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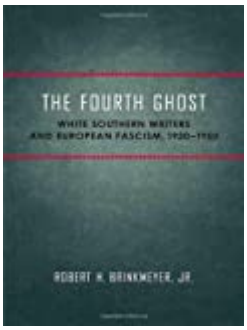

Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950.* Southern Literary Studies Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. xv + 413 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3383-5.

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The Fascist-Haunted South

In response to a question about Percy Grimm, the vigilante responsible for the lynching of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, William Faulkner remarked that he had created a Nazi Storm Trooper before he had even heard of one.[1] For Faulkner, even if we take the comment with the healthy grain of salt required when considering his statements about his own writing, the rendering of Grimm as a proto-fascist is arguably a case in which, to borrow a phrase from the narrator of *Light in August*, âmemory believes before knowing remembers.â[2] Whatever the case, Faulknerâs remark acknowledges the spectral influence of fascism on a major work of southern fiction. In this process, the explosive mix of violence and theories of racial purity informing fascism imbue the literary text with implications that reach far beyond its pages and, at the same time, transgress the borders traditionally drawn to delineate âsouthern literatureâ as a distinctive, regionally determined genre. Along these lines, Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr., in a compelling and comprehensive study, *The Fourth Ghost*, assumes the role of scholarly âGhostbuster,â if you will, capturing manifestations of the fascist specter in a host of works by southern writers and holding them up for scrutiny. The fundamental aim of this endeavor is to support a bold claim: that European fascism indelibly shaped how southern writers understood southern society and culture and, as a consequence, exerted a profound influence on their writing–sometimes directly, but more often than not as a haunting force. Brinkmeyer lays out his case meticulously and, by the end of the study, quite convincingly. As a result, he delivers a major scholarly contribution–one that productively advances the line of critical inquiry into the notion of âthe global Southâ in the context of the New Southern Studies.

The bookâs title derives from an observation in Lillian Smithâs *Killers of the Dream* (1949) about three segregation âghostsâ haunting white southerners. To Smithâs list–including the black woman with whom the white man often had sex, the child resulting from such sexual relations, and the mammy first loved by the white child but later rejected–Brinkmeyer adds a âfourth ghost ... looming alongsideâ the others: European fascism

(pp. 1, 3). With anxieties about miscegenation framing Smithâs spectral roster, Brinkmeyerâs addition seems entirely reasonable, steeped as fascism is in the ideology of racial purity. The metaphor serves Brinkmeyerâs argument well, enabling him to trace the ghostly presence on a spectrum that runs from the explicit (passages from letters, memoirs, novels, and reportage in which writers address fascism per se) to the implicit (motifs, themes, and elements of characterization interpreted as responsive to fascismâs influence). Taking Brinkmeyerâs painstaking scholarship as a whole, one cannot help but come away from this provocative study with the sense that, to adapt Flannery OâConnorâs observation, while the South viewed in its scope is hardly fascist-centered, it is most certainly fascist-haunted.

Although the study does sacrifice depth to breadth at times, Brinkmeyer is able to cover ample ground in pursuit of the âfourth ghost.â After an economical and constructive introduction that lays the critical foundation expertly, he offers an illuminating reassessment of the Nashville Agrarians, revealing how the cadreâs movement got caught up in a tangled web of political rhetoric that formed when the European fascist threat was met with a revival of democratic values in America. Brinkmeyer demonstrates how Agrarian ideas and dubious intellectual associations (for example, with the American fascist sympathizer Seward Collins, editor of the *American Review*) left the group open to charges by critics in the North and the South that its prevailing conception of âsouthern traditionalismâ was in many respects aligned with fascism. As a result, Brinkmeyer convincingly supports his claim that âthe long shadow of Fascist allegations, together with the nationâs mounting fervor of patriotic nationalism against the Fascist enemy, played a large part in the Agrariansâ undoing and particularly affected the literary careers of three of its leaders, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tateâ (p. 25). In the next chapter, Brinkmeyer examines W. J. Cash, noting how his intellectual differences with the Agrarians bring the fascist specter into more visible relief. In particular, Cashâs concept of the âsavage ideal,â which takes on added critical edge in the context of Brinkmeyerâs focus on fascism, angered Davidson, because it asserted a tangible connection between southern traditionalism and âa tightly bound system of repression and tabooâ not unlike a fascist social order (p. 49). With these two chapters in place, a pattern emerges in Brinkmeyerâs findings, as he sums up in the coda: on the one hand, the âtraditionalist configurationâ asserted that âthe tall men of the South stand opposed to the small men of modernity, the faceless masses created by the modern industrial state, which in its final evolution was the Fascist stateâ; on the other hand, âwriters who found disturbing parallels between Fascism and southern culture emphasized, not the premodern nature of southern traditionalism, but its modernity, manifested in its authoritarian control of its citizensâ (pp. 310, 311).

