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Torture, Interrogation, and American Modernist Literature*

CALEB SMITH**

Our thinking about interrogation is full of contradictions. For some, it means a form of research or "intelligence-gathering"; interrogation is part of the dirty work of policing and war, disclosing critical secrets that can save lives and preserve order. For others, so-called interrogation is a false premise for torture, an excessive use of sovereign force outside the bounds of the law. One side holds that interrogation reveals the vital truth, the other that it destroys the victim's very capacity for confession, producing unreliable statements or the nonsensical utterances of the body in pain. "Physical pain," Elaine Scarry writes in her classic account, "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[1] If the regime was really seeking intelligence, such critics maintain, it would not indulge in the excess of torture.

If violent interrogation does not really extract useful intelligence, what is its use? Some have argued that torture, rather than exposing previously hidden truths, generates new ones. As the philosopher Paul Kahn contends in *Sacred Violence*, the "explanation" of torture "can be achieved only by examining the manner in which violence creates and sustains political meaning."[2] Torture is a ritual through which the political community reconstitutes itself by spectacularly humiliating and destroying an enemy. Perhaps, then, the torture enacted in places like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib is not exceptional but continuous with a longer history of legal and extralegal violence carried out by American regimes. Hazel Carby, reflecting on the Abu Ghraib scandal, sees it this way:

> The pictures of the tortured bodies of Iraqis [at Abu Ghraib], rather than being unique or novel, are the direct

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1. ELAINE SCARRY, THE BODY IN PAIN: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE WORLD 4 (1985).

2. PAUL W. KAHN, SACRED VIOLENCE: TORTURE, TERROR, AND SOVEREIGNTY 4 (2008).

> descendants of the postcards of lynched black bodies [from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries] . . . . The digital form . . . is new, but the message they are designed to convey is as old as racism itself: this is material evidence of the wielding of power, of the performance of conquest over an enemy.

In the images of both lynching and contemporary torture, Carby observes "a consciously staged and highly ritualized performance" of racial domination.[3]

Carby's reading of these ritualized performances alludes to a major tradition of critical thinking about racist violence in the United States. Perhaps the most famous study is Orlando Patterson's *Rituals of Blood*, which analyzes certain highly formalized scenes of antiblack mob violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Connecting lynching to the ceremonial killing practiced by "primitive" societies, Patterson describes the post-Civil War South as a society going through an "extreme, total transition," a traumatic passage from slavery to "a new form of society," and responding to the shock of that "transition" by enacting an ancient ritual of human sacrifice.[4] Such a ritual, according to Patterson, is a repetition of something ancient that marks a passage into a new age.

To denounce lynching as a regression to savagery, then, is only half right: we must also grasp its relationship to the beginning of an uncertain modernity. In *A Spectacular Secret*, Jacqueline Goldsby goes so far as to argue that "lynching thrived not in spite of but because of modernity's effects"; "anti-black mob murders," she writes, "flourished as registers of the nation's ambivalence attending its nascent modernism."[5] Goldsby attends to the ways in which the social function of violence has been made and remade by media, technologies, and contexts of reception. Enacted before mass audiences, documented, and circulated in such relatively new media as photography and audio-recording, lynching contributed to the formation of a new, modernist public sphere and collective psyche.

Carby analyzes the forms of racist ritual common to lynching and the War on Terror; Goldsby discerns the emergence of a distinctly modernist media culture around lynching in the early twentieth century. Combining their insights, we can begin to perceive a common field of spectacular, highly mediated ritual violence, which includes both lynching and interro-

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3. Hazel Carby, *A Strange and Bitter Crop*, OPENDEMOCRACY.NET, Oct. 10, 2004, http://www.opendemocracy.net/media-abu_ghraib/article_2149.jsp.

