

The New Approaches in William Faulkner Study: An Interview with Dr. Christopher Rieger

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Abstract The Center for Faulkner Studies at Southeast Missouri State University is one of the most important Faulkner Studies centers in US, and Dr.Christopher Rieger, the director of the center, is a famous Faulkner scholar, and has published his book *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*, which is an very important and influential book in the field of American southern literature study. His book analyzes a kind of post-pastoral prospective reflected in Faulkner and other three American southern writers' works during "The Great Depression," and he considers that these southern authors put more emphasis on seeking a more interdependent and cooperative ecological model rather than an individualistic and competitive model from the past in order to achieve a sense of balance between the human and the nature, or between technology and wilderness, or the urban and rural. This book has been regarded by the American scholars as one which has made a great contribution to the American southern literature study. Dr. Rieger is also very interested in the comparative study of Faulkner and Chinese writers, and has written one paper on the comparative study of Faulkner and Moyan. On the July of 2015, due to the need of the research "William Faulkner and his influences on contemporary Chinese writers "sponsored by national Social Science Fund, Li Mengyu came to the center for an academic visit and had a special interview with Dr.Rieger, the interview covered such topics as the new Faulkner research approaches, the historic and cultural background in Faulkner's writing, race, gender, religion, modernity and postmodernity, and the comparative study of Faulkner and Chinese contemporary writers, hopefully, this interview can provide some new thoughts and perspectives for Faulkner study in Chinese academic circle.

Key words Christopher Rieger; William Faulkner Study; new approaches

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Li Mengyu (Li for short hereinafter): Dr. Rieger, It’s my great pleasure and honor to have an interview with you on William Faulkner, since you are an expert in this field. My first question is, as the director of the Center for Faulkner Studies in your university, could you please introduce your center briefly? What role does it play in Faulkner studies in the US as well as outside of the US?

Christopher Rieger (Rieger for short hereinafter): The Center for Faulkner Studies here at Southeast Missouri State University was established in 1989 at the same time that we acquired the Louis Daniel Brodsky collection of William Faulkner materials. So it was because we acquired the Brodsky collection that we started the Faulkner Center at the same time. Mr. Brodsky was a famous collector of Faulkner, and he collected the largest personal collection of Faulkner materials, at that time, over 10,000 items. After working with Dr. Hamblin, who was the founding director of the Faulkner center, he eventually donated the collection to our university. So he wanted to make sure that the collection was used by scholars and that it didn’t just sit in a room somewhere and one could never see it. So the Faulkner Center was established to try to promote the collection and bring people from around the world to use it, and promote the study of Faulkner’s work. We host visiting scholars, we have people working on books and articles on Faulkner who come to use our collection, the Blotner papers in particular, and we host a conference every two years that brings scholars together to present their work on Faulkner.

Li: So I also know you have an online course on Faulkner?

Rieger: Yes, that was another thing we did to promote the collection of our university; a massive open online course or MOOC was created to help people read Faulkner on their own. A lot of times, people don’t have a chance to read Faulkner with a professor or in class, and sometimes it can be difficult to read by yourself, so we created the MOOC to help people read Faulkner’s novels and understand them.

Li: OK, actually, in China last year, I received an e-mail about your MOOC from

professor Hamblin. I was very pleased to get the news, and also visited the MOOC course website and registered, and I found many very interesting topics and also introduced it to my students. Next question: You are a Faulkner expert. Could you please introduce your study on Faulkner?

Rieger: Yes, a lot of my work on Faulkner is ecocriticism, that's the main approach I take, which is a study of the natural world, the environment and how they are related to Faulkner's work. So, for instance, I have a book with a chapter on *Go Down Moses*, which is Faulkner's important novel that most tackles the questions about the environment and the relationship between humans and the nature, and I recently published an essay on *The Sound and the Fury* using an ecocritical approach to that book also, to see how nature and the environment are significant in the novel as well.

Li: And I found this approach in China is also very popular. Many scholars use this ecological approach to study Faulkner's novels. Previously, I published a book *On the Study of Shen Congwen and Faulkner's Novels in Multidimensional Perspectives*. I have also made a comparative study of two authors from the ecological approach.

