

RACE AND LITERARY THEORY: FROM DIFFERENCE TO CONTRADICTION

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Like all passageways between past and present, the threshold to the 21st century conceived as a crisis-point presents both a danger and an opportunity: a danger of the solid gains of the civil rights struggles in the Sixties being dissolved in an unprecedented social amnesia, an opportunity to learn from experience and advance race relations in an emancipatory, counterhegemonic direction. Change, as everyone knows, always proceeds unevenly. Despite the call for a return to the old dispensation, with the Great Books of the Western World summoned to fill the gaps in the national "cultural illiteracy," progress toward liberating us from Eurocentric, male-dominated learning can be discerned in such reforms as, for example, the presence in recent textbooks of Black women writers (Walker, Petry, Morrison) and token American Indian and Chicano writers.¹ This would not have been possible without such collective efforts as *Radical Teacher*, the Project on Reconstructing American Literature, and numerous individual initiatives. The agenda then was to problematize the canon and transform it—but for whose benefit? on what grounds?

In his introduction to *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983), Paul Lauter observes that in the last decade or so a growing consensus has emerged for revising/transforming the canon established by the aesthetic standard of the New Criticism which has privileged a white/male normative "paradigm of experience." The modernist patriarchal pantheon of Hemingway, Faulkner, Bellow and Mailer, questioned by women and minorities, can no longer claim a transparent foundational superiority when its rationale has been undermined. Nor can the New Critical norms and habits—the dismissal of readers' sensibility, the discounting of the artists' milieu—be taken for granted as truisms. Amid the transvaluation of Establishment values, Lauter envisages the possibility of opening up the canon in consonance with radical social changes whose impact is to compel us to ask not just "how to apply a given and persisting set of standards, but where standards come from, whose values they embed, whose interests they serve." At stake is the function or role of the teaching profession in

a world of alienated labor and mass reification.

The strategy of this new Reconstruction is manifestly one of compromise and piecemeal reforms. While lauding the virtues of oral texts like the American Indian chant, Lauter and colleagues seem unable to forsake such New Critical virtues as "complexity," irony, etc.; what they are pleading for is latitude, pluralism, diversity. But reforms have been won, the Establishment has made concessions: Douglass' *Narrative* and Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (in full or excerpts), for example, are now often mandatory for introductory courses; Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is on the way to enshrinement. Now I don't mean to discount those necessary critiques of the old formalist standard, but the targetting of the New Criticism (now eclipsed by poststructuralist approaches like reader-response, semiotics, deconstruction, etc.) and the espousal of a more militant liberalism have been overtaken by the larger sociocultural changes in the latter half of the Reagan era.

In the sphere of racial conflicts, some experts have suggested that the issue of "racism" has already been resolved by the civil rights victories of the Sixties so that it no longer figures in the public debate on what the American community is and should be. Jeffrey Prager, for example, argues that race as a social construction, i.e. "the projection of socially created difference" organized by racial category, has been displaced by other collective or social representations which mediate reality for individual subjects. He contends that the resurgent tradition of expressive and utilitarian individualism, now dominant over the biblical and civic republican variants (following Bellah's findings in *Habits of the Heart*), at present articulates race in terms of private virtue, not collective responsibility. Using Durkheim's concept of "collective representations," Prager, however, holds that "the shifting meaning of race is a function of its negotiated and contingent public character."² While this may sound like a recap of Gunnar Myrdal's thesis in *An American Dilemma* (1944) which Oliver Cromwell Cox has effectively criticized in *Caste, Class and Race* (1948), Prager does not perceive any discordance between ideals and actuality. In fact he believes that the quest for the meaning and purpose of the American community cannot be accomplished except through the mediation of racial difference as part of "the American tradition" the preservation of which (he thinks) is "critical in a democratic society." Now why and how this collective representation of racial difference acquires permanent status as a necessary and constitutive element in American society is not demonstrated but simply assumed. In any case, what Prager points out as the mutations of racial discourse under the varying pressures of "historical circumstance and social negotiation" may explain, to some extent, why Douglass (but not Angela Davis) can be assimilated or integrated into the canon. But if so, has racism (as the lived experience of millions with real material consequences) been effectively abolished or even neutralized in the pacification of the ghettos and minority enclaves?³