4. ORLANDO PATTERSON, RITUALS OF BLOOD: CONSEQUENCES OF SLAVERY IN TWO AMERICAN CENTURIES 185 (1998).

5. JACQUELINE GOLDSBY, A SPECTACULAR SECRET: LYNCHING IN AMERICAN LIFE AND LITERATURE 24-25 (2006).

gation. The virtue of this expanded view is not only that it reveals the prehistory or cultural genealogy of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. If our contemporary images of torture descend from the lynching pictures of the modernist period, we might also begin to see some of today's defining contradictions—about the relations among law and brute force, knowledge and power—in modernism's depictions of torture. Indeed, we might even discover, in such works, ways of thinking through these problems that, for one reason or another, have since dropped out of our critical vocabulary. For instance, contemporary critics have insisted that the ritual reconstitution of the imperiled community, not the gathering of intelligence, is the true aim of torture. But some modernists approached the problem from the opposite direction, asking something haunting that today's theorists have struggled to answer: if the regime really wants to torture, why does it continue to pose questions?

In 1931, a committee of legal reformers published *The Third Degree*, a report on violent police practices throughout the United States. The authors defined their subject as "the employment of methods which inflict suffering . . . upon a person in order to obtain information about a crime." Their task, they observed, was a difficult one. The early twentieth-century police claimed to have abandoned the brutalities of the past for the scientific methods of modernity. Thus, New York's Chief of Detectives had written in 1924 that "as civilization advances the third degree decreases." In an age that defined its modernity against the cruelty and superstitions of the past, the third degree had become "a secret and illegal practice."[6]

The following year, 1932, William Faulkner published *Light in August*, his novel about the education, crimes, and death of the racially ambiguous Joe Christmas.[7] Often read as a southern writer's reflection on lynching, the novel also includes an overlooked scene of police interrogation in which a sheriff and his deputies question an unnamed black witness while lashing him with a belt. Inside a cabin on the grounds of a ruined plantation, the old ritual of lynching meets the modern "secret" of interrogation.

In the rest of this brief essay, I explore the complex connections between rituals of domination and practices of inquiry in Faulkner's novel. Early twentieth century United States culture, of course, includes a complex archive of works representing extralegal violence, from Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" to detective fiction and film noir. I have chosen *Light in August* not just for its depiction of interrogation but for its distinctive poetics. Thematically, the novel is crucially concerned with the problem of be-

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6. ZECHARIAH CHAFEE, JR., WALTER H. POLLAK & CARL S. STERN, THE THIRD DEGREE 19, 21, 43 (1969).

7. WILLIAM FAULKNER, LIGHT IN AUGUST (Vintage International 1990) (1932).

lief—with how we apprehend the truth through the overlapping patterns of faith, ideology, observation, reason, and memory. Aesthetically, it depends on an opposition between motion and stasis, the progressive development of narrative and the circularity and repetitions of other especially visual forms; as the literary critic Richard P. Adams demonstrated long ago, the "total impression" made by *Light in August* is "aroused by the tension between the motion and the stoppage" of its opposing images.[8] These thematic and poetic patterns are crystallized in the novel's most famous line: "Memory believes before knowing remembers,"[9] where the problem of belief is wedded to a grammar of time that is both linear and circular.

I wish to suggest that Faulkner's novel, applying these aesthetic patterns to the scene of interrogation, implies an unusual analysis of the relationship between torture and questioning. Behind this claim is the methodological premise that the kind of formalist thinking suited to literary modernism does not always lead away from the real world of power and struggle. Instead, in its own way, it can contribute to the conceptual understanding of power that is central not only to cultural studies but also to sociologists like Patterson and legal thinkers like Kahn. Modernist poetics might even provide abstract alternatives to the ethical models that sentimentalize certain forms of suffering and pathologize certain forms of cruelty, a kind of thinking that is itself deeply bound up with the long history of torture.

