

# William Faulkner's Map of the Unseen World, Yoknapataw-

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*it is because there is nothing else I believe there is something else but there  
may not be and then I*

–Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (123)

An essay about Faulkner and belief might be expected to concern itself with southern Baptists, who are, according to Faulkner in *The Town* (1957), “incorrigible and unreconstructible” (269), or else to discuss the local Methodists, equated to Baptists in that same passage.<sup>1</sup> If the essay were to address biography, it might go into Episcopalians, because there is a historic edition of them in Oxford, where Faulkner attended services on occasion but where he was not allowed to marry his wife, Estelle. In the 1920s, Estelle Oldham, as a divorcée, was not marriageable in the downtown Oxford Episcopal church, and so the Faulkners’ union became sacrosanct in a country Presbyterian Church in Lafayette County, a few miles from town in a hamlet called College Hill. But this essay

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Charles A. Peek for all the good conversation behind this essay.

will not discuss Presbyterians either. Faulkner was not kind to institutionalized religion in any of his novels, nor in his private life did he find sanctuary, nor was he much interested in participating in religion in any way. A passage in *The Town* is emblematic:

ours a town established and decreed by people neither Catholics nor Protestants nor even atheists but incorrigible Nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord; a nonconformism defended and preserved by descendants whose ancestors hadn't quitted home and security for a wilderness in which to find freedom of thought as they claimed and oh yes, believed, but to find freedom in which to be incorrigible and unreconstructible Baptists and Methodists; not to escape from tyranny as they claimed and believed, but to establish one. (269)

Similar passages ranging from satire to denunciation of denominational Christianity exist throughout Faulkner's work, with rare exceptions such as Dilsey Gibson's attendance at an Easter service in an African Methodist Episcopal church in what would have been called Freedman's Town in Jefferson, Mississippi. If an instance of organized religious practice was attractive to Faulkner, it would be of an acute nature, such as when Dilsey sees "the first and the last" of her own predicament through the rich metaphor of the Resurrection sermon (*Sound* 297), or when Mink Snopes in *The Mansion* (1959), soon after his release from prison, in the Mississippi Delta south of Memphis comes upon Reverend Goodyhay, whose signature prayer, as suitable for vespers as for grace, is "Save us, Christ, the poor sons of bitches" (574), and whose take on salvation is that it is not granted, but hunted and held on to. "And if you cant find it, then by God make it. Make a salvation" (581), he says and voices this very Faulknerian definition of the human spirit: "We're already full up with folks that know they can but dont, since because they already know they can, they dont have to do it. What we want are folks that believe they cant, and then do it" (582).

But even so, Goodyhay and others, like Gail Hightower in *Light in August* (1932) or the Reverend Shegog in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), are depictions of ministers and, as such, part of Faulkner's social commentary which was both consistently critical toward organized religion and at the same time cognizant of the role southern church culture played and would play in progressive change. Such matters are established by historical record, and surely Faulkner was cognizant of them. Nonetheless, the only ministers or churches that interested Faulkner were the renegade, those which broke ranks or made their own in defiance of law. The soul in Faulknerian terms was accessible and recognizable only in rebellion. But this is to get ahead of some necessary groundwork.

A novelist gives shape to the invisible world, the world that draws readers behind character and action to the contours of the imperceptible. Consider, for example, a scene from *The Hamlet* (1940):

Only Ratliff and Quick sat in chairs, so that to them the others were black silhouettes against the dreaming lambence of the moonlight beyond the veranda. The pear tree across the road opposite was now in full and frosty bloom, the twigs and branches springing not outward from the limbs but standing motionless and perpendicular above the horizontal boughs like the separate and upstreaming hair of a drowned woman sleeping upon the uttermost floor of the windless and tideless sea. (989)