For Brinkmeyer, the Nashville Agrarians and William Alexander Percy held fast to the âtraditionalist configuration,â their ruminations about the supposed harmony of agrarian social order (whether idealized as exemplary or stoically mourned in passing) ironically tinged with elements of coercion and repression found in Adolf Hitlerâs Germany and Benito Mussoliniâs Italy. Like Cash, Brinkmeyer argues, Lillian Smith, Carson McCullers, and Lillian Hellman perceived southern traditionalism as a means of masking aspects of Jim Crow society that aligned southern white supremacy with European fascism, exploring the ominous implications of this connection in various forms–social and cultural commentary, fiction, and drama. For the other writers that Brinkmeyer examines, the relationship with the two opposing forces was more malleable, marked by shifting allegiances and, in turn, artistic and political transformations. Arguing, for example, that âno southern writer was influenced as deeply as Thomas Wolfe by the rise of Nazi Germany,â Brinkmeyer documents the authorâs journey (both introspective and geographical) from enthusiastic Germanophile to âchastenedâ realist in the face of Hitlerâs mounting atrocities (p. 146). For Katherine Anne Porter, as Brinkmeyer illustrates, the pendulum swung in the other direction, as her time in Germany in the 1930s influenced her initially to become a vociferous critic of fascism and, as close kin, southern traditionalism, only to wind up late in her career a determined and at times authoritarian advocate of the very southern traditionalist mindset that she had earlier critiqued. Brinkmeyerâs treatment of Faulkner is cogent as well, asserting primarily via examination of short stories published in the early 1940s that the authorâs âanti-Fascist positions ... eventually not only worked their way thematically into his fiction but also guided the aesthetic choices he made in constructing that fictionâ (p. 176). Thus, in Brinkmeyerâs view, the Faulkner who was branded by leftist critics in the 1930s as leaning fascist actually followed the path of anti-fascism toward a strident defense of democracy during World War II and âa new, socially responsible visionâ of what an artist should be (p. 177).

Brinkmeyer concludes his book with a coda that

moves beyond the timeframe of 1930-50, hitting much closer to home, as it were. In the coda, Brinkmeyer offers insightful readings of Walker Percyâs *Lancelot* (1977) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) and William Styronâs *Sophieâs Choice* (1979) to make the case that âthe specter of Fascism and its relevance to understanding the South never entirely dissipatedâ (p. 312). In each of these works, as Brinkmeyer suggests, fierce advocacy of southern traditionalism has the effect of invoking the fascist ghost. It is worth noting, for the purposes of testing the relevance of Brinkmeyerâs study beyond the parameters of southern literary studies, that this phenomenon remains prevalent in American culture even to this day. Consider, for example, Ron Paulâs response in the 2008 Republican presidential primary to video footage of former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee defending southern-fried family values with a cross in the backdrop. Paul quoted Sinclair Lewisâs charge, âWhen fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross,â which reflected a prevailing view in the 1930s that fascism would come marching from the South. The line, taken from Lewisâs anti-fascist satirical novel *It Canât Happen Here* (1935), resurfaced on bumper stickers in the wake of Paulâs comment. The roots of Paulâs seemingly superficial observation run historically and culturally deep, though, and Brinkmeyerâs study performs the important work of helping to uncover them to a significant degree. As Brinkmeyer skillfully reveals, fascism, in effect, did come to America, albeit in the form of a haunting presence that vexed and possessed, frightened and fascinated, the most influential and celebrated white southern writers, and, in so doing, reinforced the ties that bound and continue to bind Old South to New and, for that matter, Old World to New.

Notes

[1]. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 41.

[2]. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage, 1959), 119.

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