Rieger: That's great! We have a scholar from Japan who has come here to our conference who also does ecocritical approach to Faulkner too.

Li: So, it is a very insightful approach to get close to Faulkner's novels and works. Next question, Could you please introduce the contemporary criticism on Faulkner in the US? What are the major approaches in Faulkner studies in American contemporary academic circles?

Rieger: There is still a lot of work being done on Faulkner. People use a lot of different approaches, and one of the newer ones that people are using more would be disability studies, a fairly new field. There is recently a book, published by Taylor Haygood using disability studies applied to Faulkner, and we have published some essays in our books using that approach as well as the approach of trauma theory. Also popular recently have been cultural approaches to Faulkner, especially looking at popular culture, and how that has a lot of intersections with Faulkner's work. We usually don't think of Faulkner as a popular author, but some new work has been done about how his work has connections to popular culture, music, movies, popular literature, magazines, things like that. This year "The Faulkner & Yoknapatawpha Conference" at the University of Mississippi was about Faulkner and print culture, and many of the presentations looked at how Faulkner's work engaged with the

popular culture from that time period.

Li: So, I'd like to know more about the "The Faulkner & Yoknapatawpha Conference 2015" conference held at the University of Mississippi this year. I know you have just returned from the conference. Could you tell me about it?

Rieger: Yes, again, the theme was Faulkner and print culture, so there are a lot of different presentations, but like I said, a lot of people looked at Faulkner's connection to the publishing industry, and popular culture, so there were presentations on magazines, and how he was portrayed in the popular media. The cover art of his books, and how his novels fit into the paperback revolution of the time period, connections between Faulkner and other important figures in publishing and literary industry at that time, some of those were included also too. So, there was a wide variety of presentations.

Li: What was the topic of your presentation?

Rieger: My topic was Faulkner's revision process during his novel *A Fable*, some last minute revisions that he did to this novel. I used some materials from our Brodsky collection to illustrate how Faulkner worked and how he made changes. Especially in this novel, he made some important changes very late in the publishing process, when it was almost ready to go to press.

Li: A very interesting approach, and as we know, Faulkner is often labeled as a writer of the south in US. What do you think the significance of the south is to the understanding of Faulkner's works?

Rieger: Well, I think if you want to do a historical or cultural approach to Faulkner, then you need to understand southern history and southern culture; otherwise, you have an incomplete view of his connections to his history and to his culture, because Faulkner himself was very much interested in southern history, and the way that southern history has been presented to southerners and non-southerners over the years. And he also engaged with some of the issues of his day, things that are history to us now, that were very much contemporary issues to him. Faulkner would often engage with those issues as well too. You don't have to understand the south or think Faulkner is only a southern writer. And I think meeting with some international scholars has helped us to see that Faulkner can be thought of in other ways too, not just as a southern author.

Li: Just now, we talked about cultural contexts; if we examine Faulkner's works in

cultural contexts, what other cultural contexts have exerted influences on Faulkner besides southern culture?

Rieger: One example in southern studies these days is to look at is what called the global south. So, not just the American south, but South America, the Caribbean, even Africa or other parts of the southern hemisphere around the world, and to see connections between the American south and other souths. Faulkner sometimes can be placed in that context as well too. He has novels that touch on Caribbean settings, for instance, like *Absalom, Absalom!*, and he engaged in other issues that go far beyond the south to other places.

Well, and also we can study Faulkner in an American context, not just southern, but as an American writer, because many of the issues he is talking about are really American issues and are not southern issues. He happens to use the south as his location, because that's what he knows, that's where he's from, so he can write about that more authentically. But he uses that to talk about American culture as a whole. So when he is talking about race, for instance, he is not simply talking about race relations of the south, or not only about race relations of the south, but American race relations in general.