Who sees this? Who has access to the drowned woman? Ratliff and Quick can barely discern the other men on the porch. Their perception ends just beyond the storefront. The pear tree is observed by the narrator—it is *there* in other words, but it is viewed by no one. Or is it? The image contributes to the articulation of the scene, to one's sense of Ratliff and Quick, and to the invisible world of *The Hamlet*. The drowned woman's upstreaming hair, the windless and tideless sea—where are these phenomena except emergent from the pear's foliage? The image, noted in words by no character, is followed in the text by casual conversation among the men about the seasonal appearance of

the mockingbird. The characters in *The Hamlet* only occasionally have (or take) time to attend to the invisible world, but when they do, they mark it as something shared and vital. “Now that they could pay attention to it,” one reads at one typical instance, “the silver air seemed to be filled with faint and sourceless sounds” (1016). Just beyond the day-to-day business of horse-trading, farming, and social affairs, these men and women lead deep interior lives which can, with effort, tune to the evidence of the unseen, the vast invisible world within and without themselves. Faulkner’s texts work consistently to “give shape to the invisible world,” to borrow phrasing from Elaine Pagels, affecting the reader’s “imaginative perceptions of what is invisible,” including how the invisible and visible worlds intersect (xv).<sup>2</sup>

In *Requiem for a Nun* (1952), the murderous maid, Nancy Mannigoe, causes an uproar in the courtroom (identified in the stage directions as “an unheard-of violation of procedure” [507]) when she answers to God, not the Judge: “Yes, Lord,” she says when she is pronounced guilty. She then causes a critical uproar when she admonishes Temple Drake to “Believe”—when asked “Believe what?” she repeats, “Just believe” (665). In Faulkner, often the simple course of events illuminates the presence of invisible wills or forces. “*That’s what they mean by the womb of time,*” according to Dewey Dell in *As I Lay Dying* (1930): “*the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle, in which lay the outraged entrails of events*” (78). In *The Town*, Faulkner clarifies the idea, explaining that it is “as if what is going to happen to one tomorrow already gleams faintly visible now if the watcher were only wise enough to discern it or maybe just brave enough” (293). In the earlier novel, the socially and historically insignificant existence of the Bundren family is demonstrated to possess profoundly transcendent value in life and, especially, in death. *As I Lay Dying* maps the unseen world onto the bodies and minds of its poor white characters: “As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion, and seeing

<sup>2</sup>In full Pagel comments: “I began to reflect on the ways that various religious traditions give shape to the invisible world, and how our imaginative perceptions of what is invisible relate to the ways we respond to the people around

and hearing in themselves blind and deaf; fury in itself quiet with stagnation” (110).

The epigraph to this essay comes from the second chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* in Quentin’s section of the text. “[I]t is because there is nothing else,” Quentin says, or thinks, to Caddy, to his father, and to the firmament. “I believe there is something else” he asserts, and then equally assertively, “but there may not be,” and out of this ambivalence, out of this searching, the tentative, fragmentary conclusion: “and then I”; the passage is more poetic than prosaic:

*it is because there is nothing else  
I believe there is something else  
but there may not be  
and then I (Sound 123)*

Quentin’s predicament is quintessentially Faulknerian: a cause for belief, a cause for doubt, and out of this quarrel with the unseen world, or because of it, evidence or cause of existence. Taken logically, however, Quentin’s language indicates defiance, what Faulkner might have called the Nonconformist piety: “it is because there is nothing else [that] I believe there is something else,” in which case “but there may not be” may negate either the “nothing” or the “something” (either there “may not be nothing” or “there may not be something”), though in either case “I” (“and then I”) is born of the dilemma. And the dilemma, the crossing of the nothing with the something to produce character, is what Faulkner was evidently mapping in Yoknapatawpha.

Successive generations of critics have recognized the map of Yoknapatawpha as the apocryphal county superimposed on the actual map of Lafayette County, Mississippi, with the Tallahatchie River to the north (on both maps) and the Yoknapatawpha River (Yocona on the actual map) to the south. However, the map of Yoknapatawpha County includes event-markers no standard map would include. Places are subvented by narrative. Sites are marked, “Varner’s store, where Flem Snopes got his start,” or “Courthouse where Temple Drake testified & Confederate monument which Benjy had to pass on his left.” Geo-

graphic locations include Yoknapatawpha subtitles, as in “Mottstown. Where Jason Compson lost his niece’s trail, and where Anse Bundren and his boys had to go in order to reach Jefferson.” The events are, primarily, minor matters, insignificant except in Yoknapatawpha, where, as readers know, they are some of the major events in the novels: “Old Frenchman Place, which Flem Snopes unloaded on Henry Armstid and Suratt [Ratliff], and where Popeye killed Tommy”; “Compson’s. Where they sold the pasture to the Golf Club so Quentin could go to Harvard”; “Miss Joanna Burden’s. Where Christmas killed Miss Burden & where Lena Grove’s child was born.”

