“If Public Talking Means Truth, Then I reckon This is Truth”: The issue of Unreliability in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*

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After first reading William Faulkner’s novel *Light in August*, I was utterly amazed by critical commentaries that label its major hero, Joe Christmas, as “this coloured Romeo [...] the amoral mulatto” (Geismar 89) or “a black man who looks white” (Jehlen 84). Nor was this all. Although it is true that relatively few accounts that call Christmas a black or a mulatto with so little hesitation, what is seldom questioned is his status as murderer, and this came as a shock to me. In fact, one critic combines both descriptions by calling him “the part-Negro murderer Joe Christmas” (Slabey 38) and another even says—effectively taking us by the hand—“We are told how Christmas murders Miss Burden” (Chase 18).

Some critics are more careful in their labelling (see, for instance, Fadiman) and some include—albeit without too much conviction—a “probably” or “presumably” in their discussions of Christmas’s murder of Joanna Burden. One critic actually think of an alternative scheme, according to which not Christmas but his colleague and room-mate Joe Brown is the murderer (Meats), and the Faulkner scholar John Duvall suggests that Christmas technically did not so much murder Joanna Burden as kill her in self-defence. This reading, however, has always struck me as odd; as a response to a pointed gun a virtual decapitation seemed infeasible.

It occurred to me, then, that such endeavours to gain mastery over the text of *Light in August* somehow duplicate what happens within the story itself. The critic Homer Pettey expresses it well, albeit with regard Faulkner’s novel *Sanctuary*: “Faulkner’s narrative [...] compels his reader into a complicitous role with the novel’s events” (Pettey

73). Indeed, although there is reported talk of Christmas having both raped and murdered Johanna Burden, we are not definitely told that he did murder her, let alone *how*. Let's therefore problematize and unsettle such readings.

By doing so, I will not try to answer the question of *how* or *why* or even *if* Christmas committed the murder. Instead I will ask the question of how Faulkner entices the reader into participating in those acts of prejudice and labelling that would make Christmas a murderer. This immediately brings me to the issue of *reliability* and the remark by one of the novel's major characters, which functions in my title: "If public talking makes truth, then I reckon this is truth" (Faulkner 401). By putting it this way, the character, here, subtle expresses his doubts, and as will become clearer and clearer, public talking perhaps does not make truth.

Here, I must introduce a distinction between *reliability* and *credibility,* between the ability of a speaker to know the truth and to speak it—the trustworthiness of a speaker as judged by objective criteria—and the speaker's ability to inspire trust in his listener, the degree to which his statements *are taken* to be correct. The difference—we might say—is between genuine trustworthiness and simply being trusted.

This question of credibility is an ancient one, going back at least as far as Aristotle, where, the concept of *ethos* referred to a "favourable disposition" on the part of a listener towards a speaker. As the social psychologist Kim Giffin explains, it "appears to denote the degree of trust a listener is willing to place in the message of a speaker, and "reflects a willingness to rely upon or show confidence in the speaker and his message" (Giffin 122). In his *Rhetoric*, Giffin shows, Aristotle contended that the listener's estimation of the speaker was based on his perception of three characteristics: the speaker's correctness, honesty and and intentions *vis à vis* the listener. Numerous modern analyses of audience reactions include variations of these same three factors. The social psychologist Berkowitz, for instance, mentions: the degree to which the speaker *seems* to know what he

is talking about; his personal attractiveness; his interest and enthusiasm, and his apparent motivation to motivate or even deceive his audience

This distinction between reliability and credibility is an important one. After all, a speaker may be utterly unreliable and yet maintain tremendous credibility, for instance because he fulfils the needs of his audience—think of leaders of certain religious sects—or, conversely, a speaker may be perfectly reliable yet receive no credibility at all, for instance if his status is low—such as may happen to members of minority groups. What was strange to me, then is that the distinction is so seldom made in narratology. Yet, to my mind, it is utterly vital to a proper understanding of *Light in August.* Let's talk about narratology for a a moment, then.

