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Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

INTERVIEW

Faulkner and the labyrinth of memory

Jacek Gutorow in conversation with Michael Gorra

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.22.10.1

Michael Gorra at Smith College (photo: Jim Gipe)

Jacek Gutorow: *Why Faulkner?*

Michael Gorra: I've always read Faulkner, and taught him--taught him in my entry-level classes on fiction, classes on how to read with an attention to the grammar and rhetoric of fictional form. He was always a point of reference for me, a writer to invoke in discussing other people's work. But I didn't think of writing about him until I was asked to edit a Norton Critical Edition of *As I Lay Dying*, a volume that supplemented the text itself with

a variety of critical essays and contextual materials. I enjoyed doing that, and as part of the process went down to Mississippi for the first time, so that I could see his town and territory. At the time I was working on my book about Henry James, *Portrait of a Novel*, and eventually began to see that a book on Faulkner could be a companion piece: two writers whom I'd been reading passionately all my adult life and yet who didn't become my primary focus until I reached my fifties. Almost as though they had been out there waiting, waiting for me to grow up to them. Of course with Faulkner there were other things too.

JG: *Could you say something about these other things? I think some of them must have had to do with American politics – after all, you wrote the book in 2020…*

MG: I began to think about this book in 2010, while I was still finishing the one on James. But at first it wasn't a book about Faulkner. We were living in Paris that year--my wife was running a program for American students studying abroad, and I was lucky enough to just have the year to write. I always pay more attention to American politics when I'm abroad than I do at home, and two things were in the news that fall. One was the rise of what was called the Tea Party, a group of conservative politicians that had in essence formed in opposition to the policies of the Obama administration, the Affordable Care Act and so on. They would say it was more complicated than that, but really it wasn't, and in a lot of ways it was a forerunner of Trump. I was following that, and at the same time the *New York Times* began an online series about the Civil War, beginning with some pieces about the 1860 elections--elections that had happened 150 years ago.

Those pieces were pegged to the current date--on October 10, say, you would read about what happened on October 10, 1860. The paper planned to follow the war out until its end in 1865, and in fact did keep the series running until 2015, a few pieces every week. I was reading those, and reading the news as well, and began to hear an echo between 1860 and 2010, the same kind of hostility to and suspicion of the federal government, the same kind of fractures coming into play, and fractures that were about race above all. Which made me think that I should really learn a lot more about the Civil War than I ever had before.

So I started reading, and after a time I began to think that there might be a sort of drama in trying to sort out what I thought about the war's major issues, at first in a set of essays. The war--and then of course its memory. Here's an example. I'm from New England, up in the north, and I'd always had a vague sense that the memorials to the Confederacy in the southern states were somehow wrong. And moreover that there was a kind of dishonesty in the claim, which some white Southerners made, that those memorials were simply meant to honor their ancestors' bravery. That they had nothing to do with race. But now I wanted to get beyond that "vague sense," that "somehow," to say just what, exactly, was at stake in those things.

Around the time that the James book was published--2012--I realized that I could focus this new interest in the Civil War by combining it with an older one, with Faulkner, by exploring in just what way it had influenced him, determining not only the "content" or "subject" of his fiction, but also the very form of his novels. I started to see, that is, that my new interest had--rather surprisingly-- given me something to say about that old one. But there was something more. My graduate school training and most of my teaching had focused on British literature, but in living abroad, and in writing about

James, an American who had made his life abroad--well, I found that I now wanted to write an American book, a book about my own country, the one that had made me. And to write it not so much as a scholar but as a citizen.

Now the way I learn things is by teaching them, and so I started to teach a class on Faulkner, and then a second class on the Civil War itself, not its military history so much as its rhetoric, the language people at the time used to define it and then to define its memory too. And the more I read the more I saw that a major part of any book I might write would have to deal with the war's aftermath, with Reconstruction and the things that the war left undone; with the country's continuing racial inequities.

