

Report on

Narrating History, Constructing Identity: The Postmodern Turn in William Faulkner's

Absalom! Absalom!, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Go Down, Moses*

(Diplomová práce)

By

Barbara Zebrowska

This is an intelligent, well-researched and nuanced thesis on the fiction of William Faulkner and I recommend the grade of excellent (“**výborně**”). Nevertheless, I have one major reservation with the whole frame of the argument. This takes issue with Ms Zebrowska, but perhaps more properly with the general critical tendency which seeks to find postmodern elements in Faulkner's work.

As Ms Zebrowska admits, there is nothing new about such a critical approach and she cites the work of Patrick O'Donnell and Doreen Fowler from the 1990s. What the thesis does is flesh out this idea with excellent close readings of three of Faulkner's major novels. However, I remain unconvinced of the usefulness of this approach for reasons that I will outline here.

The term “postmodernism” has nearly lost of all its explanatory power as it means all things to all people. Works by writers such as Brian McHale and David Harvey have done much to hone definitions, but in general the effort seems doomed. I felt this particularly strongly when reading this thesis. For instance, McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) distinguishes between modernism and postmodernism by showing the way the former is epistemological in its concerns, the latter ontology.

Something of this distinction is to be found in Ms Zebrowska's thesis, but in a debased form. Thus, ontological postmodernism, which, in McHale's conception, is about the question of whether the world, or worlds, exist, becomes here merely the story of the disappearance of the old southern order. Ms Zebrowska, following the likes of O'Donnell, believes that this makes Ike McCaslin a kind of postmodern figure. The problem with this is that while Faulkner does indeed depict the disappearance of one set of social values and its replacement with another (and the consequent identity crisis of McCaslin), he never questions the materiality of the world, or the grand historical narratives that govern it, in the way that, say,

Thomas Pynchon does in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In Faulkner, we *know* that the Civil War took place, we *know* who won it, and, importantly, those facts tally with our knowledge of the American past; we are uncertain about exactly such historical facts in Pynchon.

In essence, the type of historical change that Faulkner charts seems to me in no way different from that charted by George Eliot in *Middlemarch* or Charlotte Brontë in *Shirley*, novels about the establishment of industrialism and progressive views in rural England. This brings with it huge uncertainty about social values and personal identity (Dorothea's role in the new world is unclear).

If the thesis deleted all references to Modernism and Postmodernism, one would be left with an excellent account of Faulkner's depiction of historical change in the south. It seems to me, therefore, that the business of postmodernity is peripheral to Zebrowska's understanding of Faulkner.

I also wish to remark that level of the prose is very high--a pleasure to read.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin", with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Doc. Quince Justin Ph.D.

Thursday, May 11, 2006