Then, you can also see him in international contexts too. I think that helps explain why his works are popular in places like China and Japan, because he writes about issues that affect all humans, universal issues, so you can see that clearly in a novel like *A Fable*, which was set in Europe, not set in Mississippi or the south at all. The south in other works too could be extended to that larger context, for instance, the problems of rural people and farmers and those issues I think can be understood by people in a lot of countries. That might be one reason some Chinese respond him, because he is talking about the clash between urban and rural and something like that is still happening in China, small towns versus big cities, and past versus the present, and so a lot of cultures can identify with that.

Li: Ok, just now you talked about cultural contexts and the global south, and it is a very interesting topic. In China, some scholars have made some comparative study of Faulkner and Su Tong, who is also a very famous writer whose writings focus more on southern settings of China, and this global source reminds me of this situation in China. Among various approaches in Faulkner studies, and also I notice there are the modernity approach and post-modernity approach, and what have scholars found out by using them?

Rieger: I think the modernity approach you are referring to is a historic one namely, looking at the whole artistic movement of modernism in the past. The first three or

four decades of the 20th century, would be the chief time period for modernism. So scholars have looked at other modernist authors, like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and how Faulkner's style and literary, writing are similar to theirs. They have looked at modernism in other forms too, like painting, in particular. So we know, for instance, that Faulkner when he traveled to Paris in 1925, viewed many modernist painters, and this was influential on him. So some critics have looked at connections between modernist painting and Faulkner's modernist writing. Those would be the main ways to look at modernism. There are several books that study Faulkner in connection to modernism as a whole.

Li: How about post-modernism approaches?

Rieger: Post-modernism I think again would be a method of connecting Faulkner to areas of the culture that seemingly don't have much connection. So again you could go back to the popular culture approach that I mentioned earlier, that would be popular in post-modernism approach, or also the ways that Faulkner often reuses his own material. After he wrote a story he would often come back to it later and take some material from it and use it in a different way in a future story. Those are techniques of post-modernism in particular too. That would be a couple of examples.

Li: I am also very interested in Faulkner and psychological approaches; could you please introduce this research approach in the US?

Rieger: Yes, the psychological approach was very popular with Faulkner, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is still used today, but it's not quite as popular as it was in those days. Freudian approaches were some of the early ones. John T. Irwin has one of the most famous and influential books on Faulkner using a Freud psychological approach, called *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge*. Lots of other approaches have been used since then, not just Freudian, but Lacanian approaches and using more contemporary psychological theories to understand Faulkner as well. Faulkner certainly writes about the unconscious a lot, people who do things without knowing why they do things. The return of the repressed is a big feature in Irwin's book, and because Faulkner's characters are psychologically complex, I think there is a lot to study. He depicts characters who are very complicated, he often gives us their inner thoughts, and a lot of their family history and memories and stories. So compared to some other authors, he provides us with a lot of information about primary characters who lend themselves very well to psychological study.

Li: In China, there are also scholars who show some interest in Faulkner psychological approaches. For instance, some scholars have made some particular studies using Freudian theory. I know you have published a book *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature*, could you please explain a little bit about the title, “Clearing-Cutting Eden” and the book as well?

Rieger: The title refers to a couple of different things. One is a historical tendency of authors and another people to refer to the south as a paradise or Eden. In the early part of the 20th century, in particular, the natural world has been destroyed at a very fast rate in the south, in America as a whole, but particularly in the south. Because it was a more rural place, you could see the destruction of the natural environment more clearly there. So that is one aspect of the title reference and also Eden refers to an imagined place of perfection that may not have ever existed in reality. There is a tendency by some people to romanticize the past and to think of the past in the south as better or more perfect, and to want to reclaim that somehow, even though it may not have really existed. So the book uses an ecocritical approach to study four southern authors, all of them writing during the Great Depression: Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. So I use ecocritical and also historical approaches to look at how the Great Depression affected those authors’ portrayals of nature and the environment in their fiction.

Li: You have just mentioned that in the final part of this book, you have made a study on the post-pastoral perspective of William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*. Could you please introduce your main view and how it is reflected in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*?