In *The Town*, Gavin Stevens returns from Eula Varner Snopes’s funeral, where Flem has erected a monument: “A virtuous Wife is a Crown to her husband / Her Children rise and call Her Blessed” (312). The monument stretches the facts of Eula’s life somewhat. Nonetheless, the monument indicates something Flem saw or wanted others to see, something unseen until that moment. Gavin, back in his office, accepts a whisky toddy from Ratliff and reflects,

“All us civilised people date our civilization from the discovery of the principle of distillation. And even though the rest of the world, at least that part of it in the United States, rates us folks in Mississippi at the lowest rung of culture, what man can deny that, even if this is as bad as I think it’s going to be, we too grope for the stars?” (466)

William James attributes “[t]he sway of alcohol over mankind” to “its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour” (326). Faulkner on more than one occasion made this same equation: “When man discovered the distillation of liquor, he raised the civilization of man above animals. Until then man had only made a few scratches on walls” (qtd. in Blotner 199n). The bootleggers in Yoknapatawpha County minister to the spiritual shortcutting of their clientele, or as Quentin muses, “*that liquor teaches you to confuse the means with the end*” (*Sound* 174). In the scene between Gavin and Ratliff, Gavin ac-

knowledges that even here, in Mississippi, rated “‘at the lowest rung of culture’” by the rest of the country, even here, among the murderous, the lecherous, the bootleggers and the thieves, “‘we too grope for the stars.’”

In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Miss Rosa Coldfield (whose house is on the map) provides the fullest image of this groping, this deep spiritual existence not inaccessible by those who occupy the lowest rung of culture:

*that sickness somewhere at the prime foundation of this factual scheme from which the prisoner soul, miasmaldistillant, wroils ever upward sunward, tugs its tenuous prisoner arteries and veins and prisoning in its turn that spark, that dream which, as the globy and complete instant of its freedom mirrors and repeats (repeats? creates, reduces to a fragile evanescent, iridescent sphere) of all space and time and massy earth, relicts the seething and anonymous miasmatal mass which in all the years of time has taught itself no boon of death but only how to recreate, renew; and dies, is gone, vanished: nothing. (118)*

The soul is imprisoned by “*this factual scheme*” of material existence. It is distilled from such pollutants, and from this noxious atmosphere it roils, it stirs itself upward, groping sunward and “*prisoning in its turn*” the memory or the knowledge (“*that spark, that dream*”) of the original miasma. The soul thus predates and dates itself from material fact; it is both imprisoned by and in turn imprisons “*this factual scheme.*” As such, the soul goes on repeating—no, not repeating but *creating*, creating in the image of its prisoner “*all space and time and massy earth,*” resolving the “*miasmaldistillant*” origin as relict. Unlike the mind, which has foreknowledge of death, the soul, the imprisoning prisoner, knows nothing of death “*but only how to recreate, renew*” before vanishing. The deeper mystery of alcohol’s “power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature” lies in its recipe: the contents of the mystical stimulant are poisons, “*miasmaldistillant*” inviting the very death whose imminence the drinker transcends, “‘grop[ing] for the stars.’”

The place and the people to which and to whom Faulkner devoted

his life were entirely and by any measure—economic, social, political, historical—inconsequential. “Niggers.” White trash. The defeated, dishonored, and forgotten defenders and inheritors of a discredited social and economic system which, as time passed, would become only more embarrassing to the national culture. Bigots, by national standards; killers; a “closed society” in terms of its politics. Mississippi in the years 1897–1962, Faulkner’s life span, was a dangerous place for outsiders, and for many on the inside, a place of terror. Where, in all this, was art; where was beauty? Surely abandoned by God (in at least three novels Faulkner repeated the question of his elder’s generation: Why did God allow us to lose the War?), the South, and Mississippi in particular, were the nation’s refuse in Faulkner’s lifetime. Faulkner looked away from the churches which provided refuge for large percentages of the population. The “Bible Belt” is a term which seems not to occur in Faulkner, not in any serious representational sense. God, for the most part, seems in Faulkner’s writing to be as corrupt in Mississippi as the ways in which the races interact, as corrupt as the sexual violence which also seems pervasive. He is, in Faulkner, implicated. Jewel says it for many in *As I Lay Dying*: “If there is a God, what the hell is He for?” (11).