Since the Seventies, the repudiation of New Critical dogmatism found in such volumes as *The Politics of Literature* (1970), Richard Ohmann's *English in America* (1976) and the writings of feminists and Third World activists (e.g., Paulo Freire's intervention was catalyzing at one stage of pedagogical reflection), may be regarded as symptomatic of the widespread dissatisfaction not with the racial problematic but chiefly with the exhausted pedagogical scholasticism of Ransom, Tate and Brooks which did not and could not address the urgent concerns of women and Blacks, and particularly students being drafted for the Vietnam war. Academic minds, as usual, lagged behind events. We know that from its genealogy in the agrarian reaction against the capitalist rehabilitation of the South, the New Critics were successfully incorporated into monopoly capital's hegemonic order as required by an expansive State engaged in surmounting the depression, fighting fascism, and asserting post-war global leadership. It was also supplanting Europe in its imperial tutelage / domination of the Third World. New Critical discourse was in effect instrumentalized to articulate the national identity even as the trope of the melting pot yielded to the rhetoric of integration. In line with supplementing the canon that evolved from Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* (1941), to Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (revised 1974), the elevation of Faulkner as an American, not just Southern, artist testifies to the New Critics' supremacy in the discipline. Despite the left-liberal reservations of Edmund Wilson and Irving Home on Faulkner's mythmaking, Robert Penn Warren's praise for Faulkner's conscience has succeeded in endowing the novelist with the gift of transcending the color bar. But, ironically, such color-blindness only confirmed the gap between the liberal State which guaranteed formal equality to all and the racially-structured civil society: "What Faulkner does is to make the character transcend his sufferings qua Negro to emerge not as Negro but as man—man, that is, beyond complexion and ethnic considerations....the final story is never one of social injustice; however important that element may be, but of an existential struggle against fate, for identity, a demonstration of the human will to affirm itself."⁴ Viewed from this salvational gesture of discrimination, Faulkner's art redeems plantocratic prejudice and the narcissistic violence of a moribund socio-economic formation. Through this metamorphosis negotiated by criticism, Faulkner has indeed become an overdetermined signifier serving the claims of U.S. moral supremacy in the world.

Despite this rear-guard triumphalist humanism, the rituals of the Faulkner cult has been unable to silence dissenting voices, among them Ralph Ellison's refusal of the religious myth and its drive for racial mastery:

For it is the creative function of myth to protect the individual from the irrational, and since it is here in the realm of the irrational that, impervious to science, the stereotype grows, we see that the Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man.⁵

We can see how Ellison, through a dialectical ruse of counterpointing outside and inside, conceives his task as one of helping the Black People attain self-definition, that is, "having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still forming American people." From the perspective of the reified subject now acquiring self-consciousness, the "American nation" its boundaries are redrawn: "The artist is no freer than the society in which he lives, and in the United States the writers who stereotype or ignore the Negro and other minorities in the final analysis stereotype and distort their own humanity."⁶ At this point, we anticipate the totalizing principle of structuralism (most pronounced in Levi-Strauss' anthropology) that would subsequently displace the New Critical doctrine of the self-contained subject with a relational method in which the discovery of identity unfolds through the mediation of the other (social codes, laws, taboos).

Following our premise that race as a social construction (where the exploitation and oppression of one group occurs in a hierarchical system of class conflict) is needed for the self-affirmation of the dominant community, we can construe literature as one privileged field of this ideological operation, one of the most efficacious cultural spaces where the subject is racially marked and constituted? Faulkner's texts are powerful interpellations of the Black population as a subject race, albeit endowed with saving grace; *Intruder in the Dust*, for instance, can even be described as dialogical or intertextual—if only the voices of Richard Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin can be stilled. There is no space here to explore how Faulkner's texts, like the pioneering film *The Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith (based on a fictional apologia, *The Clansman*, 1905), trace a common descent from racist attitudes thematized in religion, pseudo-scientific thinking and popular lore, discourses which also inform non-Southern writing by Frank Norris and Jack London, among others. With the end of Reconstruction followed by a series of economic depressions, the maintenance of fin-de-siecle order required the revitalization of a racist episteme and habitus. According to T.J. Jackson Lears, a historian of this transitional period:

In America as in Europe, racism intertwined with the recoil from modern softness. Anglo-Saxon racism offered a rationale for imperialist crusades against "inferior" overseas foes and also met less obvious social and psychic needs. Racism reasserted the cultural authority of the WASP bourgeoisie; it may also have provided many WASP Americans with a kind of negative identity—a means of shoring up selfhood by disowning impulses they distrusted in themselves. Defining idleness, irresolution, avarice and other moral shortcomings as "race traits" confined to inferior stock, racists reaffirmed a masterful, virtuous mode of identity for those who had lost a solid sense of self. Private needs had public consequences. In a variety of ways, racism revitalized the hegemony of the dominant WASP culture at a critical historical moment.⁸

In short, the presence of the racial Other sustains and validates the master's identity. Since the social field is a complex articulation of various levels of life-activities (political, ideological, economic), the intertextuality between hegemonic socio-political discourse and racist social practices and institutions can only be

mapped in specific historical conjunctures, a mapping which, for example, may be approximated by Thomas Gossett's survey *RACE The History of an Idea in America* (1963) and Michael Banto's *Racial Theories* (1987). Conceptions of racial contradiction, not just juxtaposed differences (such as those voiced by Hegel, Kant, Taine, Gobineau, Le Bon and others) are thus articulated with literary/aesthetic, moral and ethical ideas via the mediation of the underlying public discourse on the identity of American society.

