

MEASURING FAULKNER'S TALL CONVICT

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Since its publication in 1939, critical discussions of *The Wild Palms* have tended to focus primarily on the novel's unique double nature. Because it is composed of alternating chapters from two seemingly unrelated narratives—"The Wild Palms," the tragic love story of Charlotte and Harry, and "Old Man," the account of the tall convict's epic battle with the raging Mississippi River—the preponderance of criticism has addressed this bewildering duality, attempting to find unity in apparent diversity.¹ Fruitful and necessary as such comparative studies have been, the search for parallels has, I think, led critics to examine the protagonist of "Old Man," the tall convict, in an unfavorable light. For the most part, critics have had little praise for the convict, maintaining that while Harry and Charlotte triumph over convention and sacrifice all to achieve perfect freedom, the tall convict throws away his freedom and sacrifices himself on the altar of convention.² But to read "Old Man" as the story of a dull-witted countryman's ignoble preference for captivity to freedom is, I think, to misunderstand Faulkner's narrative. What the tall convict steadfastly repudiates is not freedom, but the failure to meet his allotted obligations. Whereas Charlotte and Harry cut all ties and shirk all worldly responsibilities in an effort to find absolute freedom in which to love, the tall convict surrenders freedom in order to meet his worldly responsibilities. If Harry and Charlotte are the high priest and priestess of love and freedom, the convict serves equally faithfully the opposite values—order and responsibility.

The tall convict's virtues do not shine brightly; thus, they are easily neglected, especially by critics intent on comparing him to Harry and Charlotte. In order to assess him accurately, it is necessary, I think, to examine him within the context of his own chaotic, primitive world, a world in which he attempts valiantly to bring order. Studies which juxtapose the convict with Harry and Charlotte have had an unfortunate by-product—they have encouraged critics to fasten on the convict's weaknesses and, to some extent, to ignore his strengths. By measuring the tall convict within the framework of his own story, we can

achieve a fuller appreciation of this enigmatic character, whose consciousness is foreign to modern sensibilities, but who nevertheless merits respect for his unflagging pursuit of values which are monumentally important in his barbaric environment: responsibility and order.

Critics have repeatedly chided the tall convict for turning his back on freedom.³ But "Old Man" is not about the rejection of freedom, but about the rejection of a weak, cowardly, and illicit escape. The convict respects authority and cherishes his own integrity; thus he will not run away. Although the society punishing him is corrupt, and the natural world which surrounds him seems to be senseless, the convict means to live up to his own standards: he will not flee, nor will he shed his responsibilities. He has been given a prison sentence by society, and he intends to serve his allotted time. Likewise, he has been entrusted with a boat and given a task, to find a woman in a cypress tree and a man on top of a cotton house and to return with them and the boat. Even though it entails fighting the raging river, the convict meets this obligation. Seven weeks after his departure, he returns with the boat and the woman, and apologizes for having failed to locate the man on the cotton house.

Throughout "Old Man" the tall convict is presented as a kind of knight, who pits his strength and endurance against the primordial forces of nature. Like a medieval knight, he protects his lady and struggles not only with the monstrous flood, but also with another kind of monster—the alligator, "the sauric protagonist"⁴ of a strange land. Faulkner continually uses the language of chivalric romance, "durance" (p. 149) and "craggy pinnacle or dragoned keep" (p. 149), to describe the convict's adventures.⁵ Like a medieval knight who fights for order in a barbaric and terrifying terrain, the convict is lost in a primitive world and is himself a standard-bearer of order. Above all, like the medieval knight, the tall convict is a man of honor.⁶ He would like to rid himself of the woman with whom he has been burdened, and he could have easily done so by putting her "back into another tree at any time" (p. 161), but he refuses to evade his responsibility. As he continually reiterates, he will only shed this encumbrance when he can do it "the right way" (p. 161), the lawful, honorable way.