What Faulkner believed in, by the evidence of his aesthetic project, was the inherent, indissoluble dignity of every human being whose body was drawn to earth by death and whose spirit groped and roiled skyward by longing. There is in Faulkner a consistent vision of human spirituality, aggrieved and battered, often miscast and ill-spent, but there nonetheless. The vision is one of all men and women imprisoned by the memory of themselves, their souls, and holding in common their “*miasmaldistillant*” psychic origins. By probing the dignity of men like Thomas Sutpen (who was, despite his monstrosity, motivated by shame and by the will to “fix” what had gone wrong in his life), women like Temple Drake (whom Faulkner contemplated for two decades), murderers like Mink Snopes, ineffective reformers, failed dreamers—by

<sup>3</sup>According to John W. Hunt, Faulkner “probes man’s present dilemma by looking at its historical, social, and psychological springs as well as looking

insisting upon and then charting, and then mapping the spiritual lives of the most insignificant men and women, Faulkner is rightly considered one of the most profound resources for comprehending American spirituality.<sup>3</sup> Humankind today lives, however, in a profoundly secular era in literary culture, an era dominated by social science, by materialist approaches to problems that vex people, marked in shorthand by work in race, class, and gender in recent decades, and much more of this work remains to be done.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner calls the Mississippi

that River that runs through not only the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical, not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is the very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature, though some of these beings, like Shreve, have never seen it. (213)

Some of Faulkner's readers, like Shreve, may have never seen what runs through the work, like a cartographic "umbilical," focused as they may be, on compass points and site markers. But others know from even the most stable of compass points how Faulkner placed far greater import on the invisible world, freighting the invisible with much more consequence than that which was merely seen. "Then he thought *No*," in those famous words from Quentin's subconscious mind: "*No. If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain*" (*Absalom* 158). It is not so much that *Absalom, Absalom!* confirms the truth of the imagination, which of course it does and which is well-documented, but that the novel confirms the presence of the invisible in human affairs: speculation, imagination, yes, but also faith, belief in something beyond reason and evidence to which human beings appeal as they would appeal for bread or water when hungry or thirsty: what Rosa Coldfield calls "*a brooding awareness and acceptance of the in-*

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attentive to the violence and chaos apparent in modern experience because it is in the face of that that man must live meaningfully if he is to live meaningfully at all. And probably most important for theology, he tries to test love

*explicable unseen*” in human affairs (*Absalom* 114), or more eloquently still, “*that deep existence which we lead, to which the movement of limbs is but a clumsy and belated accompaniment like so many unnecessary instruments played crudely and amateurishly out of time to the tune itself*” (113).

Mink Snopes encounters the Reverend Goodyhay upon his release from Parchman Prison in the Mississippi Delta. Mink was imprisoned for the murder of landowner Zack Houston, after Houston had pushed him to the edge, demanding one too many supplications of labor. The murder and the subsequent murder it engenders run through the Snopes trilogy like a plate-negative lifeline. As *The Mansion* opens, Mink is en route to Memphis in order to buy a gun to kill his cousin, Flem Snopes, whose killing has become Mink’s sole purpose for living. “He, Mink, wasn’t religious,” Faulkner explains. He was not sure, in fact, that he believed in God, or “Old Monster,” as he refers to the Deity. According to the narrative, Mink trusts “them” to see that events play out in such a way as to allow him justice. And then Mink’s theology is explicated in detail:

He meant, simply, that *them—they-it—*, whichever, and whatever you wanted to call it, who represented simple and fundamental justice and equity in human affairs, or else a man might just as well quit. . . . They could harass and worry him, or They could even just sit back and watch everything go against him right along without missing a lick, almost like there was a pattern to it . . . when he not only would have to depend on Them, but had won the right to depend on Them and find Them faithful; and They dared not, They would not dare, to let him down, else it would be as hard for Them to live with themselves afterward as it had finally become for him to live with himself and still keep on taking what he had taken from Zack Houston. (336-337)

Mink begins with a dismissal of the question of whether God exists. Either a Deity exists who is concerned with “fundamental justice and equity,” or else why are people here—this is Jewel Bundren’s doctrine: “If there is a God what the hell is He for?” Mink’s answer is the answer of

the ages: to provide meaning to existence, meaning to become invested with justice, equity, dignity, making him truly a disciple of the Acts of Jewel, who traded his horse to see that his mother was properly interred.