Light in August—in contrast to other novels by Faulkner, such as most of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I lay Dying*—is written in third-person narration. This means that there is a narrator who is outside the text—an external narrator—who, when we open the book lets us know that: "Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece'." Such an external narrator always uses 3"rd-person pronouns—*she*, referring to Lena, here—and never 1st-person ones. Or, if this happens, the 3rd person narrator turns out to have been a 1st-person one all the time.

Of course, the real 3rd-person narrator is always reliable; that is to say, if we think, after reading the first line of the text: "her name wasn't Lena" or "I do not believe she was sitting beside the road" there is no sense in reading on. We call this the "suspension of disbelief" that a 3rd-person narrator profits from… until he enters into the story and becomes one of the internal narrators and thereby the issues of reliability and credibility are raised.

Let's look how this works in our novel. It is clear that the single most important internal narrator in the novel is Byron Bunch, one of the workers at the planing mill

where Christmas has come to work. This Byron Bunch seems pretty reliable. We may not be consciously aware of *why*, but we feel it. But if we analyse the text closely, we see that this impression is created by the very strong endorsement that he gets from the external narrator. Let's look at an example. For instance, this narrator starts chapter 2 with the words: "Byron Bunch *knows* this: It was one Friday morning three years ago. And the group of men at work in the planer shed looked up, and saw the stranger standing there, watching them" (Faulkner 33; my italics).

It is important to realize that the verb *know* in the attributive clause "Byron Bunch *knows* this" is a so-called factive, which indicates that the speaker—the external narrator here—vouches for the correctness of what Byron Bunch thinks. This becomes clear if we add a comment on this sentence in coordinate clause. Indeed, we see that if the speaker had said "Bunch *knows* this and he is right," this would have created a redundancy, while if he would have said "He *knows* this and he is wrong," this would have created a paradox, showing that speaker agreement is inherent in the verb *know.*

We cannot be sure, however, how far the influence of the verb *know* stretches and indeed, at times Byron only *believes* or *thinks* things. But the privileged position that the external narrator gives him is reinstated all through the chapter, for instance: "And then Byron *knew*. *He knew* then why the other worked in the Sunday clothes. [...] He *knew* as well as if the man had told him" (Faulkner 37; my italics). What is more, we see that while the external narrator thus chooses to endorse Byron's views explicitly, he does not do the same for the other speakers in this chapter, to whom he refers as "the men," "the others," or "the first ones." The effect is, of course, that the external narrator brings to life a world in which Byron Bunch, the only one who *knows*, is isolated from the anonymous group of workers whose opinions do not necessarily contain reliable information. These "other folks" are introduced as members of a group rather than as individuals, and their

accounts consist to a large extent of gossip and rumours, “fake news” we would would say today.

To explain the power of gossip and rumours—or “fake news”—I will turn for a moment to the findings of social psychologists and the fact that an event can never be perceived exactly as it is. Or to put it more scientifically, the mental representation the human mind makes of an event can never be a perfect mirror image of it. This imperfect mental representation, moreover, does not stay constant throughout the years that it is retained, partly because the unconscious workings of the mind tend to delete or to sharpen harmful or potentially harmful aspects of it.

If a mental representation is voiced, the speaker will often be unable to express in words exactly what these representations consisted of. As the psychoanalyst Donald Spence argues, many aspects of experience that the speaker may want to discuss are “simply too fleeting to be captured”; they disappear from awareness before the proper language is found. Others, he argues, “can perhaps be captured in words but nor formed into sentences; they quickly drop our of sight” because the speaker “feels the requirement to make sense as he is speaking and will probably choose a coherent though over an incomplete fragment” (Spence 41).

Gossip, obviously, consists of mental representations that are voiced over and over again. This voicing of mental representations in itself always alters them, since the way in which an event is described to other depends very much on the demands of the situation, including, in particular, the demands (or imagined demands) of the audience. What one remembers of a much discussed event is not so much the event itself as the style and the form in which it was discussed with others.

