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PRECARIOUS SANCTUARIES: PROTECTION AND EXPOSURE IN FAULKNER'S FICTION

Philip M. Weinstein*

Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.

(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*)

"Breathing is a sight-draft dated yesterday," says Will Varner in *The Hamlet*, and for many of Faulkner's characters that draft is being "collected."¹ Speechless outrage, rigid immobility, "an expression at once fatalistic and of a child's astonished disappointment" (*The Sound and the Fury*, p. 331), tend to characterize their encounters with brute reality. Faulkner's people—particularly his men—are not born into the world so much as catapulted into it. They hardly cease to be amazed at the otherness of their surroundings and the impossibility of fulfilling their needs.

A chasm between self and not-self is an implicit assumption of Faulkner's narratives, and the wide variety of patterns—dreams, codes, designs, edifices—that his characters construct or draw upon represent their attempt to domesticate their space, to make sense of their lives. Before order came chaos, a world alien to human need. Since the encounter with chaos is both unbearable and inescapable, the work of Faulkner exhibits a rich array of palliative forms, of fictions that bridge that factual chasm. These fictions, in their common function of orienting and validating a self in a world-not-onese, are sanctuaries.²

A sanctuary is literally a consecrated place, one devoted to the keeping of sacred things, and it is also a place of refuge and protection,

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of immunity. In Faulkner the idea of sanctuary assumes a range of meanings, from escapism (Horace's vases in *Sartoris*, Hightower's reveries in *Light in August*) to transcendent affirmation (the "Grecian Urn" of changeless "heart's truth" in *Go Down, Moses*). In his later fiction Faulkner tends to cast a more benign eye on sanctuaries, on the customs, pieties, and values by which an individual endures and even prevails. Will Varner's precarious "sight-draft dated yesterday," collectible on sight, mellows into Mink Snopes's reliable pact with Old Marster, valid for life. More predictable than the cosmic joker-God who seems to preside in the early fiction, Old Marster emanates from the earth itself. He wears down his creatures but does not cheat them.

In the major fiction before *Go Down, Moses*, the protagonists are less secure in their dealings with the world outside. The power of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* lies almost wholly in Faulkner's unrelenting exposure of the exigent psyche to the forces that assail it. With the exception of *Mosquitoes*, the unbearably assaulted self is at the center of the novels prior to *Light in August*. The fictionality of fictions, the false haven they propose, is everywhere emphasized. As Mr. Compson says to Quentin, "it's nature is hurting you not Caddy" (p. 143). Nature will not stay curried, will not accept the human meaning of virginity. Exploding the fictions superimposed on it, nature rampages through Caddy, emotionally paralyzes Quentin, leaves Benjy witless—in that suggestive phrase, a natural. Nature as unbridled energy explodes manmade sanctuaries, and probably the two sequences in Faulkner's work that most memorably subject man to the torrent he neither sought nor can avoid are the flood scenes in "Old Man" and *As I Lay Dying*. Indeed, *As I Lay Dying* expresses, with grotesque concentration, the forces that conspire in Faulkner's world to make life unlivable as well as the reliance upon those sanctuaries that make it livable nevertheless.

The focal threat to Bundren stability is of course the corpse of Addie Bundren. Elaborate funeral procedures have been designed to minimize this unsettling phenomenon. The corpse is curried, cleansed, bedecked with flowers, eulogized, and it is gotten quickly into the ground. The corpse reveals, in André Bleikasten's arresting phrase, "the scandal of [our] fate"; and the funeral ritual is a sanctuary designed to minimize our terror of the destiny of flesh.³ In *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner emphasizes the brutal realities such a ritual seeks to keep at bay. The corpse will not stay still, will not get buried; the Bundren family becomes unbearably aware of its status as corpse. Supposedly immune from stress in that last sanctuary, the coffin, Addie Bundren

yet remains vulnerable. She is minute by minute becoming what, by the logic of her family's need, she cannot become; and so a series of psychic displacements occurs. Feelings once securely attached directly to Addie, now exposed, are involuntarily transferred to the safer region of Addie-substitutes. New sanctuaries are established; the unbearable is borne.

Jewel's passionate allegiance to the horse, Cash's unswerving attention to his carpentry, Vardaman's fixation on the fish, these displacements of energy and emotion elsewhere permit the wound to be sustained and the individual psychic economy to survive. Pure loss is evaded by substitution. My mother is a fish is at least logical ($1 = 1$); my mother is dead would be scandalous ($1 = ?$). Darl alone is deprived of protective strategies, unable to orient his emotions. He has been alienated, cast out from sanctuary, since birth. Identity in Faulkner is usually the gift (or curse) of a parent, not a psychic home one makes oneself, and Darl's mother has chosen to withhold it. Harboring anarchy within himself, he knows not only that Addie will die but that death is easier than life:

It takes two people to make you, and one people to die. That's how the world is going to end (p. 38).

How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls. Cash broke his leg and now the sawdust is running out. He is bleeding to death is Cash (pp. 196-97).

