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## Faulkner and Mississippi

by Carvel Collins

In this lecture I want to talk about the fact that Mississippians often have thought William Faulkner denigrated Mississippi and about how we might partly explain that. In doing so I want to use *As I Lay Dying* for the chief illustration.

First of all, William Faulkner obviously loved his home state. He said so, his works show it; and it would be natural for him to feel that way. Just two or three illustrations so there will be as much time as possible for looking at certain relevant aspects of *As I Lay Dying*: When producers wanted to buy screen rights to *Light in August* Faulkner said that if they made the picture in Hollywood he would charge them \$300,000 but if they made it in Mississippi he would charge them \$150,000. In a nice little sentence this clipping says, "So they decided to do it in Mississippi." Faulkner said of himself, "I write about Oxford because it's all I know. I've lived here all my life and any time I've been away, I've come back as soon as possible." And most of his works, as you have been seeing all this week, are embedded in Mississippi. I found one aspect of that fact somewhat trying but in the end satisfactory and amusing: Whenever I came here in the years following 1947 I felt I could not ask Mr. Faulkner about his work, for I assumed that was taboo; so we talked about other things. But after I had visited Oxford a number of times he must have found it quite funny that though I was here to learn about his writing I could not ask him about it; so his compassion took over: As I was walking out of his house early one morning to get into my car for a day of questioning people about their associations with him, he came as close to buttonholing me as I think he would ever do—you cannot think of him as really buttonholing anybody—and, stopping me there on his porch with great amusement, especially in his eyes, he ran off a list of people I should talk with and a list of Oxford and county buildings and places and events he had used in his works—answering many of the unasked questions I had wanted to put to him in the previous years and had felt I should not. So, he himself was quite willing to point out that in detail he had used as a

base for his fiction the region you have been seeing during this conference.

But William Faulkner, of course, wrote through that regional reality to something larger. Earlier today in speaking with a discussion group it seemed suitable to point out that when Camus and his colleagues, while the Germans were occupying France, turned to the works of William Faulkner they did not do so because they were interested in the history or sociology of a particular region in a foreign country. Surely it was because they found that Faulkner was speaking to the human condition in general. In 1958 a professor here at the University of Mississippi, John Pilkington, put it very well in an article which observed that Faulkner had expanded the Mississippi locale into the universal.

Faulkner himself said, "A writer doesn't write about a place. He writes about people, and people are the same wherever they are." Many people in this state, though, have not liked what Faulkner wrote about life in Mississippi. One's files are full of recorded objections to the picture which William Faulkner presented to the world. To give you just two or three samples: This first clipping is from a Mississippi newspaper:

The "Deep South Mayhem" school of literature has become the biggest money-maker for New York publishers. Land below the Mason-Dixon Line is presented as peopled with decadents, degenerates, perverts, half-wits and poltroons by authors indigenous to the South. . . .

The father of this school of Southern defamation is William Faulkner. His thousands of disciples, with nothing to recommend them but possession of a typewriter and some slight knowledge of Freud, make the whole region look like a "Snakepit." Now he has been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

The leaders of the South . . . should start a revolt against these propagandists of degradation. The United Nations might use the UNESCO to protest.

There has been, of course, some regional support of William Faulkner. For example, *The Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, a newspaper aimed at Mississippi as well as Tennessee, while discussing Faulkner's works in this 1951 clipping did say that literature "would be dull indeed if [it] were monopolized by sweetness and light." But the objections to Faulkner's treatment of Mississippi have been continual, and I will read from one more such clipping because it contains an element I want later to look at while using *As I Lay Dying*

for illustration: “. . . Mr. Faulkner’s desire for money has . . . led him to writing of unnatural rape [I puzzled about that for some time] and the stink of bodies long dead but unburied. . . .” My talk today grows out of the latter part of that accusation because Faulkner’s permitting the corpse of Mrs. Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* to go so “long dead but unburied” has been cited more than once as evidence that his works fail to give an accurate impression of life in this state.

Quite aware of such objections to his fiction, Faulkner said in 1959, “I fear some of my fellow Mississippians will never forgive that \$30,000 that darn foreign country gave me for . . . writing stuff that makes my own state ashamed to own me.” And now to read to you a related statement by Faulkner, which is in this 1951 article, clipped from *The Western Review*: Lavon Rascoe asked him, “Why do you present the picture you do of our area?” and added “. . . don’t you think it gives a wrong impression?” Faulkner replied, “Yes, and I’m sorry.” Today I want to discuss with you the question, What is going on here; why did Faulkner, aware that he was giving a wrong impression, continue to give it?