Light in August's central character is Joe Christmas, an orphan who feels that the secret of his "black blood" is shaping his destiny. Fleeing the home of his rigidly ascetic adoptive parents, he descends into a life of petty crime and short-term affairs. One day he drifts into the town of Jefferson, where he finds work at the mill, sets up a bootlegging business, and, in time, becomes the lover of Joanna Burden, an outcast living alone in an old plantation house. After several nightmarish encounters, Christmas kills her in her bed. The people of Jefferson are drawn to the scene by the smoke billowing up from the burning mansion. Against the backdrop of the flames, the search for the murderer begins.

Right away, the assembled crowd starts to write the script of a lynching. Faulkner describes them as people who "believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime . . . and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravaged too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward."[10] The series of verbs—knew, believed, hoped—descends from certainty to fantasy; the public's knowledge of the crime expresses their unconscious desires and the patterns they have learned from the culture of lynching. Some of the men, Faulkner goes on, "with pistols already

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8. RICHARD P. ADAMS, FAULKNER: MYTH AND MOTION 95 (1968).
9. FAULKNER, *supra* note 7, at 119.
10. *Id.* at 288.

in their pockets began to canvass about for someone to crucify."[11] Lurching toward mob violence, the crowd seems to revert to the primitive condition described by Patterson, looking at the flames "with that same dull and static amaze which they had brought down from the old fetid caves where knowing began."[12]

As if in opposition to this mass of unseeing urges, Faulkner introduces a figure of law and order: "The sheriff came up and looked . . . once and then sent the body away, hiding the poor thing from their eyes."[13] The "dull and static" collective mind of the onlookers meets the observing, humane consciousness of the sheriff; they are caught up in an old dream, but he is trying to compose a new plot from the facts he can gather. For the crowd, the fire is a mesmerizing force. For the lawman, it is an obstacle to empirical detective work: "The sheriff," Faulkner writes, "stared at the flames with exasperation . . . , since there was no scene to investigate."[14]

Briefly the sheriff stands, like the mob, idly peering into the blaze—but then a clue presents itself: "a deputy came up and told how he had discovered in a cabin beyond the house, traces of recent occupation."[15] The sheriff asks who lives in the cabin. "I didn't know anybody did," the deputy answers, "Niggers, I reckon."[16] This speculation is enough to move the sheriff to begin his investigation. "Get me a nigger," he says.[17] Even as the passage sets up an opposition between the unthinking crowd, preparing to enact a ritual sacrifice, and the more reasonable and civilized sheriff, the opposition begins to break down. Each grasps blindly for an "anonymous negro."

The lawmen detain a man, lead him into the cabin, and close the door. Outside, the public can only imagine what is happening in the cabin. Inside, though, what unfolds looks a lot like the old practices of slave discipline: "the negro did not look back; there came only into his face when the strap fell across his back a wince, sudden, sharp, fleet, jerking up the corners of his mouth and exposing his momentary teeth like smiling. Then his face smoothed again, inscrutable."[18] As the belt strikes the victim's back, what is revealed is not the answer to the sheriff's question, "Who lives in the cabin?", but the "momentary" evidence of physical pain followed by a meaningless, "inscrutable" look.

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11. *Id.* at 289.
12. *Id.* at 288.
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.* at 290.
15. FAULKNER, *supra* note 7, at 290.
16. *Id.* at 291.
17. *Id.*
18. *Id.* at 292.

A brief, ambiguous exchange suggests that the detained man has not really been chosen at random after all: "I don't even live nowhere near here," he says. "[Deputy] Buford ought to know where I stay at."[19] The detained man has begun to answer the wrong question, to disclose the wrong secret. The sheriff threatens him by mentioning the crowd outside, anxious for blood. Then the strap falls again, "the buckle raking across the negro's back. 'You remember yet?'"[20] At this point, Faulkner seems almost to have dismantled the distinction between ritualized torture and police detection. The reader has no reason to believe that the detained man knows anything about the crime. He has been chosen because of his race and handled with eager brutality because of a private grudge. The interrogation has become a lynching behind closed doors.