As I Lay Dying is not a farce, but the comedy of human travail balances its pathos. The Bundrens strike incongruous poses; their perseverance is as astonishing as its motives are compromised. Self-interested as well as mournful, furious yet wooden, they are puppets of their own passions, unintegrated dolls, lacking tragic dignity, yet able to bleed to death. In banding together to bury Addie in Jefferson, they expose their discrepant designs to the irresistible stresses of nature. Although it is typical of the Bundrens not to think of the flood once they have crossed it, that river sequence is, for the reader, an unforgettable revelation:

Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrously into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and alive waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again (p. 134).

That "something huge and alive" beneath the surface suggests the beast of the apocalypse. Time seems to stand still, and this entry into the

water is a submission of the self and its precarious designs to the undifferentiated raging waters. The wagon moves further into the current, "as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice" (p. 139). And then the cataclysm, as the illusion of human control ends. Later, while Jewel and Vernon are diving for the battered Cash's tools, Darl observes:

From here they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though it had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface. It looks peaceful, like machinery does after you have watched it and listened to it for a long time. As though the clotting which is you had dissolved into the myriad original motion . . . (p. 156).

Here is one of the governing perceptions of *As I Lay Dying*: that the shape a man creates for himself, the distinctions, purposes, and values by which he domesticates his world and recognizes himself in it—these are "clottings" that unclot, if exposed to the "myriad original motion." That "motion" is ceaseless and no structure withstands it; legs immersed are as though amputated, and one stays on its surface with "infinitesimal and ludicrous care." *As I Lay Dying* is "ludicrous" in just this manner: the spectacle of its characters trying to preserve the coherence of their "clotting" while immersed in the elements.

The raw encounter between self and not-self in the early novels is explosive; the nearer the approach, the greater the violence. Tranquility is a function of the distance maintained by sanctuaries. It is no accident that the protagonists in these novels take no pleasure in memory. Donald Mahon, Bayard Sartoris and Horace Benbow, Temple Drake, Quentin Compson, and the Bundren family are all, so to speak, war-wounded. They respond with either paralysis or oblivion to their experience. In the early fiction memory serves only to deepen pain. In *Light in August*, and especially in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, memory, while it remains painful, begins to appear as a creative faculty. But in *As I Lay Dying* little is remembered, all is felt.⁴

This novel works with one main distinction: that between talking and doing. Addie herself launches the extraordinary attack on words—"just a shape to fill a lack" (p. 164)—and contrasts them with "the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land" (p. 166). Sterile substitutions for "doing," words distance and disguise the explosive and meaningless processes of life itself. Words are the last sanctuary, for they domesticate the radical disorder of experience. Taking the opaque and calling it a mirror responsive to the self's designs, words deceive. Whereas *As I Lay Dying* is faithful, as Bleikasten explains, to the chaos of preverbalized life:

Speculative thinking no doubt also proceeds from wonder but soon goes beyond it; in its desire to make sense of nonsense, it is always at pains to play down absurdity and explain away what appears scandalous to the spontaneous mind, and in the systems it erects, scandal is never more than a moment or an element in the universal order. Nothing like that happens here: Faulkner stubbornly refuses to go beyond astonishment, refuses to question it or to convert it into rational thought; he is content to record that initial moment when a consciousness runs into the intolerable and experiences the shock of outrage.⁵

One of the reasons why *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* are masterpieces is that in them Faulkner first expressed, with a focus and immediacy he was never to achieve again, the traumatic encounter between self and not-self. He seems to have unlocked and creatively tapped his own astonishment, and there is a reasonably clear progression in his protagonists from Donald Mahon to Bayard Sartoris to Benjy Compson. What they share is psychic injury, ineffable astonishment, Faulkner's nearly inexpressible sense of the terror of life and the futility of sanctuaries. They have all been exposed to the "myriad original motion" and started to "unclot." Mahon is so damaged by the War as to be literally inarticulate, Bayard is only slightly more verbal, but in Benjy Faulkner was able to find, by going inward beyond speech to inchoate thought and sensation, the most moving voice in all his work.⁶ The stream of consciousness technique, with its focus on unformulated feeling, is an appropriate vehicle for expressing amazement before life's queerness; and in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner is supremely successful.

Sanctuary, written both before and after these two masterpieces, is technically a less inventive novel and imaginatively the bleakest Faulkner ever wrote. Hostile to all versions of sanctuary, the novel "refuses to satisfy our need and desire for a place to stand, an undamaged ideal, even a hint of the hope of human efficacy."⁷ Barely transcending the indifference of his avowed cynicism toward *Sanctuary*, Faulkner manages during only one of the novel's episodes to achieve full imaginative identification with his materials. That episode—the psychic disintegration of Temple Drake at Frenchman's Bend—expresses with chilling power the collapse of defective sanctuaries. To take the measure of her collapse there, one begins by noting her easy mastery of a college social scene so tailored to her various "talents" as to constitute virtually a psychic cocoon, a home away from home.