Mink then enters a familiar theological dilemma when he measures the Deity's capacity to "harass and worry him" with God's equally plausible capacity to "sit back and watch everything . . . almost like there was a pattern to it." Mink, the peasant parolee, called a "damned little clubfoot murderer" (*Hamlet* 747), dirt poor, white trash, without education and wholly illiterate, is not, nonetheless, a stranger to the vital Christian dilemma between free will and divine providence which so thoroughly defines his civilization—whether, like the River and Shreve, he would recognize it quite that way. He does not linger on the intricacies of this theological debate, but finds within it the very terms of his existence, just as Quentin does: "*and then I.*" The choice, after all, is not his but Theirs: They could harass and intervene, or They could create the pattern and allow Mink to act with intellectual freedom.

Mink's faith, then, is in Them, but it is equally in himself, and this bipolar faith produces a defiant, or what Faulkner calls in *The Town*, a "Nonconformist" belief system. Faulknerian nonconformism is a form of behavior and a mode of thought the champions of which to this day are revered in northern Mississippi as "rebels." They are defined, recall, as "nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord," reckless and unreconstructed, pious and arrogant, unashamed, in Faulknerian terms, and not without pride. "They would not dare to let him down," Mink continues, "else it would be as hard for Them to live with Themselves" as it had been for him to tolerate the man he killed, the reason he killed in the first place, which They well knew, as They either harassed and worried him with that initial situation or just sat back and watched it happen. Either way, in Mink's theology, he is redeemed: he had "won the right to depend on Them and find Them faithful." This is Mink's theological system, the Good News according to Mink Snopes, imprisoned for almost all of his adult life. His actions are rooted in the deep existence which he leads, in a concomitant faith in the ultimate justness of the world he

inhabits and of the importance he plays toward that end in which Faulkner locates his dignity. At the end of *The Mansion*, Mink dies, “himself among” all human beings who ever walked the earth, “equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them” (721).

Mink’s theology suggests humankind has it wrong, backwards. They ought not to be worrying whether they or how they or whether enough of them believe in God, or how to express that belief, or whether their actions are in accord with God, or whether, in Faulkner’s terms, they subscribe to this or that form of spiritual tyranny. Intellectually, one might label Faulkner a radical individualist, and what Faulkner seemed to prefer to probe were the terms under which God might believe in the world he created, if he created it. Charles Mallison, who matures over the course of the latter two books of the Snopes Trilogy, and has watched closely, concludes: “So what you need is to learn how to trust in God without depending on Him. In fact, we got to fix things so he can depend on us for a while” (*Mansion* 618). Such is the charge felt by the defiant believer, aligning Faulkner with what one critic in the 1950s called “a long line of modern agnostics or rebels, from Blake and Shelley, Whitman and Melville, to D. H. Lawrence, Kafka, Yeats, and many others, as a kind of lay order in Christianity, engaged in tasks which the official church has not yet fully encountered or assumed” (Wilder 25).

Mink’s theology may be traced throughout Faulkner’s work, from Quentin Compson back to Thomas Sutpen and forward through the corporal in *A Fable* (1954), a defiant, rebellious theology which questions God’s actions and motives. Recall in *The Unvanquished* (1938), Rosa Millard’s last visit to church: “But I did not sin for gain or for greed,” she says to God. “I did not sin for revenge. I defy You or anyone to say I did. I sinned first for justice.” She claims to have acted “for a holy cause, even though You have seen fit to make it a lost cause” (419). Recall Jason Compson pursuing his niece, defying God: “And damn You, too,” he said. “See if You can stop me,” thinking of himself . . . dragging Omnipotence down from his throne, if necessary; of the embattled legions of both hell and heaven through which he

tore his way and put his hands at last on his fleeing niece" (*Sound* 306). Jason and Rosa's God is less cooperative than Mink's or Thomas Sutpen's but provides a similar point of refusal and defiance. Sutpen works through these same questions. Sutpen is the quintessential Mississippian: he struggles with the knowledge that others assess him as inferior, he seeks to overcome a legacy of defeat, he knows that he is where he is—in Mississippi, in the United States—because of forces which have sought to destroy him, and it is against such forces that he defines what freedom he has. His loyalty is to his own kind, of which there are precious few; he has little trust in human beings. His theological sense is Minkian:

All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead. (*Absalom* 182)

In Sutpen's book, the dead take the place of Mink's *They* or *Them*, the source of motivation and obligation both, the origin and destination of all human action. Sutpen's interior life was bequeathed to him by "all the men and women that had died to make him," and he holds this interior life, this spirit, this "*miasmal-distillant*" origin and destination—he holds this in trust so that he may in his turn pass it on. He holds this obligation not privately but under the watchful eye of "all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right" so that once he was dead, he, like Mink's *Them*, would be able to look at the faces of the living to whom he bequeathed life without shame. Sutpen believes that *They*, the dead, what God he imagines, depend upon him to do his part and in turn

will do theirs. Whether and to what extent Sutpen heard wrong is another matter, and he spends a good deal of his later life contemplating the error not in his theology but in his execution of its mandate.

James defined the religious sense “in the broadest and most general terms possible,” by identifying it as a “belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.” What interests James psychologically is this phenomenon of

belief in an object which we cannot see. All our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the “objects” of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves . . . in general our whole higher prudential and moral life is based on the fact that material sensations actually present may have a weaker influence on our action than ideas of remoter facts. (47)

This pragmatist’s definition is applicable to Faulkner, who paid particular attention to the “unseen order” and to the efforts of characters to “harmoniously adjust” themselves to this invisible world. It became the Yoknapatawpha project.

In his art Faulkner was a believer but not in any orthodox or practical terms a Christian. Referring to Christmas as “an orgy of unbridled sentimental obeisance to the fairy tale which conquered the Western world” (*If I Forget* 583)—in the same passage Harry Wilbourne refers to love and finds “[t]here is no place for it in the world today, not even in Utah . . . and so we have got rid of love at last just as we have got rid of Christ”—Faulkner in his work has little patience for orthodox Christianity save where it serves needs of specific, downcast populations. Nonetheless, Faulkner’s fiction is unquestionably Christ-haunted, and in his public statements he referred consistently to Christianity as Western civilization’s “masterpiece,”<sup>4</sup> as a resource for every writer. “Remember, the writer must write out of his background,” Faulkner told

students and faculty at the University of Virginia in 1957.

He must write out of what he knows and the Christian legend is part of any Christian's background, especially the background of a country boy, a Southern country boy. . . . I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve—it's just there. (Gwynn and Blotner 86)

In Japan a few years earlier, Faulkner attested to the spiritual underpinnings of his own, indeed of all, art to prove God's existence to human beings, and, important to Faulkner, the reverse, to show God that human beings exist:

To me, a proof of God is in the firmament, the stars. To me, a proof of man's immortality, that his conception that there could be a God, that the idea of a God is valuable, is in the fact that he writes the books and composes the music and paints the pictures. They are the firmament of mankind. They are the proof that if there is a God and he wants us to see something that proves to him that mankind exists, that would be proof. And if we want to stay on good terms with God, then we better keep in mind that we are, and I don't know of a better way to do it, than with the music, the books, the sculpture, the pictures, poems. (Meriwether and Millgate 103)

What readers are able to identify throughout Faulkner, then, is a deep, psychic, or structural need in human beings toward defiance, to assert the will of the individual in the face of Them, even if They are God but also if They are not: If They are human institutions, Author-ity, Respectability—Harry and Charlotte, for example, seeking a location for love on the map of middle class and consumer respectability. And, of course, *A Fable*. Is the corporal Christ? Only if Jesus Christ were not the single instance. In the historical sense, no; in the orthodox Christian sense, no. But in the Gnostic sense, in the transcendent sense, in the

Faulknerian sense of “that deep existence which we lead,” yes. One uses the term *Gnostic* advisedly, and with caution, given the vagueness of the term and the critical debates in place around it in religious studies. At the same time, one wishes to draw on recent scholarship, which speculates that “the early church’s suppression of Gnosticism was the fork in the road where Christianity went wrong and sacrificed its vital truth for world domination” (Grimstad 47), as a rich context for *A Fable*. Gnostic scholar Hans Jonas places “the unknown God himself” at the core of Gnostic thinking, a Being “who, unknowable on principle, because the ‘other’ to everything known, is yet the object of a knowledge and even asks to be known” (288). One thinks of Sutpen or Mink, or the corporal in *A Fable*. God “as much invites as he thwarts the quest for knowing him: in the failure of reason and speech he becomes revealed; and the very account of the failure yields the language for knowing him,” says Jonas (288). *A Fable*, a gospel according to Faulkner, begs for Gnostic readings, situated at a moment outside history, when world domination is once again preferred to a deeper knowledge of existence, as “the failure of reason and speech” become thematic for some four hundred pages of Faulkner’s densest and most abstract prose.

