

(No) “City upon a Hill:” Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha

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Abstract:

Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha – the English-named capital of a county with a Chickasaw name – is the very opposite of the Modell of Christian Charity in John Winthrop’s prophetic sermon. Jefferson is corrupt, perverse, dangerous, lethal. Yet it is the very core of one of the most alluring maps imagined by poets of this world. In four sections: 1. (Re)Charting the Good Foundation; 2. Jefferson &/on the Map of Yoknapatawpha Co., Mississippi; 3. Of Maps &/as Palimpsests: Charting Jefferson Again; 4. Obituaries and/of Jefferson Lost Belles – the essay reinterprets some of the most representative stories and protagonists of Faulkner’s haunting city.

Key-Words:

Map(ping), city, urban–rural, native–alien, intertextuality, classic American literature

*Motto: “Irina: Let’s go to Moscow! We’ll sell the house, we’ll do away with everything we have over here...and then...to Moscow!” (A. P. Chekhov, *Three Sisters*)*

1. (Re)Charting the Good Foundation

In his sermon “*A Modell of Christian Charity*”, written and preached on board of the *Arabella* while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, in 1630, Honorable John Winthrop, Esqr., from Suffolk, England, invested his entire rhetorical gift to inspire *hope, endurance and determination* to his fellow Puritans on the ship sailing to Massachusetts.

John Winthrop was no reverend – nor was he a poet: he was *a lawyer*. And his sermon remains a secular masterpiece to the day due to its shrewd and efficient plea for an *idealistic vision of civility*: the main quality of a human being, the ability to control one’s own feelings of *fear* and *insecurity*.

The civilized people should live in *an exemplary city* that should keep up its high rank despite the disheartening temptation of *despair*:

For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a hill. The eies of

all people are uppon Us, soe if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. Therefore lett us choose life, that wee and our seede may live by obeyeing his voyce and cleaveing to him, for hee is our life and our prosperity.
(qtd. in Lemay, 23)

William Faulkner's *Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature*, delivered at Stockholm, on December 10, 1950, is no reverend's sermon either – nor is it a poem in prose. Like Winthrop's speech, it owes a lot to *the lawyer's rhetoric*: here reminiscent of Gavin Stevens, District Attorney of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha (as it is now detectable in Chapter Seven of the novel *Intruder in the Dust*, 1948).

In his Acceptance Speech, Faulkner warns *the young writer* that "*the basest of all things is to be afraid*" (qtd. in Cowley, 723). Further on he gives his *ars poetica*:

I believe that *man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal*, not because he alone among other creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has *a soul, a spirit* capable of compassion and *sacrifice and endurance*. The poet's, the *writer's, duty* is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of *the courage and honor and hope and pride* and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. *The poet's voice* need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail. (qtd. in Cowley 724)

The first quality of William Faulkner's contribution to world literature is that he completed his task as a *poeta vates – a prophet of poetic self-knowledge*. Declaring his *artistic ideals* he stated his mission accomplished as a *poet of the city*. Therefore, *his quality as a citizen of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi is intrinsic to his profession as an artist*.

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The citadel we have in mind here is definitely *no "citty upon a hill"* – as John Winthrop would have it. Indeed, it has been made many "a story and a by-word through the world" – such has been its doom. Jefferson gets made/ unmade/ remade a story every time we read a Yoknapatawpha book.

And *a voice of its own* – this citadel did acquire: quite distinct from the godly voice invoked by John Winthrop. It's *the voice of the townspeople of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha*. A shapeless, elusive, equivocal, insinuating, treacherous and truly democratic *collective narrator*: quite devoid of any inclination to follow any "modell of Christian charity". As rumor has it, stories get told in *this perverse tone, even more perverse than Miss Emily herself*. The mob in the story "*A Rose for Emily*" surmises and gossips unassumingly and only imparting some old news in a neighborly manner:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, *our whole town went to her funeral: the men*

through a sort of *respectful affection* for a fallen monument, *the women* mostly out of *curiosity to see the inside of her house*, which no one save an old servant – a combined gardener and cook – had seen in at least ten years.