Given this sketchy background on the displacements and sublimations of racist ideology, we may consider next the present conjuncture as a possible turning-point in the fraught relations between race and literary theory. This interaction has preoccupied the contributors to two important volumes both edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr: *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984) and *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (1985). In the latter volume, the theoretician of structuralism Tzvetan Todorov asks the tricky but misleading question: "If 'racial differences' do not exist, how can they possibly influence literary texts?" Ignorant of the subtle dynamics of ideology, Todorov misconceives the issue. He reduces the social categorization of people by racial (phenotypical) markers to legitimize hierarchy (economic and political stratification) to a simple question of cultural diversity. How can tolerance of cultures be equivalent to oppression and exploitation of a group based on a belief in its presumed inferiority? Todorov, moreover, seems innocent of the simplest facts of wage-differentiation and other forms of political and economic subordination based on ethnic/racial identification. Todorov also insists that in general European Enlightenment thought was "universalist and egalitarian," thus enslavement and brutalization of non-white/non-Caucasian peoples. Then he adds insult to injury by apologizing for past racist (in his term, "racialist") ideologies as "not all bad" because they coincided with "popular opinion" in their time, and above all they implied "the very idea of shared humanity" abandonment of which would be more dangerous than "ethnocentric universalism": "All one would have to do in order to 'recycle' these authors [Taine, Gobineau] would be to subject their works to a double 'cleansing' process, first eliminating their now confusing references to 'race' and physical differences (replacing them with 'culture' and its derivatives) and then criticizing their oversimplified classifications and their glaring ethnocentric value judgments...(373)." What a messy salvaging operation for a famous scholar committed to the search for permanent truths!

It appears that the structuralist thinker has escaped the dreaded hermeneutic circle through unwitting bad faith. Although Todorov cautions against fetishizing otherness and mystifying racial difference to thwart the peril of universalism, he himself succumbs to an equally reprehensible essentialism: "We are not only separated by cultural differences; we are also united by a common human identity, and it is this which renders possible communication, dialogue, and, in the final analysis, the comprehension of otherness—it is possible precisely because otherness is ever radical." History is thereby suppressed, nullified. I

agree with the last point insofar as it resembles Bakhti's historically situated notion of intersubjective dialogue. And I endorse Todorov's caveat on unwarrantedly superimposing the deconstructionist critique of "the truth of identity" on Black writing. But he misses the point of the whole controversy which is focused on who precisely commands and exercises the power to articulate this "common human identity" and authorize or enforce it in specific times and places? Just like Derrida (in his reply to his critics in the same volume), Todorov warns against re-imposing cultural apartheid when he rejects Gates' call that Blacks must return to their own literature "to develop theories of criticism indigenous" to it, even though in both volumes all varieties of Western, non-Black approaches were mobilized to interpret and analyze Black and other non-European cultural texts. One can conclude that Todorov's philanthropic humanism is purely verbal. It is singularly blind to the complicity of ideas with State violence and the coercive, disciplinary apparatus of class interests—a concern registered particularly in recent socialist-feminist, Third World, and neo-Marxist inquiries.

Without having to suspect the cunning of Hegel's Reason behind all these ratiocinations, we submit that what Todorov intends in the sphere of thought has already been carried out in the "bantustan" policy of canon formation today. Are we witnessing the return of tokenism writ large, integration recuperated, races separate but equal under the same roof? The phenomenon currently celebrated today as pluralism, heterogeneity, De Man's vertiginous possibilities of meaning, and free play all safely operating in the realm of rarefied theorizing, can be appraised as a new hegemonic strategy of the ruling bloc following the demise of the New Criticism and the bankruptcy of its successors, archetypal criticism (Frye), phenomenological, structuralist, and so forth.¹⁰ One can suggest that in the absence of any powerful mass movement the terms of public discourse tend to be fixed by those who control the ideological means of production. Let me cite a recent case. One can achieve what E.D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy" and entitle you to join the mainstream community if you can consume enough information about Dubois, racism, apartheid, and a few hundred pieces of knowledge. In the process, Hirsch believes that we shall also recover what has been lost in the last twenty years of social engineering precipitated by urban and student riots, namely "the Ciceronian ideal of a universal public discourse," by expanding the reading list to include the productions of erstwhile marginal groups. This kind of education (and more) has enabled a sophisticated intellectual like Hirsch to appreciate how even members of the Black Panther Party, to his surprise, can write grammatically correct, intelligent English. This programmatic call to return to the basics, part of the conservative revival of the utilitarian individualism alluded to earlier and a reaction to the popular rebellions of the last two decades, pursues the line of universal humanism still prevalent in the mass media and the academies but now retooled and institutionalized in the context of different global contingencies by a predominantly white ruling class and its organic intellectuals. Hirsch's strategy for re-consolidating hegemony proves

once more that all discourse becomes intelligible only when we grasp their social mediations and their implicit political agendas.