When rumours go “from mind to mind,” then, certain alterations tend to occur that turn out to be fairly systematic. First of all, the information is levelled. Details that are ambiguous or subtle, and thus difficult to place, are left out, whereby the story

becomes easier to understand. Secondly, the information is sharpened, or focussed more directly on a few important details. And thirdly, most importantly, the presuppositions already existing in the listener's mind, often described as "frame knowledge," are incorporated so that they form part of the story when it is retold. As it turns out, it is this last aspect of rumours—the incorporation of frame knowledge—that is at the root of Joe Christmas's misfortune.

Let's return to the novel at this point. Social psychologists have observed that people tend to be guarded and tentative in their responses to a stranger until the necessary frame knowledge can be applied, that is to say until he or she can be fitted into a category. We see this clearly in the case of Joe Christmas. Indeed, public opinion is against him from the beginning. To the workers at the planing mill that "this stranger," who "looked like a tramp, yet not like a tramp either" and who "did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags" had "something definitely rootless about him" (Faulkner 33). As such he is baffling and annoying from the beginning. But we should notice that no-one at all takes him to be a black man. Gossip, then, starts as soon as it is known that something tragic has happened at Joanna Burden's home. Indeed, we read that the "casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north" immediately voice their belief "that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro" (Faulkner 315).

Doesn't Faulkner make something clear here about the way this gossip comes about? This by moving from the individual crime to the generic of the frame, to conclude that "the Negro" is expected to commit such crimes, and that any any black man will satisfy the presumption. And so the story that Christmas raped and murdered a white woman—Joanna Burden in this case—will be believed as soon as it is "clear" that he is a black man. Indeed, as soon as Brown labels Christmas as a black man, the observers and the speakers, who are all white, can be assumed to level, to sharpen and to further frame

the story. That is to say, all ambiguity and subtlety is removed from it, so as to focus on the few details that fit the frame of the violent "Negro."

That Faulkner was interested in this mechanism is clear. We only have to think of the novel *Intruder in the Dust*, with Lucas Beauchamp, whom everyone—even Gavin Stevens—considered guilty of murder. One can easily imagine what would have happened to him without the help of young Chick Mallison and the elderly Mrs. Habersham.

The story of Joe Christmas's tragedy is really what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "an orchestration of many voices." Indeed, much of the information that we readers receive reaches us through the internal narrator Byron Bunch. But this information must be at least third-hand, because Byron was at his boarding house "at the very time when it was all coming out down at the sheriff's office" (Faulkner 95). And some of the people from whom he must have received his information were themselves locked outside the sheriff's office, their faces pressed against the glass, unable to hear. So, Byron's citation of their accounts of Brown's words—"I am talking about Christmas [...]. The man that killed that white woman [...]. He's got nigger blood in him" (Faulkner 107-108)—is unlikely to be accurate as reported speech. And it is even less likely to contain the truth about Christmas.

Byron Bunch, the seemingly reliable internal narrator, knew no better than that Christmas was a white man, and, in addition, was himself totally aware that all it takes for rumours to spread is "that idea, that single idle word blown from mind to mind" (Faulkner 77). Yet, surprisingly, he immediately takes Brown's word for it, or what he assumes were Brown's words: that Christmas is black, and thus a rapist and a murderer. Still, if one considers some of the complex gossip chains involved—and the reward that has been placed on the murderer's head—it seems not at all certain that Christmas killed anyone, or for that matter, that he came into the cabin on the Saturday

morning of the fire to say to Brown: "I've done it [...]. Go up to the house and see" (Faulkner 104).

My own account of these events must be complicated and hard to follow. This is because the intricate patters of telling and retelling, and the confusion of voices through which Faulkner has chosen to convey these events, are themselves complicated and hard to follow. A failure to appreciate this complexity has led readers—and critics—to attribute the reported actions and the quoted discourse to Christmas without realizing the unreliability of the accounts. Such readers fall into a trap that is similar to the one into which Byron Bunch falls. Faulkner himself, in any case, referred to the unreliability of his speakers when he points out that in his work opinions sometimes come from "the sort of people whose opinions one would not put too much faith in" (Faulkner quoted in Meriwether & Millgate 126-127).