(*Collected Stories*, 119; my emphasis added)

Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha is actually *no city at all*: it is a *small town* of the Old South. And it is not upon a hill – but rather low, surrounded by the quicksands of marshes and inscrutable swamps. The land is flat, just seldom raised by Indian mounds (superstitiously suspected to keep unlikely treasures). It is here where the name of the Yoknapatawpha river derives from: a Chickasaw Indian word, meaning “water runs slow through flat land” (251) – if we are to believe the only *translation* we can use: that of William Faulkner, “*sole owner and proprietor*” of it all – capital city included.

As for *the name of the city* – not even *that* means what it reads like. We would be wrong to make assumptions related to Thomas Jefferson, the true maker of *The Declaration of Independence*. Like most things in this Platonic (second-hand) diegesis, this hint is (purposefully) misleading. It *doubts* and *denies* – as a typically Bakhtinian *diphonic* term – the very word it writes and utters.

Placed at the core of the map, the terrible town of Jefferson (supposedly inspired by the writer’s hometown of Oxford, Mississippi – i.e. another *second-hand* Oxford...) derives its name from Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew, only so christened in honor of *the* Thomas Jefferson who championed the basic(ally divine) human “unalienable Rights to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” in what reads today as a moving poetic document: *The Declaration of Independence* of July 4, 1776 (Lemay, 689). Pettigrew as a last name sounds anti-heroic enough to counterpart the entire former two thirds of the character’s first and middle names. And yet his job as a *postman* is not as humble as it seems. *The classic messenger* between *mortals* and *gods* has a task to be envied by many – ambitious writers included.

If it were only for this autobiographical detail, we should still find here enough of a clue for an alter-ego of Faulkner himself. For a short while in his youth, in 1923, he held the job of a postmaster at Oxford University, Mississippi. Faulkner proved to be so hopeless as a postman that they had to fire him eventually.

If the writer projects himself onto Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew, it means he identifies himself with the entire Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha. A possessive poet by nature, Faulkner tells us, in his words, “Jefferson, c’est moi”. In his Deep South dialect, Flaubert’s celebrated quip translates as “William Faulkner: sole owner and proprietor”.

As the story goes for the record in *Requiem for a Nun* – a “*twice-told*” Yoknapatawpha *tale*, (after the classic model of Hawthorne), Pettigrew was elected by the (would-be) founding fathers of the town to lend his better two thirds of a name to the emerging settlement:

‘*We’re going to have a town,*’ Peabody said. ‘*We already got a church* – that’s Whitfield’s cabin. And we’re going to build *a school* as soon as we get around to it. But we’ve got to build *the courthouse* today; we’ve already got something to put in it to make it a courthouse: that iron box that’s been in Ratcliffe’s way in the store for the last ten years. *Then we’ll have a town.* We’ve already even *named her.*’

Now Pettigrew stood up, very slowly. They looked at one another. After a moment Pettigrew said, ‘So?’
 ‘Ratcliffe says *your name’s Jefferson,*’ Peabody said.
 ‘That’s right,’ Pettigrew said. ‘*Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew.* I’m from old Ferginny.’
 ‘*Any kin?*’ Peabody said.
 ‘No,’ Pettigrew said. ‘*My ma named me for him,* so I would have some of his *luck.*’
 ‘*Luck?*’ Peabody said.
 Pettigrew didn’t smile. ‘That’s right. *She didn’t mean luck.* She never had any schooling. She didn’t know *the word* she wanted to say.’
 ‘Have you had any of it?’ Peabody said. Nor did Peabody smile now. ‘I’m sorry,’ Peabody said. ‘Try to forget it.’ He said: ‘*We decided to name her Jefferson.*’

(*Requiem for a Nun*, 25; my emphasis added)

This funny dialogue occurs in “Act One, The Courthouse (A Name for the City)” of Faulkner’s 1951 hybrid book, half-play, half-novel. *Requiem for a Nun* develops around an outrageous plot. Moreover, it resumes a much earlier outrageous story: Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*, the so-called “corncob novel” of 1931.