I revised the book one last time with the Black Lives Matter movement very much in my mind, while trying not to use the phrase itself; that seemed to me as though it would have been too obvious and easy a bid for relevance, I wanted it to be felt without the need for saying it. But of course I couldn't have known that those issues would be even more at the top of the news cycle in the summer of 2020, when the book appeared, that there would be a wave of protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd. So the book was more timely than I could ever have imagined--great for my publisher, and yet terribly sad as well.

JG: *The Saddest Words is partly a critical essay and partly a historical study; it is also a personal memoir and travelogue. It seems to me, though, that first of all you wanted to write a few stories: about Faulkner, about his imaginary county of Yoknapatawpha, about the Civil War. Not an obvious decision since Faulkner was and remains notorious for being vague, cryptic, incoherent, rhetorical, sometimes even self-contradictory. How far can we go in making his literary vision consistent and linear? Can we make it intelligible without losing an important dimension of his work – the dimension of life's mystery and inscrutability?*

MG: You're right to focus on the question of story, and also on the book's generic heterogeneity, partly this and partly that. Some years ago I realized that I wanted to try to turn criticism into a narrative act--wanted to move it, or at least my own practice of it, away from a structure based upon argument, and toward a form of narrative instead. James says in one of his prefaces that there's the story *in* the book, and then the story *of* the book, of how it was conceived and written and received, and I thought that by moving back and forth between them I could make a story of my own. And one that might have some appeal to readers outside the academy; that mattered to me as well. Part of that involved dramatizing the question of process--my subjects' process of writing, insofar as that was recoverable, but also my own process of reading and understanding. Hence the elements of memoir, and of travel writing, because one of the ways I've come to understand books is by situating them in place: the places of their writing and their setting, but also the places of my reading.

This is a long ways away from your question--let me get back to it. In *Portrait of a Novel* I found a kind of narrative spine in James' own biography, moving back and forth between his life and his 1881 novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*. The Faulkner book has a much more complicated weave, but in essence history there took the place of biography: a history of his imagined South from the antebellum period, through the Civil War and Reconstruction and on up to the period in the 1920s when, with Jim Crow fully established, he began to write about it. And there were some things that I simply couldn't

make fit into that story. Some things got smoothed out--the sexual complications, the incest motif, in *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance. Or the fact, as my students point out, that so many of his major novels turn on unmarried pregnant teenagers. Why? I don't really know. And then there were whole novels, great novels, that I feel I scanted. *Light in August* figures in the book only insofar as I can make it relevant to other moments, other novels, and not as an object of interest in its own right. I discuss its treatment of race but not its formal complications, the beauty with which it weaves three separate stories together, like a Victorian multi-plot novel, or its Conradian violation and orchestration of narrative sequence, the radical disjunction between the order of its events and the order of their telling. That's actually the Faulkner novel that most interests me now, at least as something I might write about in the future.

So yes--the kind of work I'm doing on him risks normalizing the strange dark majesty of his prose. I treat the Yoknapatawpha saga as one enormous text in which I can move around at will, skipping from this book to that, but in doing so I also unkink it, I straighten it out into a linear history of an imagined place. That makes his work accessible, but you're right, part of the very point of Faulkner is that he's *not* so readily available. There's a moment at the end of *The Wild Palms* when the protagonist says that between grief and nothing, he'll take grief. He'll choose despair and turmoil over numbness, choose a self-defining pain. Because at least that makes a self. Faulkner is always willing to go down that rabbit-hole. My own method--and I guess my own relatively sanguine temperament too--can't always follow him.