It is because the convict is an honorable man that he cannot comply when the man with the gun asks him to remove his prison garb as the price of admission to the boat: "He had been refused so little, had wanted so little, asked for so little, yet there had been demanded of him in return the one price out of all breath which (they must have known) if he could have paid it, he would not have been where he was, asking what he asked" (p. 169). The convict cannot remove his prison stripes because to do so would be to evade his responsibility to his prison sentence. He cares for and protects his prison garments, not because he loves captivity, but because to shirk one's responsibilities to the established order is to contribute to chaos. The tall convict has his own ethos, and he refuses to bend the rules. In prison he had established "his

good name, his responsibility not only toward those who were responsible toward him but to himself, his own honor in the doing of what was asked of him, his pride in being able to do it, no matter what it was" (p. 166). Although unable to articulate the thought, the convict knows that unless men can rely on one another the world is utterly chaotic and human existence meaningless.

The tall convict has good cause to attach enormous importance to human responsibility; his past experiences have taught him the painful consequences of irresponsibility. To some extent, the convict is a prisoner because those whom he had trusted failed him. The convict had believed the detective novels he had read, taking the writers of the pulp fiction at their word, "accepting information on which they placed the stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity" (p. 23), following their directions which "on actual application proved to be impractical and (to the convict) criminally false" (p. 23). Later, in prison, musing on this injustice, the convict believes the writers of the detective novels are guilty of a crime, "using the mails to defraud" (p. 24); for he believes he has been defrauded by them of "liberty and honor and pride" (p. 24). As a man who respects authority, the tall convict had followed his printed authority to the letter. But when he had tried to rob a train according to the directions given in the paper novels, using a lantern and black handkerchief purchased from the *Detective Gazette*, the directions and equipment had proved miserably inadequate. He had been captured immediately; and in prison he muses with raging impotence at the men who had published false and unreliable information. Nevertheless, he refuses to fail others as he has been failed. He, at least, will obey the rules; he will return and serve the full term of his prison sentence.

Faulkner is not, however, suggesting that prison provides the only order in a chaotic universe. In the untamed world of the tall convict, order is created only by human conduct, by men obeying the rules, not by prisons. The evils of prison are clearly presented in "Old Man." Faulkner's convicts have been conditioned by abject servitude to act like beasts, even to think of themselves as beasts. The prisoners stand out in the rain, while furniture is sheltered—an implicit acknowledgement of their own worthlessness. Like animals, the prisoners eat in the rain, are "herded" (p. 68), and "would no more have thought of asking where they were than they would have asked why and what for" (p. 70). Shackled and willless, the convicts are no longer men; they have been dehumanized by their servitude: "They crawled in on all fours, like dogs into cramped kennels, and settled down" (p. 72). With such language, Faulkner makes clear what slavery can do to a man. Robbed of their volition, the men are reduced, demeaned, and degraded; eventually, they are indistinguishable from animals or even objects.

This is the life to which the tall convict returns. He does so, however, not because he prefers slavery to freedom, but because he respects the rules. During his seven-week adventure, the convict has experienced the alternative to law and order—chaos. Set adrift on the raging flood, he has observed lawless,

licentious nature. The uncontrolled flood, the roiling expanse wild and invisible with apparently no boundaries, is nature doing "what it liked to do" (p. 160). During the flood all manmade order is suspended and the convict finds himself face to face with unmanageable nature, before which he is helpless. The flood viciously spins his boat about as he flails impotently, utterly lost in a world gone wild. He is wrong about his speed, wrong about his direction, and wrong about the distance he has come. Eventually the convict realizes that this state of willfulness and unmanageability is not a temporary aberration but rather the river's, and nature's, normal state, while "the intervening years during which it consented to bear upon its placid and sleepy bosom the frail mechanicals of man's clumsy contriving was the phenomenon" (p. 160). Exposed to this wild, chaotic willfulness, the convict chooses its opposite: the rules, manmade order. In an effort to keep at bay the flux inherent in nature, the convict returns to prison, fulfilling his bargain with society.