But back here, in “Act Two, The Golden Dome (Beginning Was the Word)”, due attention is paid to Jackson – the other town in the fearful symmetry of Yoknapatawpha.

If Jefferson is the capital, the town to be in Faulkner’s mythic county, Jackson polarizes it: the Jackson institution for the mentally disabled represents the refuge for such embarrassing brothers like Benjy of the Compsons, or Darl of the Bundrens. The latter’s fanatically beloved mother, Addie Bundren, is *luckier* – if we may borrow here the catching (and most aptly) misplaced word from the funny dialogue above quoted. She is heading for Jefferson – neither in pursuit of John Winthrop’s promise of a dignified ultimate citadel of the righteous; nor as in a well-deserved “pursuit of Happiness,” as recommended by Thomas Jefferson; but rather as in some *ultimate quest of her home*. Even if that means a (burial) plot for some rest and comfort in the ultimately urban cemetery of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County...

2. Jefferson and/on the Map of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi

Jefferson forms the nucleus of William Faulkner’s fictive map. Nothing significant can happen too far from Jefferson in all of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Jefferson preceded (the very notion of) Yoknapatawpha.

There are two books to launch Jefferson on the Yoknapatawpha stage: *Sartoris* (1929) and *Flags in the Dust* (1926; 1973). Ironically, the latter is the first version, typically rejected by publishers. This is why the book with the original title had to wait eleven years after the novelist’s death before it got first published.

This is the book that opens – and ironically, from the viewpoint of *literary history*, also closes – the Yoknapatawpha saga. Yet if for the name of the county, the writer still has to grope for a while – the name of the small town that keeps it alive, quite like a beating heart, is already there.

Sartoris, the well-trimmed second version that got published during Faulkner's lifetime, bears the dedication:

To Sherwood Anderson
through whose kindness I was first published,
with the belief that this book will give him no reason
to regret that fact (*Sartoris*, V).

It is thanks to Sherwood Anderson's commonsensical advice that young William Faulkner resolved to take himself seriously and assume his own condition of *a country boy* as good enough for that of *an ambitious artist*. His words marking this turning point in his career are now famous:

I discovered that *my own little postage stamp of native soil* was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it.
(*Flags in the Dust*, VIII; my emphasis added)

He was right in every respect: he never got to live that long as to exhaust his Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County metaphoric material. William Faulkner died fifty years ago, before reaching sixty-five years of age. It seems that his Jefferson heart failed him.

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Jefferson was there before Yoknapatawpha got a name at all – which actually (and “officially”) happened no earlier than within the pages of the novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

Jefferson is Addie Bundren's last hope to get rid of her doomed loneliness among her living neighbors and kinship. Establishing the terms of their marriage, in a cool/cruel caricature of courting/contract, Addie prevails (already) over Anse, her pitiful husband-to-be, as shown in this sharp intercourse:

“Are you getting married?”

And he said again, holding his eyes to mine: “That's what I come to see you about.”

Later he told me, “I aint got no people. So that wont be no worry to you. I don't reckon you can say the same.”

“No. I have people. In Jefferson.”

His face fell a little. “Well, I got a little property. I'm forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me...”

“They might listen,” I said. “But they'll be hard to talk to.” He was watching my face. “They're in the cemetery.”

“But your living kin,” he said. “They'll be different.”

“Will they?” I said. “I don't know. I never had any other kind.”

So I took Anse.