One of the first relevant points is that much early criticism considered Faulkner to be a sociologist. An influential early essay by George Marion O’Donnell contributed to that conception. A good poet, a sensitive critic, O’Donnell gave important help to Faulkner’s career by early saying that he was a real writer, by early saying he was worth reading, by plugging Faulkner’s works with, for example, a regionally influential book reviewer on one of the Memphis newspapers. O’Donnell’s famous essay led many to think that Faulkner’s main, if not sole, concern was with the social and political conflict in Mississippi between the highest class and the lowest. O’Donnell presented that idea in an imaginative way, but when his followers took it up, as often happens, they sometimes simplified it until it became brutally sociological as though Faulkner had only one subject. I have to deal delicately with my conception of George Marion O’Donnell: When he came to teach in Cambridge and had not yet found an apartment, he stayed for a week with my wife and daughter and me. My daughter then was very young, tiny, and O’Donnell volunteered a remark about her which would delight any parent: “She is tremendously precocious without being a monster.” Obviously O’Donnell was a man of excellent judgment. So I want to stress that it was his disciples who forced his conception of Faulkner’s

works into an excessively sociological direction. Faulkner, aware of that conception, said in 1956 that "it does sort of amuse me when I hear 'em talking about the sociological picture that I present in something like *As I Lay Dying*, for instance."

Residents of Mississippi have been inclined to object to William Faulkner's fiction not just because some of his characters are rapists or half-wits or people who, in what seems to many to be a half-witted way, haul a dead body around for a long time but because that fiction seems to them in general to contain an insufficient magnolia quotient. Faulkner was making a local joke when in *Sanctuary* he gave the name "Binford" to the fictional character whose mistress ran the brothel. An actual and very upright Mr. Binford was then famous in this region as a book and movie censor opposed to pornography. But he objected to another aspect as well: he is said to have wanted, for example, to prohibit the screening of the now famous movie *The Southerner* because it showed large numbers of shacks rather than the proper proportion of excellent, larger houses which were available. And Mr. Binford's feeling on that and related matters has been shared by many others loyal to this region as they have read the works of William Faulkner.

Faulkner, of course, received innumerable influences other than local geography and event. For one thing, he read widely, as we all know. When he once visited at my house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and I asked whether I might have in some friends, he said, "Certainly." So I weeded the possible list to find those who would not ask for autographs. I was delighted that Mr. Faulkner seemed to like them—so much, in fact, that after lunch when we went into the living room he stood with his elbow on the mantel and gave an extended account of life in Mississippi in a straight, fascinating monologue. Later, when one of the guests asked where else he planned to visit in New England, Mr. Faulkner said, with an amused expression, that he was thinking about going to Nantucket "to see whether that slippery-footed cow is still there." He presumably was referring to the passage early in *Moby-Dick* in which Ishmael, overwhelmed at Nantucket by the maritime aspect of the island and making tall-story elaborations about it, says that the only choices of food are fish chowder or clam chowder and speaks of a cow who is standing on the beach with unstable support because each of her feet is on the head of a codfish. Faulkner in this indirect way seemed

willing to make clear that he knew Melville's work in detail, as any reader of the chapter on the bear in *Go Down, Moses* is aware.

But about taking a dead body lengthily around Mississippi: The Bundrens, as you remember, place Mrs. Bundren's corpse in a coffin, haul it on a wagon, upset it into a river, and park it overnight in a barn which one of them sets on fire. As the days of their transporting the coffin go by, the olfactory sense of the people whom the wagon passes is outraged. And before the cortege ends its prolonged journey, it is accompanied by vultures flying steadily above it. In short, your ordinary, everyday Mississippi funeral.

Obviously the citizens of Mississippi who object that this is an inaccurate picture of life in this state are quite justified. The trouble is that professional literary criticism of Faulkner's work did not come forward early enough in an effective way to help them understand that Faulkner in one sense was not writing about Mississippi. An essay by T. S. Eliot may have been vital to Faulkner by helping point him in the direction that made his best works so great that we are all gathered here this week because of them. That famous essay, published in 1923 in *The Dial*, a magazine available to Faulkner, was a review of James Joyce's novel, *Ulysses*, and it is there that Eliot identified and named the "mythical method" as Joyce's way of writing his novel. My point is that Faulkner wrote *As I Lay Dying* by that mythical method and in doing so skillfully connected the death and overlong funeral of Addie Bundren to Greek mythology and was in no way intending to represent Mississippi in sociological or local-color fashion. When Faulkner, asked whether he thought he gave "a wrong picture of this area," replied, "Yes, and I'm sorry," he gave that answer in part, I believe, because of his use of the mythical method, which I want now to discuss.

Eliot in that review of *Ulysses* described how Joyce had arranged for us to follow the surface story of Dublin in 1904 and at the same time continually—and significantly—remember the *Odyssey* and its mythic characters and events which he relates to the story:

It is here that Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance. It has the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: . . . in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [Eliot was one who was to pursue it often, and Faulkner was another.] They will not be imitators, any

more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art. . .

The next sentence seems to me very moving as one thinks of William Faulkner, far from publishing centers and at that time artistically alone, reading these concluding words by Eliot: "And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance."

The essence of the mythical method as Joyce used it in *Ulysses* all of you know, but I should give a brief recapitulation with a minimum of illustration. Joyce made the events in Dublin parallel to the events in the *Odyssey*. He arranged Leopold Bloom's character and involvements to remind us of Ulysses, and Stephen's to remind us of Telemachus. The Dublin newspaper office, continually used by critics as a handy example, reminds us of Homer's cave of the winds and is a critical commentary on twentieth-century journalism and its output. When a citizen of Dublin throws a food container after the fleeing Bloom we remember that the Cyclops threw a rock after Ulysses. At the end of Joyce's novel, when Bloom is lying with his head at the foot of the bed, the scene contains more of the mythical method's fundamental inversion than just that: Bloom, here at the end of *Ulysses* like Ulysses at the end of the *Odyssey*, is in bed with his wife, but he is unlike Ulysses—who has slain Penelope's suitors—because Molly Bloom is about to leave with her lover on a concert tour. No Ulysses, Bloom is not in full command of his "kingdom."