It is startling, then, that in the next paragraph the torture victim answers the question: "'It's two white men,' the negro said. . . . 'You can whup the blood outen me. But that's all I know.'"[21] Suddenly, the novel seems to affirm that violent interrogation actually works. The detained man's psychic defenses have been broken down. His voice is no longer defiant; it is "cold, not sullen, not anything." The reader is uncertain here about the truth of the witness's statement since Joe Christmas's whiteness is one of the central mysteries of the story, but as far as we can tell, he is telling exactly as much as he can.

The scene concludes with one final revelation. An unidentified "third man" in the cabin says, "It's that fellow Christmas, that used to work at the mill, and another fellow named Brown. . . . You could have picked out any man in Jefferson that his breath smelled right and he could have told you that much."[22] At least one of the men involved in the interrogation, it seems, has known the answer to the question from the beginning. Torture overcomes the victim's resistance and compels his confession, but what it reveals is something the torturers already know—or could have learned by asking anyone with whiskey on his breath. "I reckon that's right," the sheriff says, and the scene concludes. The lawmen go on in search of the "two white men." The reader is left with the sense that the interrogation has been nothing but a ritual of domination. The police already know the answer, but they use the question as a pretense for the gratuitous infliction of pain. The white agents of power, disturbed by the crime and by the incineration of one of their proudest symbols, the antebellum mansion, resort to the old violence of slave discipline and reconstitute their own supremacy.

19. *Id.*
20. *Id.* at 293.
21. FAULKNER, *supra* note 7, at 293.
22. *Id.*

Still, the question lingers. Why, even removed from the public eye, do the lawmen obsessively ask the detained man for information as they beat him? Why do they keep posing the question as they wield the lash? Scarry offers one kind of explanation. The search for "intelligence," she argues, is a "false motive" for torture, but it is not simply a "rationalization." Questioning allows the torturers to feel that it is they, not the victim, who are suffering. They can deny the victim's pain by insisting on their own desperate need to hear the confession that he hurts them by withholding. Without this reversal, Scarry assumes, sympathy would intervene: "to allow the reality of the other's suffering to enter his own consciousness," Scarry writes, "would immediately compel [the torturer] to stop the torture."[23]

Scarry explains the persistence of questioning as neither the methodical pursuit of intelligence nor a flimsy excuse for the infliction of pain. Yet, her account depends on assumptions about human nature that seem dubious in the context of the violence she is describing. What Scarry calls the "natural reflex of sympathy,"[24] apparently drawn from Adam Smith, belongs to the post-Enlightenment project of differentiating among the forms of violence, deciding which are acceptable and which are not, and thus developing the ideologies of modernity and the human.[25] It is a normative ideal, and there is no reason to assume that torturers' hearts and minds conform to it. In any case, the natural sympathy invoked by Scarry will not quite explain what is happening in the cabin in *Light in August*.

For Faulkner, the question has a function related not to the moral psychology of the torturer but to the temporality of ritual violence. The question places torture within a narrative; the ostensible search for information about the past allows torture to orient itself toward a future: the confession elicited in the cabin will lead to another detention and another interrogation, and so on. Thus, interrogation becomes not merely a repetition but a stage in the ongoing and expansive exercise of power. It gives the regime a direction in which to move and new subjects to pursue, detain, and overmaster. The truth or falsity of the confession is of minor concern. The crucial thing is that questioning transforms torture from a repetition into a threshold, leading indefinitely into the future.

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23. SCARRY, *supra* note 1, at 57.

24. *Id.* at 58.

25. Here I follow the critique of Scarry, and of sentimental oppositions to cruelty in general, developed by Talal Asad in TALAL ASAD, FORMATIONS OF THE SECULAR: CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, MODERNITY 100-24 (2003). I will explore these problems in greater detail in the expanded article-length version of this piece.