(*As I Lay Dying*, 99; my emphasis added)

Addie is *proud* of her people in Jefferson, even if they are in the cemetery. She feels safe: she has a place where she belongs. She has a home and a family to rely on. She can still find some hope to recover her integrity: her *aloneness* had been violated enough by the living. All she has to do is die. And she has practiced that for a lifetime, getting numb in an alien community of neighbors, sons, daughter and husband:

My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward. And so I have cleaned my house¹. [...]
One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, *because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.*
(101-102; my emphasis added)

As for *the father* Addie quotes *twice* in her monologue – he sounds much too shrewd even for Jefferson, Yoknapatwpha:

I could just remember how my father used to say that *the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time.* (98; my emphasis added)

Yet here in Yoknapatwpha not even death is forever. This is *the poet's way* to render all Christian mortals' hope for resurrection and redemption. It is so shocking in its (almost) insolent novelty, that it works. Addie is one of Faulkner's best mouthpieces.

It is Moseley – the elderly considerate “respectable druggist” whom Dewey Dell approaches in Mottson (the Mottstown on the map) while the Bundrens are still on their way to Jefferson, with Addie's dead body in their wagon – who remembers:

...folks couldn't stand it². It had been dead eight days, Albert said. *They came from some place out in Yoknapatawpha³ county, trying to get to Jefferson with it.*
(118; my emphasis added)

Jefferson may stand for quite a lay representation of purgatory on the doomed map, at half the distance between the two rivers bordering it: the Tallahatchie River up north – as a possible allusion to a land of redemption, where Issetibbeha the ancient Chickasaw chief is still at home. And, deep down south, by the bottom of the map – the Yoknapatawpha River, with muddy waters pouring as if directly from hell.

¹ “Cf. Isaiah 38.1: ‘In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.’ ” (William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, The Norton Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, NY, 2010, p. 102)

² i.e. the stench of Addie's corpse in the wagon. (my explanation)

³ “Faulkner's fictional county, based on Lafayette County, Mississippi. Yoknapatwpha is the old name for the Yocona River, which runs a few miles south of Oxford, the county seat. *This is Faulkner's first use of the name.*” (WF, *As I Lay Dying*, The Norton Edition, 2010, footnote 1 on page 118; my emphasis.)

The Pine Hills surrounding Faulkner's Jefferson bear an ambiguous name. On the one hand, as a common noun, *pine* originally means a fresh fragrant kind of tree resembling a fir-tree; but, on second thoughts, if read as a verb, the same word means *to long for, to yearn, to waste away with grief*. *The Pine Hills* on his map are Faulkner's *hills of pining: of loss and desire. Of mourning, missing, and despair*. Like Melville's mythic monster – both a *whale* and a *wail*, dragging the crew of "The Pequod" round the map of the world, to follow her magnificent *tale* (or *tail*)...

Could we read this familiar map from a different angle and see in Faulkner's *Pine Hills* his subtle metaphor of an ageless *Vale of Woe*? Therefore, this small town disguised as the capital of a rural county is a *citadel of sorrow*, a city built – not on any hill like Winthrop's, but rather embedded in a *valley of defeat and failure*:

Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

(*The Sound and the Fury*, 48; my emphasis added)

Just like Quentin Compson's father, William Faulkner – "sole owner and proprietor" – nurtures no illusion of vain victory. No hope for fair acknowledgement. No dusty dreams of provincial heroism. No expectation of gratitude or mere retribution. Therefore: this lucid writer stepping *within* his fictive map, provided with sound supplies of irony and doubt, is – paradoxically – a true idealist.

3. Of Maps and/as Palimpsests: Charting Jefferson Again

In Yoknapatawpha, *remapping is a matter of style* – if not of rule. In

1945, Faulkner returns to *The Sound and the Fury*, his 1929 novel, his "most beloved failure", to add up Appendix Compson 1699-1945. Still the story "would not be told", as the story-maker complains.