The corporal is an articulation, as the Old General says, the eruption of a secret existence, of a profoundly rebellious human spirit which roils upward, to evoke Faulkner’s language, “‘grop[ing] for the stars,’” while the body is pulled downward, into the earth. “‘We are two articulations,’” the Old General says,

“self-elected, possibly, anyway elected, anyway postulated . . . to test two inimical conditions which, through no fault of ours but through the simple paucity and restrictions of the arena where they meet, must contend, and—one of them—perish: I champion of this mundane earth, which, whether I like it or not, is, and to which I did not ask to come, yet since I am here, not only must stop but intend to stop during my allotted while; you, champion of an esoteric realm of man’s baseless hopes and his infinite capacity—no: passion—for unfact. No, they are not inimical, really, there is no contest actually; they can even exist side by side to-

gether in this one restricted arena, and could and would, had yours not interfered with mine.” (988)

If humankind lives in a materialist age, dominated by social science methodologies, then even literary criticism, once the arena of idealism and the “infinite capacity . . . for unfact” has, since the 1930s, been characterized steadily and more often than not by the heirs of Marxist, or “social” criticism, articulated today by race, class, and gender and, more recently, by postcolonial analyses of imaginative writing. One’s reading today is so well-defined on such terms that attempts to counter the wisdom of the age sound reactionary, ultra-conservative, or regressive. The situation is unfortunate, because it leaves the Old General without his counterpoint in “‘this one restricted arena’” of humanistic inquiry and research. Mankind knows much about visible power, or in other words its manifestations and the injustices it produces. In Faulkner studies, one result has been the virtual ignorance, on the part of Faulkner critics, regarding *A Fable*—Faulkner seminars in colleges and universities typically ignore the book, and numerous scholars have made grand exegetical claims in lectures, essays, and monographs without reference to the novel where, as Olga Vickery claimed in 1959, Faulkner “restates abstractly most of the ideas developed in dramatic fashion in his preceding novels” (209).

What Faulkner dramatized, like Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun*, was that a human life needed to believe, “just believe,” so that one’s life could recognize itself as an articulation of something beyond, behind, ahead of, or anyway postulate to itself. In *The Hamlet*, in a desperate moment, Mink Snopes seeks the ocean which he has never seen: “he could not have said why he wanted to go to it—what of repudiation of the land, the earth, where his body or intellect had faulted somehow,” the narrative explains.

Perhaps he was seeking only the proffer of this illimitable space and irremediable forgetting along the edge of which the contemptible teeming of his own earth-kind timidly seethed and recoiled, not to accept the proffer but merely to bury himself in this myriad anonymity beside the impregnable haven of all the

drowned intact golden galleons and the unattainable deathless  
seamaids. (951-52)

Above all else every life mapped into Yoknapatawpha County not only has access to these depths but sought them actively, thunderously, and in many cases destructively. This is precisely how one gets on the map of Yoknapatawpha. It was the job of "the sole owner and proprietor" to chart these invisible lives, otherwise to have been forgotten, like the story of Cecilia Farmer in *Requiem for a Nun*. Her story was "unrecorded by the town and the county" (632). Whereas she is absent from the town and county records, in Yoknapatawpha, hers and the "record" of all such as Cecilia Farmer are "washed thinly over with a faint quiet cast of apocrypha: because there were new people in the town now, strangers, outlanders" (640), and these newcomers saw with new eyes, assisted by their map of Yoknapatawpha, drawn to what would otherwise have remained unseen.