It is important to understand, however, that although the tall convict chooses to reject freedom, he ardently longs to remain free. Stopping at various ports to make enough money to continue the long river trip back to the penitentiary, the convict learns the satisfaction of work performed not as on the penal farm, as a slave, but as a free man. Like the other prisoners, the tall convict had been completely indifferent to prison labor, not caring if he planted pebbles or weeded papier mâché crops because he was forced to toil and because the land the convicts "farmed and the substance they produced from it belonged neither to them who worked it nor to those who forced them at guns' points to do so" (p. 30). But now, earning his own living as a free man, whether cutting wood or killing alligators, the convict remembers again the satisfaction of honest and free labor: "He thought quietly, with a kind of bemused amazement, *Yes. I reckon I had done forgot how good making money was. Being let to make it*" (pp. 261-62). It is because of this newly rediscovered joy in free labor that the tall convict refuses to leave his refuge in the Louisiana swamps. When his Cajan partner departs, the convict realizes that he is not to be allowed to stay in this wasteland where he has experienced freedom. But he refuses to leave until, manacled hand and foot, he is carried away from the "citadel" (p. 270) where he had found the "very crux and dear breath of his life—the being allowed to work and earn money, that right and privilege which he believed he had earned to himself unaided, asking no favor of anyone or anything save the right to be let alone to pit his will and strength against the sauric protagonist of a land, a region which he had not asked to be projected into" (p. 270). Ironically, the men who remove him from the bayou outpost save his life, but take away his freedom.

In the end, the convict sacrifices the freedom which had given his life meaning and returns himself to servitude. In a sense, this act of return is an act of self-immolation on the altar of civilization. When, back at Parchman, the convict is told that ten years will be added to his sentence for his alleged attempt

to escape, the convict responds significantly: "'All right. . . . If that's the rule'" (p. 331). With these words, the convict expresses his willingness to pay the price (in this case, more years of servitude) for order. Order is only bought at a great cost: and that cost is adherence to the rules. Having once broken the rules, the convict is ready to pay the price, however unjust, to advance the cause of civilization in its battle with chaos. The great shame and irony of Faulkner's "Old Man" is that the civilization for which the convict surrenders his personal freedom is itself corrupt and unworthy of his heroic self-sacrifice.

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NOTES

- 1 Representative examples of such studies include Joseph J. Moldenhauer's "Unity of Theme and Structure in *The Wild Palms*," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), pp. 305-22; Carolyn Reeves's "The Wild Palms: Faulkner's Chaotic Cosmos," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 20 (Summer 1967), 148-62; and Thomas L. McHaney's *William Faulkner's The Wild Palms: A Study* (Jackson: The Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1975).
- 2 For example, Thomas L. McHaney, in *William Faulkner's The Wild Palms: A Study*, writes that "the tall convict has been able to have for free an essentially better, though slightly comic, version of everything that Harry and Charlotte must fight and suffer and fail to get. And he turns his back every time" (p. 152). In *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), Cleanth Brooks expresses a somewhat similar view: "The Convict obviously gives up too easily and accepts too tamely his insulated life as a prisoner. He is the burnt child who forever after dreads the fire. . . . His return to prison for ten more years does indeed represent, to use Harry's word, a waste" (p. 228). And Michael Millgate, in *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), calls the tall convict's indomitability "the product of a monumental lack of imagination" and his dogged pursuit of tasks as less a matter of "determination than obsessive need, and more of stupidity than either" (p. 177).
- 3 Thomas L. McHaney writes that the tall convict "turns his back on life and retreats into prison" (p. 155).
- 4 William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 270. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.
- 5 McHaney, p. 114, notes the appearance of chivalric diction in "Old Man," but concludes that Faulkner's purpose in using this unusual vocabulary is to create another link between the two tales.
- 6 Brooks, p. 223, observes that throughout "Old Man" the tall convict is motivated by his personal code of honor.

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