Likewise, there are two versions of Faulkner's map: one by the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, his 1936 novel (published during the same year with Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*). The second version was issued one decade later, in 1946, when Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County got "surveyed and mapped for this volume by William Faulkner" to appear in Malcolm Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner*. From the original legend of 1936

Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha Co, Mississippi
Area, 2400 sq. miles
Population, Whites, 6298
Negroes, 9313

William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor

(*Absalom, Absalom!* 408-409),

the formulation changes to

Jefferson *and* Yoknapatawpha County,
Mississippi, 1945,

Surveyed and mapped for this volume by William Faulkner

(Cowley, *ii*; my emphasis)

By 1945, Jefferson had become *a separate fictive entity* from the County of Yoknapatawpha. Faulkner marks this *remapping* of his small town capital by adding up the conjunction *and*, establishing thus a relation of equality between his main urban space and the rest of (mostly) rural Yoknapatawpha County.

Yet, for all the differences between them, the two versions of the map pulsate – from beneath layer upon layer of stories – in the rhythm of the same Jefferson heartbeat.

The year 1945 signifies therefore at least *this double remapping* : of both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Nothing ever occurs just once in Yoknapatawpha. And no death is ever secure (tongue-in-cheek, Faulkner looks over his shoulder to Poe, the great romantic: great writers make great readers...). Moreover, the best remembered of Faulkner's protagonists – most of whom are Jefferson citizens, such as Quentin Compson, Addie Bundren, Emily Grierson and many others – have to die first before they can make us aware of their presence on the haunted map. Once a Jeffersonian, always a Jeffersonian.

Perhaps this is what makes any endeavor to deconstruct various samples of Yoknapatawpha lore so demanding.

We know that Faulkner's (obstinate and obsessive) stylistic virtuosity has earned him an outstanding first rank among all modern writers of the world.

But when it comes to Jefferson, we must remember that the particular literary trend championing the dirty cold *cityscape* against cheap sentimental imagery of "pure" *nature* calls itself *naturalism*.

How much of it can we depict in Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi?

For this we must record here again Faulkner's admiration and indebtedness to the great American naturalists. Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) is his most likely influence here. Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) has maintained to this day its place in the universal literary canon as *the greatest of all American urban novels*. Its protagonist, Carrie Meeber fails in her attempt to achieve her version of the American Dream – despite all deceiving appearances. The Broadway star cannot elude a devastating sense of emptiness, underlying her glamorous success on the stage. At the heart of her hearts – *Carrie will remain the country girl*: like Theodore Dreiser himself; but then also like William Faulkner, the master-player on *his stage-like map*. Lonesome Caroline Meeber from Columbia City, a small town in Wisconsin, is hard to delude. If Flaubert said "Emma Bovary, c'est moi" – much of the same could be true for Dreiser's Carrie and Faulkner's Caddy. Albeit what makes the big city glitter is the real gold of money, something is still missing.

Sister Caddy is *being missed* herself by all her three brothers back home, in Jefferson. If Dreiser's Sister Carrie went away from her Wisconsin small town, to

conquer Chicago, and then New York, with all the provincial girl's desperate ambition – Faulkner's Sister Caddy went away from Jefferson and

Vanished in Paris with the German occupation, 1940, still beautiful and probably still wealthy too, since she did not look within fifteen years of her actual fortyeight, and was not heard of again.

(*The Sound and the Fury*, 208)

The Caddy of the *Appendix* is rather a ghost, a vision of “the county librarian, a mouse-sized and -colored woman who had never married, who had passed through the city schools in the same class with Candace” (208). Yet she is all the more present in the book, since they all miss her in her pitiful pompous small town of Jefferson. Whereas the *city librarian*, still there in her home town, fails to get her presence acknowledged by (almost) anyone; she cannot help reminding us of Melville's *sub-sub-librarian* left for ever *ashore* in his preliminary obscure “Extracts” episode (10), before Ismael's quest of Moby Dick's account starts unfolding itself. Faulkner's *mousy librarian* owes something also to the “late consumptive *usher* to a grammar school”, only existent within the brackets added just below the “Etymology” page that offers deluding versions of that mysterious word's possible sources: *whale* (9).