Of all mediations, race is still the most dangerous and intractable in contemporary U.S. consciousness. While the assimilation into the curriculum of hitherto alien, potentially disruptive innovations (feminist theories of reading, for example) have enlarged but not substantially deepened the parameters of our discipline, the "political" or ideological critique of texts from an ethnic/racial subaltern perspective remains suspect and can only be intermittently tolerated. That is because subjectivity in the present conjuncture, while constituted by racial discourse, has to operate according to jurisprudential norms of equality, due process, and so forth. What I would call a race-relations mode of metacommentary which also articulates the moments of class and gender (such as those by Black women critics like Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde in *This Bridge Called My Back*, 1981; and the contributions of Hazel Carby and Pratibha Parmar in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1982) is one that would not only position antithetical texts such as, for example, Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937) side by side with T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919), or Frances Beale's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1969) next to Adriene Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1972) in order to de-homogenize a liberal arts curriculum modeled after the classic "marketplace of ideas." It would insist on highlighting the contradiction of premises, assumptions, principles, and implications between these texts. It would call attention to "the war of position" (Gramsci's term), the dialectical confrontation between texts and practices and their asymmetrical power relations, within the framework of societies still characterized by injustice founded on class division and gender hierarchy—a condition which, for millions of people in our society, is (whether one likes it or not) still primarily lived and experienced as racial oppression. And that is not, to be sure, something undecidable or indeterminate. Ultimately, this approach will help clarify the problematic of race as analogically parallel to that of religion in Marx's well-known formulation in his "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844): it is the "sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."###

FOOTNOTES

¹ For an oppositional critique of the conservative trend, see Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, "Schooling, Culture and Literacy in the Age of Broken Dreams: A Review of Bloom and Hirs h," *Harvard Education Review*, 58 (1988): 172-194. On the struggle for the empowerment of "subalterns" in Stanford University, see the report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 14 Dec. 1988: 1, All.

¹ Jeffrey Prager, "American political culture and the shifting meaning of race," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 10 (1987): 62-81. For a new theoretical formulation of the positionality of race as a "decentered complex of social meanings," see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

² See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "By the Rivers of Babylon: Race in the United States," *Socialist Review*, 71 & 72 (September-October 1983): 31-65; 35-69, excerpted in *Racism*, ed. Bruno Leone (St. Paul: Greenhaven press, 1986) 137-143. For an analysis of racist discourse/practices in Britain which can be highly instructive for American scholars, consult Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

³ Robert Penn Warren, "Faulkner: The South, the Negro, and Time," *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966) 263. Compare Irving Howe, "The Southern Myth and Faulkner," *The American Culture*, ed. Hennig Cohen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 430-48.

⁴ David Minter, ed., *William Faulkner The Sound and the Fury* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987) 266. Parenthetically, Ellison's remark uncannily anticipates Lacan's theory of the Imaginary as the matrix of Manichean transitivity, as well as Fanon's dialectics of colonized/colonizer in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

⁵ Minter 267-268. Elaborations of the Black identity project can be found in Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) and Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature" (1978), in *Poetry and Politics*, ed. Richard Jones (New York: Quill, 1985) 175-187.

⁶ For a neoMarxist articulation of class and race, I recommend Stuart Hall, "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance," in UNESCO, *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: Unesco, 1980) 305-345. See also John Solomos, "Varieties of Marxist Concepts of 'Race,' Class and the State: a critical analysis," *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*, ed. John Rex and David Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 84-109. For a Gramscian orientation, consult: Eugene Genovese, *In Red and Black* (New York: Pantheon, 1971) 55-72, 188-199; and Cornel West, "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois P, 1988) 17-29.

⁷ *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981) 108-109.

⁸ Joel Kovel describes such an attitude (as shown by Todorov) as a form of "metaracism" in *White Racism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 211-230. Certain observations of Robert Blauner are still relevant today; see his *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 1-110.

⁹ Part of this hegemonic strategy may be located in the "ethnicity" approach to the humanities: for example, Werner Sollors, "Literature and Ethnicity," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) 647-665. Current feminist theories of reading persist in being color-blind also; see Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocínio Schweickart, eds., *Gender and Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986). The scandal of racist white feminism has been noted by Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard, *Sexism, Racism and Oppression* (New York: Blackwell, 1984) and particularly by Jenny Bourne, "Towards an anti-racist feminism," *Race and Class* (Summer 1983:1-22. On linguistic hegemony/racism, see Mary Louise Pratt, "Linguistic Utopias," *The linguistics of writing*, ed. Nigel Fabb et al. (New York: Methuen, 1987) 48-66.