Like Horace's Oxford and Gowan's University of Virginia, Temple's Ole Miss is the neatly compartmentalized stage on which she

wants to be seen; it is her theater of effectiveness. Within that network of arenas, regulations, and rituals of dress and behavior Temple is at home and in control. The first glimpse of her reveals her long blond legs and bold painted mouth, and those "power centers" are displayed and exploited with cool control. Look and like, her behavior says, but do not touch. Signs of danger abound, however, and the obscene scrawl with Temple's name on the lavatory wall is portentous. Such scrawling belongs to another code, and the town boys are expressing there what they would like to do to her, the desire her behavior is calculated to stimulate without fulfilling. That lavatory scrawl also suggests grossly the body's liabilities, and one of the nightmare sequences in *Sanctuary* occurs at Frenchman's Bend where Temple is huddled in the woods, trying to relieve herself privately, when she discovers herself being watched by a stranger.⁸ It is a nice girl's nightmare: not the glamorous dream of lovemaking but the nightmare of being observed excreting or later being raped with a corncob. Even more brutally than in the fate of Addie Bundren, Faulkner stresses in the ordeal of Temple the physicality of the body, the futility of locating values within it and insisting on it as an inviolable sanctuary.

Frenchman's Bend is only a few miles from Jefferson, but in *Sanctuary* Faulkner treats it as another planet. Temple encounters it, as one encounters the water in *As I Lay Dying*, traumatically. Gowan Stevens, utterly drunk, drives into a tree at 20 miles per hour, and Temple is hurtled out of the car:

She felt herself flying through the air, carrying a numbing shock upon her shoulder and a picture of two men peering from the fringe of cane at the roadside. She scrambled to her feet, her head reverted, and saw them step into the road. . . . Still running, her bones turned to water and she fell flat on her face, still running (p. 38).

In casual antithesis to her mastery of the Ole Miss scene, Temple intrudes violently upon the wrong stage. The car, the cool Virginian, the moving legs and arms, they are all the old props but now out of control, useless, and Temple begins to "unclot." Her body will not behave properly, and throughout these Frenchman's Bend chapters she moves like a deranged wound-up toy, starting and stopping compulsively, obedient to forces beyond her control. At first she copes as she can, using her collegiate manners:

"Say," she said, "dont you want to drive us to town?"

He [Popeye] turned his head, the cigarette in his mouth, the match cupped between his hands, Temple's mouth was fixed in that cringing grimace. Popeye leaned the cigarette to the match. "No," he said.

"Come on," Temple said. "Be a sport. It won't take you any time in that Packard. How about it? We'll pay you."

Popeye inhaled. He snapped the match into the weeds. He said, in his soft, cold voice: "Make your whore lay off of me, Jack."

Gowan moved thickly, like a clumsy good-humored horse goaded suddenly. "Look here, now. . . . I don't like that," Gowan said. "Do you know who you're talking to?" He continued that thick movement, like he could neither stop it nor complete it. "I don't like that." Popeye turned his head and looked at Gowan. Then he quit looking at him and Temple said suddenly:

"What river did you fall in with that suit on? Do you have to shave it off at night?" Then she was moving toward the door with Gowan's hand in the small of her back, her head reverted, her heels clattering. . . .

"Do you want—" Gowan hissed.

"You mean old thing!" Temple cried.

"You mean old thing!" (pp. 48-49).

In this encounter Temple and Gowan move and speak out of a cluster of specific social values. Those values control both perception and behavior; the new experience is accessible only in the old terms. Temple's automatic "cringing grimace," designed to get her way pleasantly through flirtation, triggers the wrong response in Popeye: he knows whores, not coquettes. Coaxing the man into thinking he will enjoy doing her a favor, appealing to his sporting instinct, caressing his masculinity via his Packard, finally offering to pay him like a servant: these are effective routine maneuvers in her adolescent world of controlled eroticism, fast cars, good times, and easy money. At Frenchman's Bend they are useless.

Her remarks about Popeye's clothes are the acme of teenage invective, but as her frustration mounts she relapses toward greater childishness. She finally resorts to tantrum, accepting spitefully the superior force of the unswayed male, submitting to him while protesting. As the narration continues, her fright deepens and her childishness becomes infantile. Trying almost hysterically to think her way into the immunity of sanctuary, she cradles Ruby's baby and wails: "And besides, my father's a ju-judge. The gu-governor comes to our house to e-eat—What a cute little bu-ba-a-by . . . if bad mans hurts Temple, us'll tell the governor's soldiers, won't us?" (p. 54).

Frantic, later, after being seen relieving herself outdoors, Temple careens into the house and tells Ruby of her outrage. She notices her hand lying on the stove, springs away, is then caught by the older woman. The privacy and protection of distance or shared custom are gone; all contact has become inimical. Temple grinds Ruby's hand

against the door jamb, gets free, scrambles to the barn, flies up the ladder, falls through the loose planks, and lies gasping. Then she remembers the rat:

Her whole body surged in an involuted spurning movement that brought her to her feet in the loose hulls, so that she flung her hands out and caught herself upright, a hand on either angle of the corner, her face not twelve inches from the cross beam on which the rat crouched. For an instant they stared eye to eye, then its eyes glowed suddenly like two tiny electric bulbs and it leaped at her head just as she sprang backward, treading again on something that rolled under her foot.