Likewise, Faulkner's *city librarian* remains somehow out of the main story, yet cannot be ignored. She recognizes Caddy in “a picture, a photograph in color, clipped obviously from a slick magazine – a picture filled with luxury and money and sunlight” (209).

When she takes Caddy's photo to Jason, and then to Dilsey, none of them wants to have anything to do with it.

Like Sister Carrie, Sister Caddy ends up a stranger to her sordid native little town. Their kind of victory over the mediocre world they leave back home behind themselves has a bitter price: that devastating sense of alienation and guilt (and selfishness), of *the great city*, be it (Dreiser's) New York or (Faulkner's) Paris.

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Faulkner's most beloved fictive sister, Caddy Compson, was bound to haunt him as an allegory of *his own country boy's ambition* to assert himself as *an important writer* one day, when *anyone in the city* would be *aware* of him as *making a difference*:

One day I seemed to shut a door between me and all the publishers' addresses and book lists. I said to myself, Now I can write. Now I can make myself a vase like that which the old Roman kept at his bedside and wore the rim of slowly away with kissing it. *So I, who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl.*⁴ (228; my emphasis added)

⁴ This famous quotation never got published during the writer's lifetime. It belongs to the former version of William Faulkner's two Introductions to *The Sound and the Fury*, both written in 1933. They were recovered respectively in 1972 and 1973. (See the Norton Edition of WF's *TSATF*, 1994, pp. 225-232.)

In the rural desert of Yoknapatawpha County, Faulkner's version of the American Dream means accomplishing a remarkable writer's career. Caddy Compson is the *fata Morgana*, alluring him to a *magnificent city* never to be really and/or completely conquered.

4. Obituaries and/of Jefferson Lost Belles

Because what Flem found that last time was *inside* Uncle Billy's house. She was his only daughter and youngest child, *not just a local belle but a belle throughout that whole section*. [...] She wasn't too big, heroic, what they call Junoesque. It was that there was *just too much of what she was* for any one human female package to contain, and hold: *too much of white, too much of female, too much of maybe just glory*, I don't know: so that at first sight of her you felt a kind of shock of *gratitude just for being alive* and being male at the same instant with her in space and time, and then the next second and forever after a kind of despair because you knew that there never would be enough of any one male to match and hold and deserve her; grief forever after, because forever after nothing less would ever do.

(*The Town*, 9; my emphasis added)

So far we have mentioned *three* possible (*feminine*) instances in which Faulkner could identify himself with the fictive object of his passion: with the entire town of Jefferson – in the first place; next, with Addie Bundren, herself reminiscent of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne of Puritan Boston; then with Caddy Compson, Faulkner's soul mate – if he had ever had a sister. Now a *fourth version* of the Flaubertian echo in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is Eula Varner Snopes. And it is obviously the most appropriate of all. Indeed, William Faulkner could say, "Eula Varner Snopes, c'est moi."

The Town (1957) – the middle and rather mellow volume of *The Snopeses' Trilogy* – has often been regarded with some superciliousness by literary critics. Yet this novel is not only highly enjoyable, but also vital in our attempt to trace back all the possible clues to Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha. In point of narrative technique, it is an unmistakable Faulknerian product; the story is told by three voices, all male: Charles Mallison Jr., Gavin Stevens, and – last but not least – V. K. Ratliff. Despite all differences in point of age and cultural background, the three narrators share a devoted admiration for Eula Varner Snopes.

Charles Mallison Jr. is an older acquaintance for readers of Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), a novel with an apparently detective story plot, yet with much more troubling issues at stake, such as terms of morality and interracial tolerance in the same little town of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha. Still an adolescent, Charles Mallison acquires the main part in the intricate story, proving the courage to demonstrate that his friend, Lucas Beauchamp, is innocent, and saving the latter from the lynching mob of the same terrible town.