Rieger: In the book as a whole, I talk about how the pastoral originally in southern literature is seen as a balanced middle ground, between the city and wilderness. So in older southern literature, traditional pastoral versions had a farm or the plantation as a pastoral space where these competing forces were balanced. It was a kind of paradise in that sense. But as we get into the Great Depression era, there is so much environmental devastation and destruction that the plantation and farm now come to be seen as very problematic places, and authors are not willing to look at those places in the same ways as previous authors were. So even though these new authors still use versions of the pastoral, the pastoral middle ground moves from the farm and plantation closer to the actual wilderness, in order to achieve or hope to achieve that sense of balance, such as the balance between the human and the nature, or between technology and wilderness, or the urban and rural. The writers are still trying to use the pastoral mode to find that balance with the middle ground,

but the location of it has shifted.

Li: How do these changes in the pastoral relate to ecology?

Rieger: I think that you see in this time period of the 1930s and 1940s that these southern authors put more emphasis, for instance, on cooperation, collective action, and interdependence among people and between people and their natural environment, so that a more interdependent and cooperative ecological model replaces a more individualistic and competitive model from the past. As I argue in the book, I think this is largely because of the effects of the Great Depression. For example, environmental disasters of the era, like floods, droughts, soil erosion, widespread logging, and a boll weevil infestation, illustrated to many people the ways that the human and natural worlds were interconnected.

Li: I have another question: I'm very interested in Faulkner's cultural setting. For instance, Faulkner's novels are set in *the* Bible belt. We know Christianity has also exerted very strong influence on Faulkner.

Rieger: That's true. Faulkner certainly was raised Christian. Later in life he was not necessarily a very devout churchgoer or devout Christian. But he knew the Bible very well. He often used story patterns or themes or motifs or character types from the Bible. In his fiction, there are a lot of references to the Bible, so I think it is helpful to understand Christianity and the Bible in order to understand Faulkner. However, Faulkner at times could be very critical of religion too. I don't think he was critical of religion itself, as much as he was critical of the ways that people sometimes use or misuse religion for their own purposes, so he could show the problems with doing that, just like with everything else. Faulkner was very willing to show problems with Christianity and religion.

Li: How about the issue of race? Even nowadays, for the black American, there are still some problems. So what do you think of the significance of Faulkner's writings in terms of this racial problem?

Rieger: Faulkner in some ways is very ahead of time when he writes about race. He shows us in *Light in August*, for instance, that race really has nothing to do with skin color, and so he is writing that book in early 1930s, and this is a topic that still gives people trouble today. But we still have many of those same racial issues in our society today, although they may take different forms now. So he still has something to teach us or something to say about contemporary American society.

Li: Ok, it still has a significant meaning today.

Rieger: There is a recent journal article that talked about connections between *Light in August* and Barack Obama, and his own personal story and the way that he has been treated by some groups in the country or media figures. So I think that is an interesting connection to the present.

Li: How about women's issue or gender issues? What is Faulkner's attitude towards women?

Rieger: Well, that is a good question, and there is still a quite bit of debate about Faulkner's women characters and how he presents women. So some people see a lot of problems what the way the presents his women characters, that he uses stereotypes, that he shows a very limited picture of women, but other people would argue that he has a lot of strong women characters, and he is showing us these very limited women characters. But he is doing so in order to point out the problems of male dominated culture or patriarchal culture, so that he showing us the realities but he is not necessarily agreeing with those realities that may be oppressive to women. Rather, he is showing us how difficult life is for women, that it is men who make it so difficult for women. So that is still a topic of debate: how we should view Faulkner's female character and Faulkner's own view about women.

Li: You delivered a speech on the comparative study of Faulkner and Mo Yan at the Faulkner & Yoknapatawpha Conference last year. I am glad to know you have showed an interest in Chinese contemporary writers. Now I'm doing a National Social Science Fund project on Faulkner's influence on contemporary Chinese writers, and also you have written one paper on that topic.

Rieger: Only one, so far, I will be very interested to see your work as well too.

Li: Hopefully later on we can cooperate and do some more studies in this field.

Rieger: Sounds good, I look forward to it.