In constructing *The Sound and the Fury* by the mythical method Faulkner headed each of the four sections of the novel with a date, the sequence of the four dates being a Thursday, 1910; Good Friday, 1928; Holy Saturday, 1928; and Easter Sunday, 1928. Carefully examined, these sections clearly present characters who are in

detailed inverted parallel to Christ during Passion Week just as the impractical and in many ways unsuccessful Bloom of Joyce's novel is parallel in an inverted way to the overwhelmingly competent Ulysses. On Thursday of Holy Week, Christ had the Last Supper, talked with His Father, was captured by a mob, and was taken to be judged. In Quentin's monologue of *The Sound and the Fury*, to which Faulkner gave the date of a Thursday, Quentin is captured by the mob of immigrants, he is taken to be judged, he remembers a long talk with his father, and he has a last supper with fellow students. The details of the parallel are innumerable, but to give just one example, on Maunday Thursday the bells are silenced, not to ring again until Easter morning when Christ is risen; Quentin, on the Thursday of his monologue, continually tries to silence the Cambridge bells by escaping from their sound. Faulkner does all of this realistically; Quentin Compson is not a Christ figure, he is "real," a son of the Compsons who is at Harvard.

To move to the next day in *The Sound and the Fury*—and I will continue to be sketchy because this still is not our subject—on Good Friday Christ was put upon the cross at noon and His spirit, according to liturgy, left the cross at three in the afternoon. Jason Compson in his monologue, which is headed by the date which was Good Friday, 1928, enters cotton speculation at what is also noon and is sold out at what is also three o'clock—by Jewish brokers. In the Middle Ages, Good Friday had as one of its official aspects the vilification of the Jews, and Faulkner presents Jason's anti-Semitism as part of his defective character. Jason in this commercial crucifixion—and parallel details here as elsewhere are voluminous—is as different as possible from Christ. That is the point. When I began to present this concept years ago in opposition to the widely-held early view that Faulkner's novels were primarily discussing sociological matters, some readers objected that it was sacrilege to equate Christ and the vicious Jason Compson. I suppose it would be, but I was saying that Faulkner made the unloving Jason exactly, in the mythical method's detailed but inverted way, unlike Christ.

Benjy Compson's monologue, given by Faulkner the date which is Holy Saturday, 1928, shows the retarded Benjy as a submerged person who reminds us, in the mythical method's inversion, of Christ in the underworld on that day. Christ went into the underworld, planted a cross, took over from Satan, and harrowed Hell to



select for salvation the good people who had died before his dispensation. Benjy in his monologue is also in a world of death: he has as a hobby a miniature graveyard, he likes to visit the family cemetery plot, he remembers the killing of pigs. He is led around by a boy called Luster (Satan is traditionally thought of as a shining one) who dominates Benjy, even to the point of burning him. Christ dominated the underworld on Holy Saturday; Benjy, on Holy Saturday of 1928, in the mythical method's inversion, is dominated.

In the final section of *The Sound and the Fury*, which is headed by the date of Easter Sunday, 1928, Miss Quentin is not to be found that morning in her room where some of her clothing is strewn about because she has left in a hurry. On Easter Sunday morning Christ was not to be found in His tomb, and that His grave clothes were still there was interpreted as a sign of affirmation. We, unlike the observers of Christ's empty tomb, feel sure that Miss Quentin will never return.

Though parallels of this sort can be rich sources of episode and detail for an author, surely one of their chief functions for Faulkner was to provide contrast. Before Christ went up to be a redeemer through love He gave His disciples the eleventh commandment: "That ye love one another as I have loved you." *The Sound and the Fury*, in spite of the widely accepted critical view that it primarily depicts the decay of the Mississippi aristocracy, is about the psychological problems of a family and the emotional disaster which results. It is not about economic conditions in Mississippi, it is not an examination of how well-to-do families such as the Compsons were thought to have been replaced by others as they lost their land; they do lose their land, but the novel actually gives no explanation of that. *The Sound and the Fury* is not a work of sociology, it is a work of psychology. The Compsons go down to disaster, and by using the mythical method to contrast their situation with the Christian ideal of love, Faulkner makes us even more aware of the extent and nature of their failure.

Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* used Christian religion as a contrast to the unloving way of the Compsons; in *As I Lay Dying* he used Greek religion for a similar purpose. That part of Greek mythology which he used was the worship of Demeter in the Eleusinian Mysteries. Years ago, in the 1957 special Faulkner issue of *The Princeton Library Chronicle*, I published an account of this matter. I

had been reading *As I Lay Dying*, thinking of *The Golden Bough* which Eliot mentioned in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and wondering about small, somewhat odd things which appear in Faulkner's novel. There is nothing overtly placed in *As I Lay Dying* in order to guide us at once to think of a so-called "hidden" parallel—nothing like the title of *Ulysses* which Joyce put there to guide us to the *Odyssey* or the liturgical dates which Faulkner put in *The Sound and the Fury* to help us notice the inverted parallel with Passion Week—but there are in it several somewhat strangely emphasized items. Having to go off to a class, I asked a graduate student assistant to look in the index of the one-volume edition of *The Golden Bough* to see whether several of those somewhat strangely noticeable items were clustered around any particular pages. When I came back from class he told me that many of them appeared in the account of the myth of Demeter. When one looked further it became at once quite clear that Faulkner was making use of the religion of Demeter in writing *As I Lay Dying* and that, as with *The Sound and the Fury*, the religion is one of love and that its relationship to the surface story is inverted.

In writing *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner gave himself the entertaining project of repeating in it much of *The Sound and the Fury* but making it different. Here are interior monologues but done in a different way. Here too is a family with a daughter pregnant and unmarried but presented differently. To go through this quickly, and repeating some of what I published long ago: Demeter, buxom and comforting, is the all-loving mother. Addie Bundren, thin and grim, is a completely nonloving mother to her son Darl. When Darl in his monologues, of which he has more than any other character, continually shows that he believes his mother never gave him attention, we think he is imagining or at least exaggerating. Then well along in the book when we read Addie's only monologue we find her saying that she actually never did give attention to him. The novel, I continue to argue, is chiefly an account of the damage to Darl who finally is driven to the insane asylum by his mother's unloving mistreatment of him. The religion of Demeter emphasized love and fertility: As you know, when Persephone was picking flowers Hades abducted her into the dark underworld. Demeter, in grief at the loss of her daughter, withdrew her support from fertility. When Demeter was able to get Persephone back from the underworld, she again fostered fertility and growth. You will remember that Dewey Dell

Bundren, picking not flowers but cotton, is working down a row saying to herself that if her cotton sack is full when she gets to the end of the row she will let Lefe make love to her. Lefe must have extrasensory perception, for a little later, in one of the book's many humorous passages, when she asks him what he is doing he replies that he is picking into her sack. They get to the end of the row, the sack is full, Lefe takes her into the thrice-mentioned "secret shade," and she becomes pregnant. Thereafter Dewey Dell's desire is to get an abortion. If you want a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree reversal of fertility, surely abortion is that. For Faulkner to have one of the novel's characters which remind us of the mythology of Demeter, goddess of fertility, trying to have her unborn baby taken from her is an effective application of Joyce's mythical method.

The fanning of Addie which appears in *As I Lay Dying* puzzled me some because in the surface story of the Bundrens there is a slightly too noticeable emphasis on it. Fans were very much a part of summer life in the days before air conditioning. As I remember from childhood on farms near small country towns, many business firms issued their advertising on cardboard fans like those you have been seeing this week nostalgically used as menus at The Warehouse Restaurant here in Oxford. So it is realistic enough for Dewey Dell to be using a fan at Addie's deathbed, but the fan was one of Demeter's most notable symbols because of its use at the threshing floor to winnow grain, of which Demeter was the goddess.

Jewel Bundren is the son of Addie and minister Whitfield, a man of God; in some versions of Greek myth Dionysus is the son of Demeter and the head god. Jewel does seem to be presented in intentional inversion of Dionysus, whose worship the Greeks joined with the worship of Demeter. For example, he is wooden, stiff, and not free while Dionysus was associated with freedom from restraint. That alone, of course, would not prove anything, but a number of details appear which give support to this contention. As samples, when the barn is burning and Vardaman watches the men coming out to fight the fire wearing nightshirts and carrying lanterns, he notices that the lanterns light the men's hairy legs. That is quite realistic in the surface story. But just as Jewel Bundren is at the grim center of these excited hairy-legged fire fighters, Dionysus was at the center of his followers, "the Pans, Satyrs, and Silenuses" who, Frazer wrote, were "closely associated with him and are represented

more or less completely in the form of goats.” When Jewel brings the coffin out of the burning barn, the novel says of the sparks which fall on his undershirt that they “bloom like flowers.” That too is realistic enough, but to remember that Dionysus was depicted as garlanded with flowers seems reasonable when reading a novel with so many other references back to myth. Jewel’s sudden and unexplained appearances and disappearances correspond to the epiphanies of Dionysus. And Faulkner must have enjoyed himself as he incorporated such small details of the parallel as this: he presented Jewel when a young boy so sleepy from secretly working for a neighbor through many nights that Addie found him at milking time dozing and fallen forward into the partially filled dairy pail. That is completely realistic yet probably related, in view of Faulkner’s general practice and his specific technique in this novel, to an aspect of the worship of Dionysus—the mysterious, ritualistic statement, “I a kid fell into the milk.” Faulkner does seem to have arranged for us to notice the connection of Jewel with that Greek god.