Gavin Stevens is the District Attorney of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha, in more than one novel: *Light in August* (1932), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) and *The Snopeses' Trilogy: The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* and *The Mansion* (1959). A Harvard man and a Ph D of Heidelberg University, Gavin is Judge Stevens's son, Maggie Mallison's twin brother, Charles's uncle, and a bachelor until very late in his life, i.e. by the end of *The Mansion*, the novel in which he finally gets married. This will give him time enough to pine in vain for both Eula and her daughter, Linda. Moreover, he will stay a confirmed (and rather comic, sometimes) defender of Jefferson against *Snopesishness*. Of course, his name Gavin resounds of allusions to Sir Gawain of *King Arthur's Round Table Legends*. Gavin Stevens is Faulkner's caricature of *Old South chivalrousness* – and yet this is a caricature drawn with the due tenderness and affection for what it symbolizes.

If Gavin Stevens is the Don Quixote of Jefferson, V. K. Ratliff is his Sancho Panza correspondent. Gavin Stevens is *the dreamer* – another Jeffersonian alter-ego of William Faulkner himself; V.K. Ratliff is *the raisonneur*. He earns his living as a salesman of sewing machines and all sorts of household merchandise, all around Yoknapatawpha. But his true (“active”, as he would say meaning “actual”) *mission* is to *keep the story flowing*. Ratliff (a.k.a. Suratt on the 1936 map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha) is a born storyteller. His main gift though is *to collect* the story ingredients: this he can only do by *the art of listening*. Therefore, if Gavin Stevens is *the great orator*, V. K. Ratliff is *the good listener*. The two friends share an inexhaustible curiosity about human nature. But Ratliff corresponds to *the great reader in the writer's mind* of William Faulkner. What the novelist conveys by Ratliff's mouthpiece is a particular kind of pragmatic wisdom, full of humor but also compassion for his Yoknapatawpha folks. Sometimes Ratliff's thoughts, even when uttered out loud, take certain tones reminding us of Mark Twain.

Flem Snopes is the quintessence of the Faulknerian *abject*. Jefferson would never be Jefferson without (the likes of) Flem Snopes. It simply would not function without this supreme 20th century embodiment of what we call today *the banality of evil*. For a shortcut to the definition of *Snopesishness* we have to follow two main characteristics of Flem Snopes:

- a) his unflinching pursuit of *social development*, money making, “respectability;”
- b) his awesome propensity for *family development*: all along *The Snopeses' Trilogy*, their kinship coming from nowhere will spread all over Yoknapatawpha County, finally invading Jefferson, too.

He is the *ultimate upstart persona* – maybe in the entire world literature, if it were not for such predecessors like Dickens's or Dostoevsky's. Faulkner's Flem Snopes is even more disgusting than Charles Dickens's Uriah Heep from the novel of *David Copperfield* (1849-1850). Starting his “career” at Bill Varner's store in Frenchman's Bend, Flem Snopes marries Eula Varner to provide a “respectable” father to Linda, Hoake McCarron's natural daughter. Together they will settle up in Jefferson, where Flem Snopes becomes president of Old Bayard Sartoris's Bank, by means of the basest blackmail.

This blackmail makes use of a classic sexual scandal: the *eighteen years* old illicit love affair between Eula, Flem's wife, and Manfred de Spain, a member of one of the oldest aristocratic families in town, the actual president of Old Bayard Sartoris's bank.

The (threat with the) sexual scandal will serve Flem Snopes to snatch the old Sartorises' bank and become its president instead of Manfred de Spain, his wife's beau:

Why only now? It was one thing as long as the husband accepted it; it became another when somebody – how did you put it? – catches them, blows the gaff? They become *merely sinners* then, criminals then, lepers then? *Nothing for constancy, nothing for fidelity, nothing for devotion, unpoliced devotion, eighteen years of devotion?*

(271; my emphasis added)

What Eula and Manfred did “had a consecration of its own” – just like what Hester and Arthur did, in Hawthorne's romance *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Nor is the husband any less of a torturer in Faulkner's Jefferson than he once was in Hawthorne's Boston: “He has violated in cold blood the sanctity of a human heart” (166).