A *Fable* contains an inset story of a crippled race horse and a degenerate horse-groom, later a sentry in the Great War, a story detachable and emblematic of the novel as whole, related to the runner by the Reverend Sutterfield. The story becomes something the runner believes in enough to liberate himself from cynicism and into purposeful action. The story of the horse interests one less today than the way in which it is described by Faulkner as possessing a value equal to

the immortal pageant-piece of the tender legend which was the crowning glory of man's own legend beginning when his first paired children lost well the world and from which paired prototypes they still challenged paradise, still paired and still immortal against the chronicle's grimed and bloodstained pages: Adam and Lilith and Paris and Helen and Pyramis and Thisbe and all the other recordless Romeos and Juliets, the world's oldest and most shining tale limning in his brief turn the warp-legged foul-mouthed English horse groom as ever Paris or Lochnivar or any else of man's splendid rapers: the doomed and glorious frenzy of a love-story, pursued not by an unclosed office file nor even the raging frustration of the millionaire owner, but by its own inherent

doom since, being immortal, the story, the legend, was not to be owned by any one of the pairs who added to its shining and tragic increment, but only to be used, passed through, by each in their doomed and homeless turn. (807)

The “world’s oldest” tale is the story of defiance, of pitting the will against all odds in the effort to reach salvation, to affect the course of events, drawing strength of will not from facts nor assurances but from something immortal, something which preceded and will outlast the living. It is through the legend, the fictional and biblical tales, that humanity “lost *well* the world,” and gained another. This other world is physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, transcendent, and immediate: as deeply within the self as it is outside the self, of sexual union (the paired prototypes) and psychic isolation—“each in their doomed and homeless turn.” In Faulkner, where, aesthetically, form follows function, one gains access through deeply moving thought, emotion, or experience. “To think: not that dreamy hoping and wishing and believing (but mainly just waiting) that we would think is thinking, but some fierce and rigid concentration that at any time—tomorrow, today, next moment, this one—will change the shape of the earth” (*Fable* 933).

The story of the race horse convinces the runner to act, provides what he calls a protagonist, something he can believe in. To say that to Faulkner the world moved by stories would be true but trite, superficial. To this modernist, the fiction was evidence of human access to the invisible world; to draw from that world and to give it shape, coherence, and meaning was the power of human belief. It was as well humanity’s best argument before a distant God. Like the peasants at the end of *The Hamlet*, leaning “along the fence, grave and quiet, as though the fence were in another land, another time” (1009), all human beings lead lives only in part connected to a social world. “This world is not his world,” Cash says of Darl (*Dying* 178), and one might paraphrase this toward all human thought: This world is not one’s own world, this life one’s own life. The “sole owner and proprietor” begins with the physical map, the topographic features—rivers and pine hills—and adds to it the record of what was done here, the names and the actions, what is to be remembered. It is because of the map, William Faulkner, sole owner and pro-

prietor:

*it is because there is nothing else  
I believe there is something else  
but there may not be  
and then I*

In Faulknerian terms one might call this the Quentin equation. Whatever else there is to existence beside physical presence—God, spirituality, the soul, salvation—whatever else there is, it is invisible, it occupies the realm of nothingness. The “I-Quentin” believes in the something of this nothingness, believes in it precisely because it is nothing—the equation is thus rooted in defiance: it is *because* of this nothing that I-Quentin believes in something. However, this belief is not delusional; it believes with full knowledge that “*there may not be*” something in the nothingness. Therefore, or nonetheless, and consequently: “*and then I.*” Hence, the Quentin equation: I defy, therefore I am.

The map of Yoknapatawpha County threatens to become a narrative. It is marked as a map should be marked by rivers and roads, railroads and landmass names. But it also contains the secret lives, the invisible points, “where Jason Compson lost his niece,” “where they buried Addie Bundren at last,” “where Wash Jones killed Sutpen, later bought and restored by Major Cassius De Spain.” The map not only reconfigures Lafayette County but reconceptualizes what one expects a map to tell. There are no compass points on Faulkner’s map: no North, South, East, and West. Roads bear neither names nor numbers. A reference to Memphis junction is the only indication of an outside world, a world beyond the borders of the County. The map draws no attention to where in space and time it exists relative to other locations, relative to a continuum of location. Instead, readers’ attention is drawn to life and death, pursuit and failure, bringing to mind what happened. “*It is because there is nothing else*” that readers mark the “*relicts the seething and anonymous miasmal mass which in all the years of time has taught itself no boon of death but only how to recreate, renew,*” the map itself a testimony to “*I believe there is something else—but there may not be—and then I.*”

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