Li: I have read your paper, which is very insightful. What do you find are the similarities and differences between the two writers? And what has caused you to do this kind of research?

Rieger: I think there are a lot of similarities between Mo Yan and Faulkner, their experimental narrative technique for one thing. They both use stream of consciousness techniques or they shift viewpoints a lot in the same story, and they move around in time a lot in their stories, so the past and the present are mixed

up together in the ways they tell their stories. My presentation last year at the conference was specifically about two novels, Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*.

Both those novels dealt with war and civil war, particularly, so I am interested in how they both portray war in their home territories, civil war, particularly. And there are a lot of similarities. In particular, I think they have very similar relationships with the past. Both authors seem to be very critical of the past and to look at the past with a critical eye, and they want to tell the truth about the past, where others have covered up the truth. But yet, both of them also retain a dialectical view of the past in some ways, and there is something very positive and appealing about the past to them as well. So in my presentation I talked about how figures from the past in both novels take on legendary status almost. And people in the present can never hope to measure up to these legendary figures of the past. Even though they are very critical of the past, both authors see the present as smaller and less significant than the past. The past is full of giant and mythical figures, deeds, and stories, and the present is very small and uninteresting by comparison, at least in their characters' minds. So, I think both of the authors have that ambivalent relationship with the past: they don't like it and they want criticize it in some ways, but they are still attracted to it.

Li: As you have mentioned in your paper, that is a complex attitude which reflects the two enchantments and disenchantment with the past.

Rieger: Yes, exactly. Both opposite feelings at same time are present.

Li: I found your views about strong women also very interesting.

Rieger: Yes, that is another interesting comparison. Because both stories are set far in the past from when the writers are writing them, both of them project very strong female characters backward into the past who are more brave and better equipped to deal with the war in some way than the male characters. Some male characters are very dishonorable in the war setting. But each of these authors uses a strong female character who is a real leader of the people in both novels, and these women are very dedicated to their families, showing loyalty, courage, strength, and bravery.

Li: At the beginning of your talk, you mentioned that your center, hosts visiting scholars every year, including visiting scholars From China and Japan?

Rieger: We have quite a few Chinese visiting scholars who have come in the last 10 years. Usually there are an average of two or three Chinese scholars every year, who come and stay with us, sometimes just for few weeks, sometimes for an entire year,

and they are very interested in Faulkner and interested in the way we teach literature and writing. They have other interests besides Faulkner, too, sometimes that bring them here. We also have quite a few Japanese scholars. We have annual program with a local company here in town, called Biokyowa. Biokyowa has an office in Japan and a factory in Cape Girardeau, and this Japanese-American company helps us to pay for a Japanese scholar to come over once a year for about two weeks and do research in our collection. At our conferences, we have scholars from Japan and China, Canada, Nigeria, Australia, and France come to present their work. Just in the last year, we have had a visiting scholar from the University of Dubai, who came for several weeks and do some research while, and we got scholars visiting from all around country. We also have graduate students and scholars who come to use our collection for particular projects. They are working on books, dissertations, or articles, and that has been great for us to have different people to come to visit us here and use our resources.

Li: Just now you mentioned so many scholars from all over the world visiting your center. Could you please share your comments on Faulkner from an international perspective?

Rieger: It's interesting that Faulkner appeals to so many people from different parts of the world. Because sometimes in the United States, people do still think of Faulkner as a southern writer, but I think that is a limited way to view him. I think Faulkner's popularity in so many other countries prove that he has appeal that is not just a regional appeal or even just a national appeal. He writes about topics that people anywhere can identify with, the gender issue, for instance, or the community and the individual, past and present, how they clash. People everywhere can identify with a lot of those themes.

Li: Thank you very much for sharing you insights of Faulkner. You are warmly welcome to visit China to give lectures on Faulkner and on the comparative study on Faulkner and Chinese writers.

Rieger: Alright, I'll see you in China.

Li: I look forward to that day. Thank you very much.

Annotation: Special thanks to my postgraduate student Yangyan who helped edit the recording interview.

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