In sharp contrast to the internal voices—those with their easy gossiping and careless fake news—stand the chapters in which the external narrator directly narrates the story of Joe Christmas's life. Although this narrator seems omniscient in that he can look into the past as well as into the future, he does not claim unlimited authority on all the subjects that he himself considers worthy of mentioning, which is very unusual for an external narrator. His modal adverbs clearly show this. Christmas's activities are thus presented in 3rd-person narration, for instance in: "he would not look up then. He would not move, *apparently* arrested and held immobile" (Faulkner 123; my italics) or in "*perhaps* he thought of that other window which he had used to use and of the rope upon which he had had to rely; *perhaps* not" (Faulkner 253; my italics).

Passage like these constantly foreground the narrator's own lack of insight and understanding. They constantly provide alternatives and convey, time and again, the indeterminacy of events and the ultimate unknowability of feelings and emotions. They open up, problematic and undermine the disambiguated, streamlined versions of "the

town," creating a world that allows no closure. This amounts to an important contradiction with the "truth" that is so easily created by the internal narrators.

Through the account of the different contexts in which Christmas's actions are placed, then, the sensitive reader is made conscious of the difficulties involved in knowing "the truth." We become aware of the dangers of social frames and become sensitized to the nature of prejudice. To return to my title here, public talking does not make truth after all. And unanimity does not change prejudice into truth. It only makes it more dangerous.

What, then, may make reader become implicated in what Duvall calls "the same ideology that the text problematises"? I can only briefly mention two thoughts on the subject here. First, as we have seen, much of the information reaches the reader through the voice of the internal narrator Byron Bunch. This Byron is introduced in the first chapter as a reliable speaker, which obviously lends him a credibility that persists long after his reliability has, in fact, become questionable. Secondly, the story of Joe Christmas's labelling by the community, and of his consequent lynching, is constantly complicated by his own search for identity. Being an orphan, he is longing to be named by others. When he tells his girlfriend Bobby, for instance: "I think I got some nigger blood in me. […] I don't know. I believe I have" (Faulkner 216), she refuses to believe him. She even refuses to discuss the very possibility of his mixed blood and thereby acknowledge an uncertainty that is so much a part of his character. In fact, Christmas is not relieved by having the possibility of his mixed blood denied or made insignificant. He cannot, because his very identity is bound up with this possibility.

If, as the Southern history scholar Richard Gray argues, "it is a traditionally Southern strategy to place the black on the margins of language" (Gray 146), Christmas's place is completely outside of it. What he needs is to find a voice, a language—that which the Southern historian Donald Kartiganer calls "an available myth or version of reality,

that will allow him to live the entirety of his contradictory being" (Kartiganer 43). Even more so than if he had clearly been black, he is, in the words of Gray, denied "the dignity of an adequate definition" (Gray 146): the dignity of having a name. Therefore, as Kartiganer writes, he will "drive incessantly towards identity, fiercely defying all attempts to define him by reduction to less that his awareness of himself" (Kartiganer 43).

But the situation is even more complex than this. Christmas will defy all attempts to define him, whether reductive or not. Detachment was his solution to the unbearable situation of his youth, and it has become part of his character. With his hypersensitivity to influence, pressure or ties of any kind, he is doomed to refuse the very act of complete definition by a fellow human being for which he longs. Joe Christmas's problem is not only what the Faulkner scholar Michael Ruppersburg calls "one man's agonising struggle to phantoms his identity against an entire community's to name him" (Ruppersburg 33). It is as much a struggle against himself: a struggle between his need to be named and his need to stay free of the influence of others, which he has learned to fear. His character is thus strung out between acts which force others to name him and acts that seek to escape the same process. This paradox keeps him struggling for the very thing he cannot accept: the act of being named, of becoming a person. Thus, as Faulkner has so marvellously conveyed it, the center of his text remains an absence, a lack that no shape can fill.

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