She fell toward the opposite corner, on her face in the hulls and a few scattered corn-cobs gnawed bone-clean. Something thudded against the wall and struck her hand in ricochet. The rat was in that corner now, on the floor. Again their faces were not twelve inches apart, the rat's eyes glowing and fading as though worked by lungs. Then it stood erect, its back to the corner, its forepaws curled against its chest, and began to squeak at her in tiny plaintive gasps. She backed away on hands and knees, watching it. Then she got to her feet and sprang at the door, hammering at it, watching the rat over her shoulder, her body arched against the door, rasping at the planks with her bare hands (pp. 90-91).

Temple has become a cornered animal. Everything in her world is jailer or violator. Ruby smothers her, the floor opens up, the rat beams passionate aggression, the corncob on which she treads will soon rape her, the door will not open. It is a world of pure abrasiveness; indeed Temple is being raped continuously, not just once by Popeye with a corncob. The disintegration of Temple Drake is the emotional center of the novel and the locus of its considerable power. In it Faulkner renders the damage that a psyche can undergo, damage analogous to the war wounds incurred "off stage" by Donald Mahon and Bayard Sartoris. The intermittent anguish of Temple metamorphoses, in *The Sound and the Fury*, into the unforgettable ordeal of Benjy and Quentin; and Temple deserves from Faulkner's critics a measure of the sympathy those two characters receive.

Usually dismissed as a nymphomaniac or a bitch who gets what she deserves, Temple actually suffers, during these extraordinary early chapters, as a full-fledged Faulkner heroine. The narrative point of view is unironic, fully committed to the protagonist's agony. In the collapse of her defective rituals of thinking and feeling, Temple is undergoing a Faulknerian initiation. She is being moved out of a sanctioned world of "licensed tranquillity" into a chaotic one of meaningless terror and aggression. That she succumbs to its pressures is no indictment: few of Faulkner's early protagonists who are equally

exposed fare better. The Temple Drake of the later chapters is not so much immoral as psychically damaged, tampered with. Breathing is a sight-draft dated yesterday, and hers, figuratively speaking, was collected at Frenchman's Bend.⁹

Light in August certainly expresses Faulkner's unabated interest in psychic exposure and the collapse of inadequate sanctuaries, but it also begins to figure forth more positive senses of sanctuary. The desperate need for immunity implied in Horace and dramatized in Quentin is both enacted and articulated in Hightower. He is not so supreme a realization as Quentin Compson, but (enlarging upon the examples of Darl Bundren and Horace Benbow) he both acts in the drama and articulates its largest ramifications. He shows and tells the reader some of the negative meanings of sanctuary: the refusal to confront the inalienable stresses of life, inoculating the self against them with the commandment of God, the apotheosis of a Civil War ancestor, racial superiority to the black man. He articulates the self-evasion by transcendence, the self-consoling desire for immunity, that underlies the abstract codes of McEachern, Hines, Grimm, the Burdens, as well as himself.

Listening to Protestant music, he comprehends the death-demanding idealism of his people, their terror of the uncontrollable vicissitudes of fleshed-out life in time, their repudiation of the only valid sanctuary in their possession: the gift of loving forgiveness, symbolized by "the crucified shape of pity and love" (p. 462), Jesus Christ. Through Hightower, Faulkner has described the range of transcendent certainties by which a man deforms his experience in order to master it, to make it fit his needs, and thus to keep at bay "*the maelstrom of unbearable reality*" (*Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 150).

In Lena Grove, however, Faulkner has created a positive mode of sanctuary, and she represents in large part the breakthrough achieved in *Light in August*.

Behind her the four weeks . . . a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again, through which she advanced in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creakwheeled and limpeared avatars, like something moving forever and without progress upon an urn (pp. 4-5).

To juxtapose this use of Keats's urn against Horace Benbow's apostrophe to his sister Narcissa in *Sartoris*, "Thou still unravished bride of quietness," is to measure the new sense of sanctuary in *Light in August*.¹⁰ Here the urn figure is neither "still" nor "unravished" but

imagined as incorruptible nevertheless, in perpetual motion, moving at the seemingly infinitesimal speed of "earth's diurnal course." In contrast to Narcissa, the peace Lena conveys is unevasive and undecieving; in contrast to Temple, none of Lena's motions is erratic, nothing she touches abrasive. She is a sanctuary in the double sense of containing value and being undeformed by stress. She enjoys both the motion of the figure on the urn and the stasis of the urn itself, moving forever and without progress.