JG: *Which brings me to another question I wanted to ask. At the end of your book you allude to the idea, perhaps a possibility, of reading Faulkner despite or against himself ["I read him despite, and I read him for or because or on account of his difficulty," 351]. Reading Faulkner against Faulkner – how do you understand this imperative, especially after spending several years following him, his characters, his myths and his imagination?*

MG: The idea comes out of Benjamin, his directive in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that we must learn to brush the past against the grain, to read it for what it is reluctant to say; to find the bits of barbarism in the documents of civilization. But I've come to that in a kind of circular way. A few years ago I gave a slide lecture about Henry James that focused on the interplay between the places in his fiction and the places in his life, and at the end a man in the audience asked if I always became the people I wrote about. As I'd made James into a character and was somehow inhabiting him. Or he me. That took me aback, and yet there's a kind of truth in it. My basic impulse as a critic is a celebratory one: I want to make the best case I can for the works I find compelling, and I'll add that I always do start with the works and not the life. That's true for me as a teacher, and also as a reviewer. Moreover I don't approach a new novel with a sense of what, at this moment, fiction "ought" to be, a set of rock-hard standards or principles against which a given book might be found wanting. Instead I try to take a given book on its own terms, exploring how well it succeeds at whatever it seems to attempt.

But I'm also aware that this is indeed a bias of mine--that I work, and work best, by trying to step within the terms of whatever book or books I'm writing about. And in consequence they're apt to take me over. So then I need to step back, to ask what I'm missing in trying to stay so close. So that was really the biggest challenge in writing

about Faulkner, the need and the difficulty to get out from under that powerful voice. You probably remember the Flannery O'Connor line about him, about what it was like, as a Southern writer, to work in his shadow. She said that when the Dixie Limited comes down the track you just better get out of the way. But that's hard to do, and not only for Southern writers. So I had to learn--to make myself--learn to ask what he's not saying, what aspects of the social reality around him he's not considering. To face all the moments when he makes me uncomfortable--especially true in *The Unvanquished*, and in some moments of *Go Down, Moses* as well. To face and explain them--not explain them away, but tracing out the causes of that discomfort and then seeing what those moments can tell me into the work as a whole; moments that usually have to do with the representation of race in his reading of Southern history. In "The Aspern Papers" James invents a biographer who always manages to excuse his subject of any wrong-doing, who finds that his every action was justified. I hope I haven't done that, and in fact I think that Faulkner, like Conrad, only gets more interesting the more skeptically you read him, the more you push and prod and even flay him, the more you read him against himself. More interesting as an artist and also as a figure caught in time, as though his voice were historically symptomatic.

Lunch in a garden (Photo: Brigitte Buettner)

JG: *In some of the chapters you take your reader to the places associated with Faulkner and his books: New Orleans, Oxford, Vicksburg, Ripley, Natchez… You describe them in historical and geographical detail, quite obviously focusing on the aspects having to do with Faulkner's life and works. Well, did you find him there? Did you feel his presence, if even for a while? Did it help you see his world – both real and imaginary – in a new light?*

MG: This question seems connected in my mind to the previous one, and I want of course to say both yes and no. It calls up Richard Holmes' wonderful *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer,* a book that describes how as a young man he really did believe--half-believe, anyway--that he could break the walls of the present, that he might somehow touch the past itself, if only he could duplicate its conditions. Sleeping where his subjects slept, taking the journeys they did, and so on. I've never believed that, and

yet I do think that seeing the rooms and houses and cities of one's subjects does help in some unspecified way. Or not so unspecified--some of this is purely practical. Walking around the courthouse square in Oxford, Mississippi gave me a scene to write, in the first-person and the present tense, it was one of the things I used to animate my narrative.

But having said that, I'll add that the most important places for me in writing about Faulkner were the battlefields. Those mattered a lot more than Rowan Oak, his house in Oxford. Walking over the land on which people had fought, pausing to look at the too many monuments that now define those spaces--that made the Civil War imaginatively present to me in a way it hadn't been before. The relations of hills and woods and streams, the ground people had to cover at Gettysburg, that helped me understand why a given battle had gone the way it did. And in fact the Oxford square helped too. I wouldn't say that it brought me closer to Faulkner himself, not as a person, but it did make me see the world he wrote about in sharper detail. That arrangement of streets and buildings helped me understand some of the patterns of sociability that govern his characters and their world.

