism*. It is an investigation into the ways in which a *nonwhite, Africanlike* (or *Africanist*) *presence* or *persona* was constructed in the United States, and *the imaginative uses* this fabricated presence served. I am using the term “*Africanism*” not to suggest the larger body of knowledge on Africa that the philosopher Valentine Mudimbe means by the term “*Africanism*”, nor to suggest the varieties and complexities of African people and their descendants who have inhabited this country. Rather I use it as a term for the *denotative and connotative blackness* that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany *Eurocentric learning about this people*. [...] Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible *to say and not to say*, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to *historicize and render timeless*. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (6-7; emphasis added)

Therefore, Africanism is Toni Morrison’s (rather elusive and enigmatic) decoding pattern “*to historicize and render timeless*” – in other words, to relate to *durability and transience* – or, as I prefer to put it – to *evanescence and endurance*. *Colors*, like *moments* in time, *fade*. Dark shades turn ever lighter. It is a matter of day and night, of the indifferent and inevitable passing of time, from *imaginative darkness* to *limpid light*. Maybe even *Light in August*... Hence, *endurance is the glorious romanticized vision of real lonely fading away*. This is how I understand Toni Morrison’s lectures on *whiteness and the literary imagination*. And likewise William Faulkner’s novel *Light in August* is, like every masterpiece, a book too classic for its own good...

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My first focus is fatally a(nother) famous passage from Faulkner’s book about that rich (and heavy) light. It occurs by the end of its middle chapter - number 11: a father’s monologue by a secret grave, a pointless speech delivered to his lonesome tragic daughter, whose recalling it sounds/reads like a failed attempt at dialogue & no more than just another monologue:

<sup>1</sup> See John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge and Otto Rank, Don Juan. Une etude sur le Double*.

But he made me go in [i.e. into the cedar grove], and the two of us standing there, and he said, “Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, *murdered not by a white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins.* Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother’s. Yours, even though you are a child. *The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it.*” And I said, “Not even me?” and he said, “Not even you. Least of all, you.” I had seen and known negroes since I could remember. *I just looked at them as I did at rain, or furniture, or food or sleep.* But after that I seemed to see them for the first time *not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people.* (252-253; emphasis added)

In her essay *Black Matters*, Toni Morrison (ironically) insists on “these moeurs” as “delicate things” which prompt even contemporary well-bred white readers –literary critics included – to (politely pretend to) ignore any *difference* in point of *race* when it comes to texts authored by nonwhite writers:

One likely reason for the paucity of critical material on this large and compelling subject is that, in *matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse.* Evasion has fostered another, *substitute language* in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation [...] is further complicated by the fact that the habit of *ignoring race* is understood to be a *graceful, even generous, liberal gesture.* *To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.* According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse. (9-10; emphasis added)

The *silence* and the *invisibility* above mentioned trigger to our minds such great examples of Afro-American writers – and, at the same time, *Africanist* personalities of American literature – as Richard Wright, with his *Native Son* (1940), and Ralph Ellison, with his *Invisible Man* (1952). But here we must go on with Joanna Burden’s confession about that dark “shadow in the shape of across”:

I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. (253; emphasis added)

Joanna’s father allows for no hope of escape from the characteristic Southern (sense of) *doom*. And not even this confession she makes to Joe Christmas can absolve her – since

Christmas thought, “She is like the rest of them. Whether they are seventeen or fortyseven, *when they finally come to surrender completely, it’s going to be in words.* (241; emphasis added)

This brings us to the notion of *age* as an aspect of identity, just as powerful as the *sign of race*. Like the latter, the *sign of age* is crucial for the construction of Faulkner’s diegesis. Joe Christmas is thirty-three – a profoundly Christian symbol. And he will stay thirty-three years old forever on his cross – in a (self)-mocking (if tragic)vision of whatever we might call here *durability* or *endurance*.

Joanna Burden’s age represents the counterbalance of *transience* or – in my terms – *evanescence*. She glides grotesquely from hypostases – not merely of spinsterhood, i.e. of eternal (or enduring) adult virginity – but even of girlishness, to fits of perverse self-debasement (or what *she* thinks this would be – also in terms of trespassing race-borders). Of this perfectly symmetrical couple (she is *undoubtedly* white, he is *supposedly* black; she is a Northerner, he is a Southerner; she is definitely female, his sex is

ironically uncertain, etc.) - Joanna is the first to face death. Both Joe and Joanna must die violently. There is not a chance of *ageing* – for any one of them. Yet *her age* remains a mystery – even in death – as if to polarize so many certainties, all on her side.

This is Joanna's fluid portrait, the very first paragraph of Chapter 11. Like Toni Morrison, his student, William Faulkner took no sides: either with feminists, or with misogynists. But – like many other things in his book's economy – this portrait depends on ...*a certain slant of light*:

By the *light of the candle* she did not look much more than thirty, in the *soft light* downfalling upon the softungirdled presence of a woman prepared for sleep. When he saw her *by daylight* he knew that she was better than thirtyfive. Later she told him that she was forty. "Which means either fortyone or forty-nine, from the way she said it", he thought. But it was not that first night, nor for many succeeding ones, that she told him that much even. (232; emphasis added)

This brings us to the significance of *talking* in this novel, of *telling tales – true or false*, of *communicating* by any means – sex included.