Heretofore, the primary meaning of sanctuary has been its arrest of motion. What the young Faulkner saw in Keats's Grecian Urn was an enviable stasis of values achieved, however, at the expense of motion and vitality. In the world of Faulkner's fiction, if a thing moves, it is usually dangerous—be it a horse, a car, a raging river, or a girl entering puberty like Caddy. If it is fixed—like Horace's vase, Benjy's "Caddy smelled like trees," Doc Hines's angry God, Thomas Sutpen's design—it remains available to contemplation and can house the orientational demands of the exigent psyche. But Lena Grove is a walking sanctuary; the value she carries is burgeoning within her; she has solved the Faulknerian dilemma of motion without trauma. By comparison, Dilsey is a human wreck: the rain needles into her, her legs are giving out, she is going blind. Dilsey suffers the assault of life whereas Lena magically tranquilizes it. Lena's motions are paced and graceful; she is redolent of an earth of serene and predictable cycles. Effortlessly sociable, Lena is no primitive but a seamless blend of nature and art. Talk with her is discourse, eating is ceremonial, even childbirth is accomplished in its inalterable rhythm, without violence. Hers is an art of perfect process, not transcendence, but if it evades nothing, it encounters nothing it needs to evade. Thorns reluctantly become roses in her presence.¹¹ Her pastoral can encompass but it cannot resolve the tragedy of Joe Christmas on which this novel centers.

That tragedy remains unresolvable, but the other development in *Light in August*, the other positive sense of sanctuary, is that, unlike the earlier fiction, this novel begins to interrogate the death-dealing rigor of its own plot:

The voice [Mrs. Hines's] goes on. "I know it aint right to bother a stranger. But you are lucky. A bachelor, a single man that could grow old without the despair of love. . . . I just thought that maybe if it could be for one day like it hadn't happened. Like folks never knew him as a man that had killed. . . . I never saw him when he could walk and talk. Not for thirty years I never saw him. I am not saying he never did what they say he did. Ought not to suffer for it

like he made them that loved and lost suffer. But if folks could maybe just let him for one day. Like it hadn't happened yet. Like the world never had anything against him yet. Then it could be like he had just went on a trip and grew man grown and come back. If it could be like that for just one day. After that I would not interfere. If he done it, I would not be the one to come between him and what he must suffer. Just for one day, you see. Like he had been on a trip and come back, telling me about the trip, without any living earth against him yet" (p. 387).

If Faulkner's great theme, as Malraux has suggested, is the irreparable, here is his countertheme: a re-creation, a might-have-been. In *Absalom, Absalom!* these two themes—the brutality of what has been and the promise of what might have been, the failure of sanctuaries and the imagination of sanctuaries—are massively in tension. In *Light in August* Faulkner is only trying out, tentatively, this other kind of sanctuary, this different counterforce to the chaos of reality. Having rendered the range of destructive "shapes and sounds with which [a man may] guard himself from truth" (p. 453), Faulkner moves, in Mrs. Hines, toward a fictive, consolatory design that knows itself to be fictional.

Unlike her husband's rabid abstractions, Mrs. Hines's scenario of the life her grandson might have led is imaginatively rooted in the flesh and blood:

"I aint never seen him when he could walk," she says. "Not for thirty years I never saw him. Never once walking on his own feet and calling his own name—"

"Bitchery and abomination!" the man says suddenly. His voice is high, shrill, strong. "Bitchery and abomination!" (p. 350).

Far from Addie Bundren's scornful definition of the word—"just a shape to fill a lack"—Mrs. Hines's words well up out of her unreleased feelings, and she lovingly delineates a walking child. Her husband, who has looked on this child so many years of his wife's deprivation, has yet never seen him, focusing only on those abstract nouns by which the child was replaced and in obedience to which his youth was mangled.

Doc Hines fanatically believes his fiction; it leads to disaster. Mrs. Hines's fiction is openly fictive; it is the aftermath of disaster. It is meant to change nothing, just an outpouring of the imagination, a rehearsal of the rich might-have-been that has been canceled out by the poverty of reality. In her fiction she wistfully posits sanctuary, a single day of grace in which the past is suspended, just as Hightower realizes that Sunday is for forgiveness of the week's sins, "the heart quiet now for a little while beneath the cool soft blowing of faith and hope"

(p. 347). If the pastoral and all-accommodating Lena Grove represents one kind of stay against stress—at the level of plot and character—then Mrs. Hines's fiction represents a humbler, quite different sanctuary. Changing nothing but calling forth the life spilled or never realized, it is a brief adumbration of the act of mourning and celebration, of memory and imaginative creation that is *Absalom, Absalom!*

Most readers going through *Absalom, Absalom!* for the first time probably share Quentin and Shreve's frustrated cry, "Wait! Wait!" Go over that again, the reader says, and the book does just that, retakes scene after scene, inviting the reader to find his bearings in what first appeared as chaos. The original encounter is likely to resemble Grandmother Compson's response to Rosa's aunt's delivery of a wedding invitation:

"Father and your grandmother were just married then and mother was a stranger in Jefferson and I don't know what she thought except that she would never talk about what happened: about the mad woman whom she had never seen before, who came bursting into the house, not to invite her to a wedding, but to dare her not to come, and then rushed out again. Mother could not even tell what wedding she meant at first, and when father came home he found mother in hysterics too, and even twenty years later mother could not tell what actually happened" (pp. 54-55).