Now and then in *As I Lay Dying* the mythic matters surface in ways which reduce the realism of the twentieth-century story as they never did in Joyce’s *Ulysses* or, for that matter, in *The Sound and the Fury*. There is oddly notable stress on the sulphurous air over the Bundren’s side of the river, which may be to help us remember that in the mythic parallel their side of the river is related to the lower world in which Hades kept Persephone. When Tull stands on the Bundren’s side of the flooded river and looks at the bridge, which is under water at its middle but rises from the water at the other bank, he thinks, slightly too pointedly, that going to the other bank would be like coming up from the underside of the world. Speaking of the bridge, I might point out that the novel says the bridge was built so that Dr. Peabody could travel back and forth across the river. A symbol of doctors is the caduceus, the staff with entwined serpents which was the symbol of the god who could travel back and forth between the upperworld and the underworld.

When I published this conception years ago in the article I just mentioned—an article which was too short to include the voluminous supportive details—there was considerable hostility to it. Come to think of it, there still is. Some people did not and still do not like to hear such a theory, partly because of their firm belief that *As I Lay Dying* is literary sociology or history. Frederick J. Hoffman early did

what he could to kill off the spread of this conception that Faulkner used the mythical method. The editor of the Sunday *Book Review* section of the late New York *Herald Tribune* sent me in 1951 the newly published volume titled *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*, edited by Hoffman and Olga Vickery, and said that right then she had so many reviews to publish in such limited space that I should only write a review of it if I found it overwhelmingly outstanding. Though there were, as you know, excellent articles in the book, I felt that the study of Faulkner already had moved beyond some of it, especially Hoffman's introduction. When I told her that I did not think it was as overwhelming as she required, she did not publish a review. Hoffman naturally was unhappy when no review appeared in the Sunday *Tribune*; so he asked the editor about it. To my misfortune she must have been nodding, for she told Hoffman that she had not printed a review because Carvel Collins had said the book was not worth reviewing. Hoffman—who, as those of you who knew him will remember, had at least as much vanity as you and I—was furious with me and told me so. Like many of you I have got in trouble by writing reviews, but that was the only time I ever got in trouble by not writing one—and prolonged trouble at that. Over the following years students of Hoffman's occasionally told me that in classes he sometimes made considerable fun of my published statement that Faulkner had used Freud in *The Sound and the Fury* (Hoffman's book entitled *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* had mentioned *The Sound and the Fury* but had not noticed Faulkner's elaborate, basic, and deliberate use in that novel of Freud's schematization of the human personality) and of my published conception of *As I Lay Dying* which I am discussing here today. Later, ten years after my nonreview, Hoffman and Vickery assembled their *Three Decades* revision of that anthology of Faulkner criticism, and in his introduction to it Hoffman did not stoop to argument but merely put both concepts away forever by contempt. I wrote him that I am always eager to learn and asked him to help me out by explaining why he felt so sure that Faulkner could not be doing that sort of thing. He replied that such criticism did "not lead to an appreciation of the novel's complexities" and went on to say that he always would object to any such "reductive criticism: mythologizing, for example, 'Christ-ing,' etc." It is true that such criticism does not lead to appreciation of what Hoffman early had decided were the com-

plexities of those novels, but that possibly should be no one's desire. Certainly the next part of his reply does not seem helpful; it would mean, for example, that all those who have said Joyce made use in *Ulysses* of an extended parallel with Homer have been wrong, that T. S. Eliot was less perceptive than Hoffman when Eliot wrote in his review of *Ulysses* which I quoted a moment ago that "Mr. Joyce's parallel use of the *Odyssey* has a great importance." Hoffman's view was perhaps partly motivated by the fact that such criticism of Faulkner's works presented overall interpretations so thoroughly contrary to his own that it inevitably would seem to him and to his followers to be irrelevant and, as one follower, to be mentioned in a moment, called it, "inconsequential."

You can see that Mr. Hoffman and I did not get very far with this. After his death I thought that his kind of argument about such works as *As I Lay Dying* would end, even his fellow editor of those two anthologies of Faulkner criticism, for example, having ultimately moved a short distance away from the position she had taken in her earliest Faulkner studies. But that proved too much to expect, for one of the more recent articles on *As I Lay Dying*, published in 1973 as part of an all-Faulkner issue of a Canadian journal named *Mosaic* and written by a Canadian professor named Joseph Gold, carries on the Hoffman tradition. It is not hard to see why, for the author of the article had said earlier in a book which he made from his Hoffman-directed doctoral dissertation that Hoffman "taught me to read and to write, as he must have taught many others. I cannot repay my debt to him." He does, however, make an attempt in his article to repay that debt by attacking, in a gratuitously personal and extremely inaccurate way, the conception of *As I Lay Dying* which I am re-presenting to you today. And his article does demonstrate, as he said, that Hoffman taught him how to read and write, for he tries to keep alive in his article Hoffman's conception by denying that in *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner used any mythical parallel whatever. The editors of *Mosaic* had invited me to write for that same all-Faulkner issue a lengthy article on *The Sound and the Fury*, an invitation I declined because I had stopped publishing anything about Faulkner until Joseph Blotner would finish writing his biography. Their invitation had led me to think the editors possessed magnificently good judgment. Naturally! So I was more than usually surprised that they would publish such an article as Professor Gold's, which I am not

alone in finding defective, the 1973 volume of *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual* having judged the article “lightweight” and “trivial.” The chief problem with the article is that because its author was fully committed to the opinion that even Faulkner’s early works are essentially upbeat he had to perform unsupportable Procrustean alterations on this tragic novel. But one of the critics I respect very much has pointed out that surprise is not in order: such articles unfortunately will continue to appear because many editors and readers, having been brought up on reductive critical views of Faulkner’s works such as those which Hoffman and like critics fostered, not only prefer them but are eager to be aggressive in their maintenance. As Robert Scholes has written in another connection, “Frequently—usually—knowing something easy is a way of not knowing something hard.”