Still, this is a case of the more details the better. Because I guess I do understand my subjects better by situating them in space, by trying to imagine the way a landscape or a built environment might have influenced the pace and patterns of their everyday life. There's a wonderful line by the 19th century German social geographer Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl: "We ramble about in open country so as to learn how to ramble about in the singularly dusty world of books." So I wanted to see the building in Venice where James finished *The Portrait of a Lady*--a *pension* then, a hotel now. And in New Orleans, where in the mid 1920s Faulkner really began to become a writer, I got a sense of his rhythms by seeing how close the place where he lived was to Sherwood Anderson's apartment in Jackson Square, how easy it was for Faulkner to drift down the street and just wait--loiter, really--until the older writer appeared. And then they would start to walk, and talk, and drink, and when that season in his life was over Faulkner knew what he was going to do, he had Yoknapatawpha County all ready in his mind. Nor do I think I could have gotten that narrative immediacy by just looking at a map. I needed to ramble myself; though I'll confess that Google's street view can sometimes help refresh your memory.

JG: *While preparing to write The Saddest Words, you have read many books about the Civil War (you mention some important titles in your introduction). Have they changed your understanding of the North/South conflict? And is it fair to compare what we know about the war with what we find about it in Faulkner's novels and short stories?*

MG: I would say that they deepened rather than changed it, but of course those things aren't really distinct. As a high school student in the early 1970s I got what was then the standard textbook line, even in the North: the war wasn't about slavery, it was about states' rights and other constitutional questions, questions of what were then called principle. Making that slaughter into a mere disagreement between people of good will, that sort of thing. Scholarship had already moved on by that point, but it took a long time for those changes to filter down, and the textbook publishers also had their eye on a national market, one that included the Southern states that were still fighting desegregation. But even then I knew that the war was about slavery. The only states' right anybody was willing to die for was the right to hold slaves, and of course I took a

certain teenaged pleasure in insisting on that to my Nixon-voting teacher. So that central truth was pretty clearly fixed in my mind already, and nothing I've learned since has ever come close to dislodging it; confirmed it rather. That said, my understanding did of course change, and one of the major ways it changed was through an ever-growing awareness of the wartime agency of Black people. Reading W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America* was crucial here, and then of course the scholarship that has followed it. Accounts of what were called the "contrabands," enslaved people who got themselves to the Union lines and freedom as quickly as they could; or of the role of Black soldiers in the Union army, as well as of the war crimes and atrocities that the Confederacy inflicted upon them.

But there were other changes too. I pretty quickly found that I was as interested in the social history of the war as in more purely military or political questions, and a lot of my reading there illuminated some of the war's paradoxes. How, for example, poor white Southerners could commit their lives to a cause and a system in which they had no economic interest, one that in fact was in many ways inimical to their interests. Or the ways in which some slaveholders could act with what they believed was kindness and consideration toward those whom they held in bondage -- the acts of self-persuasion through which they justified themselves. Slaveholding Unionists too -- one of the paradoxes on the other side. Learning about such people deepened and enriched my understanding, but here's the thing: Faulkner himself knew all that. In a lot of ways his understanding of the war is closer to the historiography of our own time than it was to his own. He wrote about the contrabands, for example, at a time when very few white historians gave them any attention at all. He never tricked himself, in his best work, into believing in the states' rights argument, and though he was far from immune to the appeal of Lost Cause pageantry, he knew that with secession the South had gone over a "precipice" that it believed was an "apotheosis." Still his understanding of Reconstruction is less sound than his account of the war itself. He presented slavery as a sin, a stain upon the land, but he nevertheless absorbed the standard line that the Reconstruction policies of the federal government were meant to impose "Negro tyranny" upon the white South; the line associated with what's called the "Dunning School," which dominated the historiography of the period for a couple of generations, and whose after-effects still shaped my textbooks. You can see the traces of that in *Go Down, Moses*, which in other moments is so clear-eyed about slavery's fundamental evil.