In this brief passage there is a small paradigm for the Faulknerian encounter between self and not-self: abrupt, furious, incomprehensible. Fanatically imbued with her own motives, Rosa's aunt descends upon the Compsons like a tornado, utters a hysterical injunction, then is gone. Cutting across "*the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering*" (p. 139) which make up society's sanctuaries, such an encounter is not a communication: it is an overwhelming. A Faulkner character, once overwhelmed, once exposed to the "*maelstrom of unbearable reality*," can only echo Wash Jones's cry: "*I kaint have heard what I know I heard. I just know I kaint*" (p. 288). Wash, Rosa, Ellen, Henry, Eulalia Bon, Charles Bon, Charles E. St. V. Bon all encounter experiences that are keyed to alien dreams or codes and thus are beyond assimilation. All are traumatized, directly or indirectly, by the brutal requirements of Thomas Sutpen's intransigent design.

This design itself is of course forged in response to the most profound trauma in the novel, a door shutting in a little boy's face. In this moment Sutpen forfeits the security of his naive vision and takes on the annihilating perspective of the plantation owner. He sees himself and his family as white trash, as "cattle, creatures heavy and without grace" (p. 235), and cattle they remain. Eulalia Bon, Rosa Coldfield,

and Wash Jones's granddaughter are dealt with, inflexibly, as cattle, as potential producers of a male Sutpen heir. Inflexibility is Sutpen's hallmark; he first appears in Jefferson as a man "whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay" (p. 33). The pottery image suggests his strengths and his defects.¹² A man exposed to unbearable heat, he should have died; instead he was "fired" and has taken invariable shape. Everything assailable in him has withered under the heat; what remains is invulnerable to stress, a sanctuary indeed.

Deprived of his moorings, the comfort of his "poor white" identity annihilated by a slammed door, Sutpen desperately reaches out for another orientation, takes on his design. That design, impervious and unremovable, becomes the shelter within which he lives, the sanctuary he can never abandon. The meaning of his moment of exposure, when the old identity collapses and the new one has yet to be forged, is best articulated by the lyrical Rosa Coldfield of Chapter V. Blocked by Clytie's "*black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh,*" Rosa thinks:

Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering. . . . But let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too (p. 139).

Touch is the threat and the promise that haunt *Absalom, Absalom!*, from Clytie's hand on Rosa's arm, to Sutpen's hand on Rosa's head, to Wash Jones's grim "I'm going to tech you, Kernel" (p. 288), to that embrace, intolerably imagined but never enacted, between Charles Bon and Judith Sutpen. Touch is the destroyer of those sanctuaries of shibboleth and immunity, even as they are constructed to prevent touch. Thus Thomas Sutpen has a door slammed in his face, dedicates much of his life to building a mansion in which he will be on the owner's side of that door, and then devotes the remainder of his life to keeping the door shut, the sanctuary inviolable.

But can exposure be endured, can "*the maelstrom of unbearable reality*" be encountered without protective designs? There is no more profound question in Faulkner's work, and Rosa Coldfield, in one of the novel's central passages, articulates its widest implications:

. . . Even at nineteen [I] must have known that living is one constant and perpetual instant when the arras-veil before what-is-to-be hangs docile and even glad to the lightest naked thrust if we had dared, were brave enough (not wise enough: no wisdom needed here)

to make the rending gash. Or perhaps it is no lack of courage either: not cowardice which will not face that sickness somewhere at the prime foundation of this factual scheme from which the prisoner soul, miasmal-distillant, 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) all of space and time and massy earth, 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; and dies, is gone, vanished: nothing—but is that true wisdom which can comprehend that there is a might-have-been which is more true than truth, from which the dreamer, waking, says not “Did I but dream?” but rather says, indicts high heaven’s very self with: “Why did I wake since waking I shall never sleep again?” (pp. 142-43).

Living in the present is here imagined as a kind of continuous murder, a lunging—Hamlet-like—through the arras-veil of the present moment into the future. It requires something beyond courage to encounter, unprotected by the orientational designs of the past, the undomesticated future. Rosa speaks of the radical poverty, the “sickness” of the spatial-temporal world outside the self. She describes the undesigned, uninterpreted “factual scheme” as an uninhabitable swamp. This is the world the Faulkner protagonist is typically catapulted into, and he either goes under or spends his energies making sense of it, designing it. The prisoner soul, “fastened to a dying animal,” dreams. In that dream of meaning it momentarily escapes the swamp, “relicts” the factual earth and creates a human scene. The aspiring prisoner soul makes of opaque otherness an expression of its own “sunward” dreams. Transforming its factual exile into a fictive home, it makes sanctuaries. Eventually, inevitably, the sanctuaries collapse.