The Bundren’s overly extended transportation of Addie’s body, which understandably seems to many Mississippians, as I pointed out earlier, to be culpably unrepresentative of burial practice in this state, surely is present in the novel because of an extended journey which was a significant feature of the worship of Demeter. For illustration by just one example from the many elements of the Bundrens’ trip which have their counterparts in the Greek religious journey, I will select cakes. Dewey Dell Bundren claims to have been carrying the cakes which Cora Tull tells us so lengthily about baking and trying to sell, but Anse, accusing Dewey Dell of lying, says that she has not brought the cakes on the journey to Jefferson. A major feature of the Greek religious journey was the carrying of cakes which, formed into shapes associated with fertility, demonstrated the affirmation present in the worship of Demeter—an affirmation absent in the Bundrens’ relationship to her inverted counterpart, Addie. In creating this illustrative detail, as with innumerable elements, large and small, of *As I Lay Dying*—as well as of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and other works—Faulkner’s primary purpose in arranging the surface story was not to give an accurate account of regional life but to invoke an ancient presentation of hopes for human behavior and by so doing to point up more dramatically the psychological tragedies of his modern protagonists. The Bundrens’ absurdly long journey is not intended to be in the service of accurate journalistic regional reporting.

When I go around the country lecturing about Faulkner’s life and

works, I find myself stressing that no one person can make a myth and that, contrary to what some critics have claimed, Faulkner was not trying to do that but, to repeat, was holding up the established myth as an ideal—here in *As I Lay Dying* as before in *The Sound and the Fury* an ideal of love—and here presenting in contrast with the static myth the nonstatic life of the Bundrens. For example, one feature of the worship of fertility at Eleusis was, according to a source which Faulkner used, for the priestess and the hierophant to go behind the sacred altar and down into an underground room to perform a ritual marriage in the interest of fertility and salvation. Dewey Dell, wanting an abortion, goes to the drug clerk lout who takes vicious advantage of her: He gives her a powder of no efficacy and says that he will give her the final part of the treatment later. So she comes back that night to the closed drugstore, leaves her brother Vardaman on the doorstep, and goes with the clerk around behind the prescription case, which perhaps is to remind us of the sacred altar at Eleusis for the clerk earlier has been pointedly warned away from it because he is not a registered pharmacist, down into the drugstore cellar, there to copulate with him—ritualistically, on her part—in the interest of an abortion. Faulkner hardly could present more dramatically the opposite of the love and fertility which were essentials of the Eleusinian Mysteries.

Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* and other works was, like Frazer and his other sources, a comparative religionist. Demeter had her counterpart and recognized predecessor in the Egyptian goddess Isis, sometimes represented in the form of a cow. As Vardaman sits waiting in front of the closed drugstore, Faulkner sends a cow wandering down the street of the town. Those of you who have lived in small country towns and know that livestock does get out and that their hooves make an interesting sound passing at night along the paved streets will have found this *As I Lay Dying* cow to be very realistic, in no way forced or Egyptian. But the novel says that as she comes by the drugstore she is lowing mournfully as though for her lost calf. The passage is very moving to the reader, for Dewey Dell, in one sense lost or abandoned, is at that moment being violated underground in the drugstore cellar.

The title of this novel always interested me. I do think that Faulkner constructed *As I Lay Dying* in a planned one-to-one similarity with *The Sound and the Fury*: interior monologues, mythical method,



even, uncharacteristically, a drawing in each—of an eye in *The Sound and the Fury* and of a coffin in *As I Lay Dying*. He made the family structures much the same in the two novels, though he added one character in *As I Lay Dying* by amalgamating parts of two characters from *The Sound and the Fury* and putting them together to make an additional Bundren. It turns out that Faulkner also chose and used the titles of the two books in much the same way: The title of *The Sound and the Fury* obviously has a literary source, *Macbeth*. The title of *As I Lay Dying* certainly also has the air of coming from a literary work. For a long time I looked for the source of this title. I looked, for example, through translations of the *Odyssey* because *As I Lay Dying* involves a journey and because its surface story has an air of the archetypal, which, as I mentioned a moment ago, *The Sound and the Fury* does not. Finally I gave up. I would never ask an author what he intended in a novel; it is his duty, if asked that question, to lie. That is one of the problems with the published books of transcriptions of question-and-answer sessions with Faulkner. But I would not mind asking any author for the source of an element in a novel if it could be checked objectively. I was not where Mr. Faulkner was; so I got in touch with a man who was seeing Faulkner often and asked him to ask about the source of the title. When he kindly asked Faulkner, Faulkner promptly said it was from a translation of the *Odyssey* and with precision gave the name of the particular translator and said that the title came from the eleventh book, a speech by Agamemnon in the underworld. I was glad that the underworld aspects of *As I Lay Dying*—in the parallel with Persephone, lost in that region and later its queen—had come to mind before Mr. Faulkner identified the source of the title, that the information he supplied was an element of confirmation rather than the original lead. In the passage which is the source of Faulkner's title, Agamemnon tells Ulysses about reaching home and being killed by his wife and her lover and goes on to say:

. . . I, as I lay dying  
 Upon the sword, raised up my hands to smite her;  
 And shamelessly she turned away, and scorned  
 To draw my eyelids down or close my mouth,  
 Though I was on the road to Hades' house.