JG: *In an important fragment you write: "The real war lies not only in the physical combat, but also in the war after the war, the war over its memory and meaning" (p. 24). The one thing which strikes me in this sentence is its final formulation: "the war over its memory and meaning." Do you think Faulkner was fully aware of taking part in such a war? How would you characterize his efforts? I mean, do you think he was consciously reinterpreting and reassesing the past and its meanings?*

MG: I think he was, though as with everything about him the answer isn't straightforward. What's the Emily Dickinson line--tell the truth but tell it slant? Everything Faulkner does is slant. I don't think you could grow up in the South at his time and *not* know that the memory and meaning of the war was contested ground. Black people of course knew that they had a different understanding of the war than whites did, and white knew that they did. But Southern whites also knew that their memory of the

war was at odds with the North's, and the vehemence of their insistence on their own accounts of its meaning -- their belief that the South was right -- was in part a reaction to that different understanding; in part as well to a growing indifference in the North to its memory. So Faulkner writes in *Absalom, Absalom!* that you have to be born in the South to understand the importance of the war's memory: that its continued presence in the Southern mind seems baffling to those from other regions.

There's a moment in *Flags in the Dust*, set around 1920, when an old banker named Bayard Sartoris, the son of a Confederate colonel, asks his father's last surviving soldier what the war was about --- what were you all fighting about? And the other old man says, in effect, that he never really knew. Which suggests that the war's meaning is up for grabs, that it will necessarily be a site of constant reassessment and reinterpretation. Yet that said, I don't think Faulkner himself is primarily interested in that process. What interests him instead is the way in which the memory of the war lingers forever on--that whatever it means you can't get away from it, and even or especially if you *don't* know what it means. Bayard is an old man but he lives forever in his father's shadow. The past is present, or as he makes one character say in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." What it means matters less than the fact that you can't escape it.

With his daughter Miriam, Etretat on the Normandy coast (Photo: Brigitte Buettner)

JG: *In the chapter entitled "A Legacy" you interpret Go Down, Moses and reflect on the failures of the Civil War and of the Reconstruction Era. You write about the "moral and monetary economy of theft and bondage" and emphasise that the modern history of the US "rests upon a crime" (265). You show that the Reconstruction was primarily the time of domestic terrorism, Ku Klux Klan and local pogroms, and did not put a stop to the racial drama in the South. Faulkner turned his eyes away from all of this, at least in the stories included in Go Down, Moses. Why do you think he refused to see the problem?*

MG: Well, he did and he didn't. He did insofar as he absorbed the local line about Reconstruction, the one presented in both school textbooks and white oral history, the sorts of things people would say and remember while sitting around on the courthouse square. For example, he erroneously claimed, in *Go Down, Moses* -- or had one of his

characters claim, anyway -- that the Klan was mostly composed of the descendants of carpetbaggers, Northerners who'd some South to make a quick profit after the war. But even the use of "carpetbagger" as a shorthand for what went on during Reconstruction-- that ignores all the people who came South to teach, to rebuild. That includes a New England-born governor of the state, Adelbert Ames, who was run out of office by white supremacists and who was completely vilified by the Mississippi textbooks of Faulkner's day.