Rosa’s dream-like love of Charles Bon, her later offer of herself to Thomas Sutpen, these are imaginative gifts, fruitless fictions, issuing in nothing but memory, but redeeming for their moment the chaos and poverty of the swamp:

I was that sun, who believed that he [Sutpen] . . . was not oblivious of me but only unconscious and receptive like the swamp-freed pilgrim feeling earth and tasting sun and light again and aware of neither but only of darkness’ and morass’ lack—who did believe there was that magic in unkin blood which we call by the pallid name of love that would be, might be sun for him . . . (pp. 167-68).

Rosa’s love, Henry’s love, and Bon’s need for a father are creative designs no less than Eulalia’s hatred and Sutpen’s dynasty fixation are destructive ones. They are, equally, responses to the swamp.

The might-have-been is an unacted possibility that has failed to become real, as Rosa's gift of herself was unclaimed. Her chapter begins with the scornful phrase, "so they will have told you," but those words soon metamorphose into the refrain, "they cannot have told you this." They cannot because it never happened. The might-have-been that is more true than truth—accessible only to memory and imagination—is the province of human desire, not factual history; and Chapter V celebrates the un-lived life of Rosa Coldfield.

In contrast to *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, where all is experienced but almost nothing told, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a story of stories. Rosa's story is created in bitterness and hatred, Mr. Compson's in bemusement, Quentin and Shreve's in increasingly anguished sympathy. The designs they find reflect the moods they bring, and Mr. Compson's ends in stalemate. Only Quentin and Shreve can make sense of it, and Faulkner stresses that they *make* sense of it, with the attendant bias that such a creative act implies. Indeed, Quentin and Shreve's story-telling, Rosa's demonizing, and Sutpen's morality share a generic trait: they all impose a pattern upon the patternless. They interpret "*the maelstrom of unbearable reality*," they cultivate the factual swamp of meaningless details with which this novel began. Thus *Absalom, Absalom!* re-creates (by its speculative, design-engendering form) that network of chaos-ordering yet potentially life-thwarting designs that it exposes in its plot. The re-creation, in contrast to the other designs, is unprecedentedly generous, exploratory, openly fictional:

"And now," Shreve said, "we're going to talk about love." But he didn't need to say that either . . . since neither of them had been thinking about anything else; all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them, as someone always has to rake the leaves up before you can have the bonfire. That was why it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other . . . in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false (p. 316).

This is the lyrical language of marriage and metamorphosis, describing a bond of mutual tolerance and sympathy between Quentin and Shreve. That bond is a sanctuary of shared and generous feeling within which they pursue an acceptable design for Thomas Sutpen's career. The sharing and the generosity betoken intimacy (not immunity) and make possible the creation of a humanly satisfying story. Thomas

Sutpen's body is lost to time but his meaning has yet to be made. To go beyond the stalemate of Mr. Compson, the power of love is needed, and Quentin and Shreve find it within themselves even as they imagine it in their story.

The love they posit is less between Judith and Charles or Judith and Henry than between Charles and Henry, and preeminently from Charles toward his father. Thus, a "horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs" (p. 101) becomes through their imagining a family tragedy, and Charles Bon is transformed from weary Sybarite to anguished son and brother. This dead-end narrative, in which all has happened by the beginning, assumes through the poignancy of its final version a range of options. By the generosity of Quentin and Shreve's conjoined imagination, Charles Bon takes on life: his vengeful mother, the calculating lawyer, the painful discovery of feelings on entering Sutpen's Hundred, his self-immolating motive for putting the picture of the octaroon in his locket, his caring for the wounded Henry, above all, his plea for just a flicker of recognition, these details turn the incoherence of outer fact into the coherence of inner need; they make a moving and meaningful design.

That design offers little solace, but it appropriates Mr. Compson's "shadowy inscrutable" materials and transforms them into a drama of almost intolerable significance. Faulkner celebrates in *Absalom, Absalom!* the imaginative energy by which men make their world a human one, by which, through orientational fictions, they transform the brutal facts of death and trauma into a commemorative vision of the living energies that have died or suffered injury. This is the mark on the stone:

. . . And then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter (p. 127).

Even as she says these words Judith Sutpen is making her mark. She passes Charles' letter on to Grandmother Compson who passed it on to her son who passed it on to Quentin who is created by William Faulkner so that the marks on the stone, the scratches of meaning—the record of desire and disillusionment that "cant matter" yet "must matter"—can be passed on. This commemorative rehearsal of abortive aspirations underlying those congealed marks and scratches constitutes the core of Faulkner's achievement.

Faulkner's "tough" early fiction—*Soldier's Pay* through *Sanctuary*—posits a bleak world of inarticulate outrage, a world in which sanctuaries are, foremost, illusory stays against the chaos of reality. Exposure in these novels is traumatic and unavoidable. But Faulkner's work turns in the thirties toward a more humanistic focus on the range of potentially viable responses one can make to inevitable exposure. He moves from a focus on unbearable encounters to one on how they are borne nevertheless. Ultimately, he moves from the nihilistic trauma of *Soldier's Pay* to the saccharine reminiscence of *The Reivers*, from the shock of unassimilable experience to the savor of experience digested and recollected.