Words remain the more fragile, yet the most powerful, hence the least reliable – of all the possible means of communication. They are fatally *ignored* when they should be carefully considered, like for instance Reverend Gail Hightower's wise advice wasted on Byron Bunch, only to be followed by the former's funny lament, echoing - with a touch of (self)parody – Shakespeare himself: "Ah, Byron, Byron. What a dramatist you would have made" (389).

Words are given the wrong interpretation – remember Percy Grimm's final decision to castrate Joe Christmas before killing him, assuming the righteous stand of a good citizen ready to punish an alleged homosexual black murderer of a white woman. "Words are no good" – says Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) (171).

But above all, it is *words* that *make* all these characters what they are – or seem to be. Existence itself – between *evanescence* and *endurance* – is defined in terms of words. *Names* make the *fates* of all these characters. Hence, the story of Joe Christmas would hardly be worth the telling without his funny name.

Moreover, he only acquires (some sense of) an identity *after* the dietician at the orphanage *calls* him publicly *a nigger*. The dietician herself is a fascinating character in this tragicomic show. She provides me with the most spectacular and rewarding argument that – although never mentioned in Toni Morrison's comprehensive study of *whiteness and the literary imagination* – William Faulkner's *Light in August* does belong there. So far, we have been revisiting her essays "Black Matters" and "Romancing the Shadow" – perhaps the most celebrated two thirds of this entire set of lectures. Last but – indeed – not least in Morrison's volume comes an essay entitled "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks". It discusses the (apparent) paradox of the shark-like nurse, a typical female monster of Ernest Hemingway's fiction. But – as I hope to prove – there is nothing like William Faulkner's dietician when it comes to shark-like nurses in modern American fiction (turned classic).

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Toni Morrison resorts to Ernest Hemingway's fiction to demonstrate it is informed with racism:

*Race has become metaphorical* – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division *far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was*. (63; emphasis added)

She supports her view on some critical writing by James Snead, focusing on William Faulkner (Snead x-xi):

*Racism* might be considered *a normative recipe for domination created by speakers using rhetorical tactics*. [...] Faulkner counters these social figures with literary devices of his own. (66-67; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, Toni Morrison is not concerned here with Faulkner. She goes on to distinguish some *linguistic strategies* used in literary texts to signify a specific bent towards the question of race differences. *Fetishization* is one of these – and she exemplifies it with allegorical images of *blood*:

Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery. (68)

*Light in August* is obviously the right place to look for the way in which the fetish of blood functions: be it tragedy, parody, detective story – Joe Christmas’s story seems to almost exhaust this fetish.

But the fetish I prefer to highlight here is rather hygienic: *toothpaste*.

Faulkner appears to find this image quite resourceful: nineteen year old Quentin Compson takes care to brush his teeth before committing suicide (on June Second, 1910). Five year old Joe Christmas seals his fate – at least in terms of *race* – also by means of toothpaste. But he chooses to eat it: as a parody of the forbidden fruit from a dubious tree of knowledge? What kind of knowledge? It can hardly qualify as self-knowledge, anyway.

In Faulkner’s *Light in August*, the dietitian plays the part of what Toni Morrison calls *a disturbing nurse*. Morrison has little patience with Hemingway’s notorious propensity for a “romantic attachment to a nurse”- in both fact & fiction:

*The wounded soldier and the nurse* is a familiar story and contains elements reliably poignant. To be in a difficult, even life-threatening position and to have someone dedicated to helping you, paid to help you, is soothing. And if you are bent on *dramatic gestures of self-reliance, eager to prove that you can go it alone (without complaining), a nurse who chooses or is paid to take care of you does not violate the view of yourself as a brave, silent sufferer*. [...] Cooperative or sullen, they are Tontos all, whose role is to do everything possible to serve *the Lone Ranger without disturbing his indulgent delusion that he is indeed alone*. (81-82; emphasis added)

But there is a reverse to this (mock)heroic picture of the (s)motherly nurse matching her unconsolated lonesome hero: Morrison calls this persona the *disturbing nurse*. She hurts and diminishes the man she encounters. She is merciless with his pride. She is brutal because she is narrow-minded; evil – because she is stupid and unimaginative. But above all, *a disturbing nurse* is scared. *Fear* and *self-pity* make her turn her *male* patient into a victim – and herself into a *shark* apparently endowed with (sadistic) *kindness*.

I simply cannot help visualizing Faulkner’s dietitian here:

The dietitian was twenty seven – old enough to have to take a few amorous risks but still young enough to attach a great deal of importance *not so much to love, but to being caught at it*. *She was also stupid enough to believe that a child of five not only could not deduce the truth from what he had heard, but that he would not tell it as an adult would*. [...] she believed that he not only intended to tell, but that he *deferred* doing it *deliberately* in order to make her suffer more. It never occurred to her that he believed that *he* was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment *deferred* and that he was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance

and write it off. (123; emphasis added)

Faulkner's term for this (failed relationship with a dominant woman) is not *nursing*: it is *mothering*. Hence, Joe Christmas will reject any token of feminine sympathy – for fear of this treacherous *mothering*. And thus, in his quest for identity, the fetish of the *pink* sticky sweet *toothpaste* will add up to the fetish of *blood* that is more than just *female*, more than just *red*: it has to be either *black* or *white*.

I find it strange that Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is not about William Faulkner's *Light in August*: the indirect ultimate lesson both these books teach us is one of cool detachment, and of reading like a writer.

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