But he didn't insofar as he never presents racial violence as a good thing. His accounts of lynching are horrifying, and meant to be; and in *The Unvanquished* he shows the way in which those who use the gun to maintain white supremacy have lost their souls. One of the stories in *Go Down, Moses*, "Pantaloon in Black" ends with a white sheriff talking about the victim of a lynching as though he's not human; but the victim is a man who's just lost his wife, who believes that he has nothing to live for, and everything up to the end has shown us how entirely human, how vulnerable and how strong, he really is. I think the thing is, Faulkner accepted the racialized social hierarchy of his day, but that acceptance was full of contradictions that he never fully resolved. For example, the dignity that he allowed to some individual black characers, Lucas Beauchamp in *Intruder in the Dust* or Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, vs. the distaste with which the novels present many of his white ones, the Snopeses above all, but also the murderous Percy Grimm in *Light in August*. At what point does the one begin to outweigh the other? He never answered that except in the working out of particular plotlines. Part of him rejected the idea that that social hierarchy needed to be maintained by violence -- or rather a part of him wished and hoped that it could be, and another part knew that it couldn't. He saw everything, but couldn't break from a world and a place in which he always intended to go on living. Though at the same time we have to remember that for most white Mississippians of his day he went much much too far. Even his own extended family thought so.

JG: *When I was reading The Saddest Words for the first time, I was struck by the way in which you acknowledge and honor Faulkner's art: "[He] could not see the racial ideology of his world – could not even really think – except when writing fiction. He could stand outside that ideology only by first assigning it to a character. He inhabited those beliefs by inhabiting another person. Then he saw them clearly, and in that act he came better than he was" (67). And a bit later: "something happened when he faced a fictional page. The pen made him honest…" (104). These moving passages provoke many questions. Let me ask the most banal one: how do you think Faulkner approached literature and his own works? As a kind of personal salvation? Expiation, perhaps? Exorcism?*

MG: This question and the last one seem closely related to me, for one of the ways, the only way, really, that Faulkner was able to approach these issues at all was through his characters. The lines you've quoted, oddly enough, are among the last things I wrote for the book, they each came at a late stage in revision. A lot of reviewers and interviewers have picked them out, and they sound like the sort of thing one should say in either an introduction or conclusion. I suppose they *are* a conclusion, in that I wrote them just before submitting the book's final version, and insofar as I couldn't have written them without doing everything first. But I think they work better just where they are.

And I've been thinking about them ever since writing them. I don't believe anybody really knows how the creative imagination works, or maybe you can only know how your own does. For Faulkner I think a lot of it depends on the creation of character, and it's notable that he never made a character who's really like him, there are no obvious novelistic stand-ins for the author. V.S. Naipaul, in contrast, once said that he needed such characters, needed a mouthpiece. That's certainly true by the time he got to *A Bend in the River*, and I think it's one reason why his fiction dried up and he spent the second part of his career revisiting the first one. Sometimes brilliantly, of course, as in *The Enigma of Arrival*, but not in a way that would make sense to anyone who didn't already know him. Faulkner is so different -- every time he creates a character he seems to step outside himself, there's a constant attempt to imagine otherness, other ways of being, which includes other opinions, ways of living. Many of his characters are much worse than I take him to have been -- Jason Compson is only the star -- and it's by seeing the worst of them, thinking his way inside them, that he manages to show us so much.

But none of this answers your question. Exorcism, expiation…I don't think so. That may be the result, it may be what happens when the writing is done, but I think the motivation, the approach, is at once simpler and more mysterious. His favorite poem was Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and in a couple of places he has characters quote from it; and once, admittedly, a little unbelievably. It's a poem that ends by equating truth with beauty, beauty with truth, and though there's a scholarly argument about just how to take those lines, I think Faulkner read it straight. I think that above all he wanted to make something. To make sentences and paragraphs, to make a world, and he believed that if only you could make it true enough, deeply and richly true, it would be beautiful, that beauty lay in a statement of truth about what people were like, what the world around them was like. And also that words and sentences of an adequate intricate beauty would themselves be true. True because adequate.