At midpoint are *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, those narratives that fuse self-annihilating exposure with self-reconstituting commemoration. In these two fictions the collapse of defective designs is exquisitely balanced by the celebratory imagination (not the sentimental imposition) of finer designs. The might-have-been haunts the imagination—Rosa's, Quentin's, Ike's, the reader's—but the irreparable remains irreparable. Faulkner's greatest fictions alter no facts; in them no Lazarus comes back from the dead. They propose few sanctuaries, no refuge from "the scandal of our fate." But by rehearsing the passionate encounter with brute reality, by giving through words permanent shape to that encounter, his art becomes a kind of sanctuary itself, a place in which "cant matter" and "must matter" are ranged against each other in a relationship of supreme tension and poise.

Notes

¹William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 308. Further quotation from Faulkner's novels will be followed by the page number in parentheses and will refer to these editions: *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Random House, 1956); *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, 1957); *Sanctuary* (New York: Random House, 1958); *Light in August* (New York: Random House, 1968); *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1951).

²"Sanctuary" is a widely (if loosely) discussed concept in Faulkner criticism. Lawrance Thompson, Olga Vickery, Richard P. Adams, and Panthea R. Broughton all attend to the ways in which words, codes, and values are related to the bewildering experiences they are meant to bring under some control. (See the essays on *Sanctuary* in

Thompson, *William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963], and Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Introduction* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1959]. The theme is more generally treated throughout Adams, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968], and Broughton, *William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974].) This study differs from the four mentioned above in that it views the imposing of conceptual grids upon brute experience (the making of sanctuaries) as both an inevitable distortion and a necessary creation.

³André Bleikasten, *William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973), p. 75. In addition to Bleikasten's superb study, I have benefited from Vickery's essay on this novel and from John K. Simon's "The Scene and the Imagery of *As I Lay Dying*," *Criticism*, 7 (1965), 1-22.

⁴Darl's fate illustrates the rule that, for Faulkner's early protagonists, brute reality may be successfully encountered *or* understood, but not both.

⁵Bleikasten, p. 133.

⁶For a discussion of the affective immediacy of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Ab-salom, Absalom!*, see Arnold L. Weinstein, *Vision and Response in Modern Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 111-53.

⁷Joseph W. Reed, Jr., *Faulkner's Narrative* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), p. 63.

⁸William Rosky takes this usually loose metaphor of nightmare more literally as he applies its characteristics—paralysis, impotence, accumulating anxiety—to the novel. See "The Pattern of Nightmare in *Sanctuary*: or Miss Reba's Dogs," *MFS*, 15 (1969), 503-15.

⁹Even so astute a critic as Vickery assesses Temple's behavior in mainly moral terms: "Time and again Temple is given the opportunity to leave; time and again Ruby warns her to be quiet, to stop running, to stop impressing her fear and desire on the men. But she persists, half-fascinated by the idea of her own rape and half-dreading the actual experience. She can never quite make up her mind . . ." ("Crime and Punishment: *Sanctuary*," in R. P. Warren, ed. *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* [Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1966], p. 130). Vickery's emphasis on free will, on crime and punishment, is excessive. Temple's breakdown is psychic before it is moral, and J. J. Mayoux's description is more appropriate: "After the event, after the disaster, there is a new form of anguish: Temple's, for example, with its complex symbols, the empty time of a defunct clock, and the secret hemorrhage. This hemorrhage is a form of the consciousness of the body, curiously frequent in Faulkner:—the slow flowing of the blood, while the broken personality drifts toward physical or moral destruction" ("The Creation of the Real in William Faulkner," in F. J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery, *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963], p. 162).

¹⁰The Grecian Urn motif in Faulkner has received considerable attention, starting with Karl Zink's two articles in 1956: "Faulkner's Garden: Women and the Immemorial Earth," *MFS*, 2 (1956), 139-49; "Flux and the Frozen Moment: the Imagery of Stasis in Faulkner's Prose," *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 285-301. See also Darrell Abel, "Frozen Movement in *Light in August*," *Boston University Studies in English*, 3 (1957), 32-44; Lawrance Thompson's Afterword to *Sartoris* (New American Library, 1964), pp. 304-16; J. F. Kobler, "Lena Grove: Faulkner's 'Still Unravished Bride of Quietness,'" *ArQ*, 28 (1972), 339-54; and especially Joan S. Korenman, "Faulkner's Grecian Urn," *SLJ*, 7 (1974), 3-23.

¹¹Here, as elsewhere, I am indebted to the conversation and unpublished dissertation of John Hinchey of Swarthmore College. In "defending" Lena Grove, Hinchey points out that she undergoes both Joe Christmas' orphanhood and Dewey Dell's violation, without suffering their psychic disintegration. This argument is unanswerable, but one misses in the portrayal of Lena some internal rendering of her marvelous adaptability. She may encounter these stresses, but Faulkner's portrayal of her bypasses them. Thus, remarkable as she is, Lena seems to lack some region of the psyche in which assault is registered *as* assault.

¹²I owe this analogy to conversations with Philip Fisher of Brandeis University.