What the community, the town folks, the public opinion, *the mob and its gossips* cannot forgive is precisely this *enduring affection between two people*. Neither Hawthorne, nor Faulkner will mask their sheer *disdain for the mob*. No mercy for the stupidity of the immortal spirit of the flock: this remains the message of their books over the years.

Eula Varner Snopes belongs to *no city upon a hill*, but she certainly belongs to some plot in Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County. Like alien Addie Bundren, the poor white trash schoolteacher, from the forlorn hamlet just below Yoknapatawpha River – Eula, Will Varner's splendid daughter, belongs to this most dignified cemetery. She arrives here aged thirty eight years, having killed herself. Speculations as to the reason of Eula's suicide will lead (next to) nowhere:

He [i.e. Uncle Gavin in Charles Mallison's recalling] sat there looking at Ratliff.

“Why? Why did she have to? Why did she? *The waste. The terrible waste. To waste all that, when it was not hers to waste, not hers to destroy because it is too valuable, belonged to too many, too little if it to waste, destroy, throw away and be no more.*” He looked at Ratliff.

“Tell me, V.K. Why?”

“*Maybe she was bored,*” Ratliff said.

(*The Town*, 308; my emphasis added)

Very much like Quentin Compson's *June Second 1910* demise, Eula Varner's suicide is preceded by an absurd gesture of farewell. Addie Bundren was so keen on paying her duty to the world she was leaving by *cleaning her house first*. Quentin Compson took care to *brush his teeth* before he went drowning himself. Eula Varner also found a special gesture to perform as a *polite* good-bye to Jefferson – she went to the beauty parlor to have her hair done before she put a bullet into her head:

Then I saw Mrs Snopes. She had just come out of the beauty parlour and as soon as you looked at her you could tell that's where she had been and I remembered how Mother said once she was the only woman in Jefferson that never went to one because she didn't need to since there

was nothing in a beauty parlour that she could have lacked. (267)

The Town is an authentic *American romance*, in which William Faulkner assumes the voice of Gavin Stevens in the latter's monologue silently uttered while contemplating Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha:

Because the tragedy of life is, it *must* be premature, inconclusive and inconcludable, in order to be life; it *must* be before itself, in advance of itself, to have been at all. (274; my emphasis added)

This ineffable nostalgia is of little help – alas! – when it comes to the dilemmas that the District Attorney has to face. His cases concern murder, racial intolerance, rape, burglary. Flem Snopes's cynicism is finally defeated by the hope for revenge that keeps his murdering cousin, Mink, alive for thirty-eight years, at Parchman, the terrible prison-cotton-farm for life-convicts. Joe Christmas, Nancy Mannigoe – on the other hand – are murderers each with a case that no straightforward punishment can solve.

With William Faulkner, ambiguity is much more than just a matter of literary style. It is a matter of moral dilemma. His books will not let any reader indifferent. Most of them invite the reader to Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha.

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There are numerous well-known *pairs of books* that make Faulkner and us, his readers, *redraw his palimpsestic map*: *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936); or, *The Sound and the Fury* and its *Appendix* of 1945; *Sanctuary* (1931) and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951); *Flags in the Dust* (1973) and *Sartoris* (1929); let alone the short-stories – sometimes in (just as powerful) an echo to the great novels.

The 1936 map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, by the end of the book *Absalom, Absalom!* is reconsidered and reconfigured in 1945, for Malcolm Cowley's volume *The Portable Faulkner* (1946).

Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha is a *live metaphor* – in terms of Paul Ricoeur's definition – of the *Faulknerian urban space*. Hence, it commands (*re*)*charting*.

Even if nothing is there for the first time, before the eyes of our imagination – this means that Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha is still open for its new visitors and old charters alike.

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