Late in his life he wrote a letter in which he said that he was looking back over what he had done and couldn't believe that he had made these things, that he had called his world and his people into being. It's a romantic dream, sure, but it's not a cold one, and nor do I think he views that work as instrumental, in the way thinking of it in terms of expiation would be. That might be a consequence, it's not a cause. When he drew his map of Yoknapatawpha County he wrote on it, "William Faulkner, Sole Proprietor." Some scholars have given him a bit of flak about that, and I can understand that, given Mississippi's history, and that whole idea of ownership. But I can't go along with them -- what that shows me isn't the pride of ownership but of creation, a realm of the imagination.

JG: *In the last chapter of your book on Henry James's Portrait of a Lady you write this about Isabel Archer's unexpected decision to go back to Italy and Gilbert Osmond: "She goes because she recognizes that the most valuable thing she has is a free mind." Do you think we can find such freedom in Faulkner? After all, his works might be described as fatalistic, sometimes even apocalyptic, and his general view of the human being is rather gloomy. But is it the whole truth about Faulkner?*

MG: I'm reading Cormac McCarthy now, whose thinking does indeed seem apocalyptic, so that the only real freedom one can have is the freedom from illusion, freedom from believing that there is anything in human life outside of deadly strife. His most nihilistic

and merciless characters, the ones who most horrify us, are at the moral center of his books, precisely because they don't kid themselves that there's anything more. Except the natural world. That he allows to be a place of grace, the world of wolves and horses, however savage it is as well. Anyway, Faulkner doesn't go that far, and yet I don't think he has anything like a Jamesian belief in freedom either. Not as we live from moment to moment, making decisions as we go. What he does have is a belief in the value of retrospection--freedom for him lies in the ability to make sense of the past, to order and understand and make some shape out of it. Which admittedly includes the way in which that past goes on happening in the present. So his most troubled characters are those who can't establish a proper relationship to the past, either their personal past or a historical one. The obvious example is Quentin Compson, at least in *The Sound and the Fury*, though I'd say that in *Absalom, Absalom!* he actually does achieve that. But right I'm thinking more of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, who never does have a full understanding of the things that have made him and in consequence feels--it's one of Faulkner's best lines--that he's been carrying his life "like a basket of eggs," a job so exhausting that at the end he is ready to die.

JG: *My final question: what does the phrase critical thinking mean to you?*

MG: Interesting question! That phrase gets used a lot these days in American universities, but I'm not at all sure it means the same thing in other contexts. Here it's used to describe what a traditional liberal arts education is supposed to give you. You don't learn a body of knowledge so much as you learn how to learn, which also means learning how to read skeptically, with an eye toward evaluating evidence, analyzing a text's intellectual assumptions and substructure. In the study of literature that includes all the usual practices of close reading, the attention to form, point of view, tone, diction, and so on; which can be extended to the close reading of other kinds of works as well, history or sociology. That's what the term is supposed to mean, anyway, but I don't quite trust it, because these days it's often used to provide some justification for what people like me do. We're not teaching literature--we're teaching critical thinking. Putting it that way makes me wince, or worse, Still, it's what gets said when we're talking to deans, and what the deans say in talking to the money people. Or to parents, who want their kids to study something "practical." So the point of studying English, of reading Faulkner or Austen, isn't just to engage with their intricacies, but to learn how to think critically, which is held to be a transferable skill. Something good, that is, in the workplace. Which it is--and yet I resist that kind of instrumental view of one's studies.

This seems to me a world away from what the academy calls "critique," with its roots in the Frankfurt School, in that beady-eyed penetration of illusion. There was a time, a couple of decades back, when it was a bit declassé to admit that you might like the things you studied and wrote about! Because that might get in the way of seeing them clearly. I don't believe it does, and my own goals as a critic are far more modest. I want, as a teacher, to make my students--all of them undergraduates--into the sort of readers who as adults will be comfortable picking up a difficult novel and reading it for pleasure. And I want as a critic to make the books and issues I write about, the books I care about, seem as alive and interesting and compelling as possible. Especially when you fight with them--because you need to do all that first in order to show why the fight's worth having.

Corbieres, south of France (Photo: Brigitte Buettner)

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