At this point I should tell you for my own protection that I am in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, because I want to suggest

that Addie is not the heroine which most of the early criticism, and even too much of the recent, has said she is and because I am drawing your attention to the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* which is thought by some experts to be one of the first anthologies of stories emphasizing the perfidy of women. The heart of this matter is that Agamemnon's wife has killed him—and that is bad enough—but in Greek belief, if you will recall *Antigone*, it is important to give a corpse—even that of Antigone's treacherous brother who had attacked his own house—token burial, presumably because of our common mortality and the eternity of the afterlife. So along with her murdering of Agamemnon is his wife's perfidy in not giving him the last rites which will ease him in eternity. Knowing Faulkner's source of the title is important in correcting one of the clichés of criticism about this novel: The usual assumption in the early years after the novel appeared was that the "I" in the title refers to Addie Bundren. She is the one who is to be buried and her monologue appears well along in the journey to her burial ground; so critics early thought of her as the one who is dying. That probably contributed to the once widely-held, significant misconception that Addie is attractive, that she is reliable, that Faulkner admired her. After I had pointed out that misconception in one of the discussion sessions this week a young woman came up to me afterward and said, "I am so delighted to hear you say that. Right from the first time I read *As I Lay Dying* I thought Addie was a bitch." So all is not lost.

In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner used the famous passage from *Macbeth* not only for his title but throughout the novel. Because I published this too some years ago I will not go into it here except in a hurried way: Shakespeare's "Out, out, brief candle!" appears in Benjy's section in the nature and treatment of his birthday candles. Quentin's monologue certainly contains "a walking shadow," which he mentions many times. Jason surely is "a poor player that struts and frets" as he shows off in front of the cotton speculators at the telegraph office. The basic tale is first "Told by an idiot." And the ending brings in "sound and fury, / Signifying nothing": on the next to last page, in the scene at the monument in the square, Benjy, who has been moaning and crying from time to time in the novel, makes his greatest noises of distress, and in describing them Faulkner uses a significant word from Macbeth's speech, calling them "tongueless; just sound." Then Jason enters the scene. Often furious earlier, here he is at the peak of his fury. Faulkner, with too much taste to use the

word, just shows us the condition. Then Benjy changes mercurially—which fits in with the Freudian material Faulkner consciously used in this novel, a concept I have been peddling several years and for which I now have further evidence—so that at the end, the novel says, his eyes are “empty.” Faulkner did not print the word “nothing,” but emptiness is that. Faulkner here in this small way, just as throughout his works in similar and much larger ways, expects us to collaborate with him—as, for example, at the end of *The Unvanquished*. That novel tells us earlier that Drusilla likes verbena because it is “the only scent you could smell above the smell of horses and courage.” Her complete statement is in our minds when at the end of *The Unvanquished* Bayard finds that Drusilla has placed on his pillow the sprig of verbena which, in the very last words of the novel, is filling the room “with that odor which she said you could smell alone above the smell of horses.” There Faulkner lets you and me add the words “and courage” in our judgment of Bayard as he expected us at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, as I have been arguing, to join Benjy’s “just sound” and Jason’s fury and, then, the nothing in Benjy’s eyes with the title passage from *Macbeth*. I feel he had a similar expectation at the end of *As I Lay Dying*: It is Darl—not, as was thought for so long, Addie—whom we are to think of in relation to the pronoun in the novel’s title. Like Agamemnon, Darl throughout the novel is in distress—because a woman, his mother, will not give him any support at all. At the end of the novel, in Darl’s last monologue, he is locked away insane at the state hospital, where, with his hands at the bars of the windows, “looking out, he foamed.” Agamemnon told Ulysses in the passage I have just quoted to you from which Faulkner drew this novel’s title that his murderous wife would not “draw my eyelids down or close my mouth, / Though I was on the road to Hades’ house.” We can only look and foam through eyes and mouth which are not closed. Looking out and foaming, Darl in the mad house, which is about as near as we can come on earth to “Hades’ house,” is suffering the ultimate distress because from Addie, like Agamemnon from Clytemnestra, he did not receive even the most elemental decency.

In this connection—and repeating that I favor the Equal Rights Amendment—I want to point out that critics and readers for a long time admired Addie not only because the misunderstanding about the pronoun in the novel’s title led them to consider her central and

because she seemed more forceful than the other members of her family but also because she made a statement about the relative value of words and deeds, a statement admiringly quoted in most criticism of the novel. We all agree that deeds, as the saying goes, speak louder than words, but I think it is probably just as incorrect to assume automatically that Addie is Faulkner's direct spokesman in that statement as to assume that he admires her general behavior. Faulkner could not have been entirely hostile to words while writing more than twenty books. Nor did he in practice share Lieutenant Henry's famous objection in *A Farewell to Arms* to certain words of rather large import; after all, Faulkner made his well-known public statement in favor of "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." In *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner presents Addie as trapped by Calvinism. When she is destroying her son Darl she herself is a victim of her own parent, her father, who so fully impressed on her the Calvinistic opinion that the only purpose of living is to get ready to be dead a long time. That view, as one of Faulkner's sources points out, is hostile to life, to the fertility worshipped in the Eleusinian Mysteries. It sees our earthly life as insignificant, which is one of the reasons Addie, though she accepts her first-born as part of the minimum requirement of marriage, completely rejects her second child—Darl—and therefore, as soon as she knows she is carrying him, exacts from her husband the promise to bury her someday in Jefferson, away from him and their children—in short, the basis for the entire novel. Her Calvinistic rejection of life—and of words—leads to her famous statement, which probably is famous because many readers prefer expository writing to fiction. They often—and without being aware of it—prefer the comfort of what they think are direct statements by the author to the uncertainty of symbolism and other aspects of fictional technique. And they often deny the author's privilege to be dramatic and write speeches which are to reveal the nature of a character and only mistakenly can be taken as statements of the personal view of the author. It was pleasant here at the conference to listen to a paper by one of the participants, Richard L. Godden, which skillfully presented technical support of the view that Addie's statement concerning words and deeds is not what most critics have thought it is. I urge you to reexamine the widely-held conception that Addie is not only a heroine but that she is speaking directly for Faulkner when she discusses words and

deeds. To think that way may be to think the way my friends who are history professors do when they ask me to drop all “that English–teacher nonsense” and tell them precisely in which paragraph of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner states flat–out what he thinks about the history of this region. The only answer I ever have been able to give to that is more “English–teacher nonsense.”

Though the only proofs of the validity of critical conceptions of fiction must come from the fiction itself, one little event early gave somewhat heartening support in spite of the opposition from such early critics as Frederick Hoffman and his fellow believers: During talks with Mr. Faulkner here in Oxford and in New York and Massachusetts I trotted out various conceptions I had of his works—such as the one I have been speaking to you about this afternoon. Though always very courteous, he never flatly said “Yes” or “No”—and I would have been disappointed in him if he had. But before long I received a letter from the Director of Chatto & Windus, Faulkner’s London publishers. She said,

I am writing at the suggestion of William Faulkner, who tells me that you are writing a critical book on his work. As you may know, my firm has published Mr Faulkner for many years, and if you have not already made arrangements with an English publisher for your book, we should very much like an opportunity of seeing it when it is done.

That, of course, is no proof of anything, but considering Mr. Faulkner’s usual relationship to critical opinions about his work I found it supportive. It certainly made me feel more comfortable in presenting conceptions which—though by now adopted by some critics—then were unpopular with almost all Faulknerians, who too often were comfortably trading back and forth the early essentially sociological conceptions which so delayed the establishment of Faulkner’s reputation.

It is not surprising that citizens of Mississippi could be confused about Faulkner’s novels if professional critics for such a long time could consider *As I Lay Dying*, for example, to be an account of a family of almost wholly admirable Thomas Jeffersonian yeomen. And if many professional critics did not consider *As I Lay Dying* to be anything except Faulkner’s presentation of Mississippi folks, it is quite understandable for some Mississippi readers to have felt that *As I Lay Dying* is supposed to be an accurate picture of life and death

in this state, that it is inaccurate, and that Faulkner did wrong to write it. When you think about what Faulkner's purpose was, to draw on the life he knew but to go far beyond it toward the more universal and to do so in this novel by his adaptation of Joyce's mythical method, equating his characters in an inverse way with Demeter and other personages and events of myth, which there has only been time here to take up sketchily, I do not feel that we should consider the residents of Mississippi to have been particularly imperceptive. Most of them have been making a living in ways other than literary, and if the professionals who were making their living by writing criticism did not figure this out, why should civilians be expected to do so? Faulkner more than anyone else, of course, would have been aware of all this (and more!) and presumably was thinking of it when, having been asked that question whether he thought his novels gave an inaccurate picture of this region, he replied, "Yes, and I'm sorry."

If Faulkner were still alive he still could make the other remark quoted earlier: ". . . it does sort of amuse me when I hear 'em talking about the sociological picture that I present in something like *As I Lay Dying*, for instance." Perhaps the strident, emotional tone in which some critics reject interpretations of the sort I have been touching on here is explained by a point which John Barth made in the "Author's Note" to his *Lost in the Fun House* where he wrote that "the discovery of an enormous complexity beneath the simple surface may well be more dismaying than delightful."

But Faulkner's home region was not without understanding of his artistic situation: a newspaper which had objected that his novels presented a denigrating picture of Mississippi, nevertheless ended the article in this—final—clipping by praising him because he "never compromised—not for money, not for popularity, and not for an easy audience."