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### "Born There": Faulkner, Oxford, And Lafayette County

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CHAPTER I

*“Born there”*

*Faulkner, Oxford, and Lafayette County*

*Philip Weinstein*

At the end of the outrageous Sutpen saga in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Quentin says to Shreve, “You cant understand it. You would have to be born there” (289): the South as at once what “you can’t understand” unless you were “born there” and what Faulkner’s great work tirelessly seeks to convey – to convey, not to explain. “Born there” in 1897, Faulkner does not explain the South. Instead, he enlarges the stakes of his culture’s flash points of distress and makes them more lucidly unbearable. Take actual Oxford and Lafayette County away from Faulkner, and fictional Yoknapatawpha vanishes. How should we describe the tensile relationship obtaining between this writer and his place? It may be best to begin with a capsule history of the place. In every way it precedes the writer, spurs him – by its recalcitrance – to his most remarkable fictional moves.

White settlers populated, and the US government founded, Lafayette County (in the northwest corner of Mississippi) in 1836.<sup>1</sup> They did so by way of a sustained act of violence, the expulsion of native Chickasaw Indians to the “Indian Territory” (which would become Oklahoma). Over the next decades the Indians were replaced, inexorably, by imported slaves indispensable to a cotton economy that depleted the land (cotton was a non-rotating crop) as aggressively as it enriched the planters. The young state of Mississippi prospered; its university was founded in 1848, and the city of Oxford boasted 1000 citizens by 1860. The racial politics of city and county were indistinguishable. Blacks had to be seen as subhuman animals requiring white surveillance and care, inasmuch as they were required to do the subhuman labor in the fields that made the cotton economy work. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Mississippi’s gleeful leap into secession occurred only a few weeks after South Carolina’s initial break.

For a year and a half it remained a “distant” war, but the battle of Corinth (October 1862) signaled change. Grant and Sherman, driving South after Shiloh, were bent on capturing Vicksburg. As they advanced, they laid

waste. Gone was the Union Army's earlier "gentler" strategy of attempting to win over non-combatant Southerners. In its place was something grimmer: systematic punishment. Grant took Oxford in December of 1862, and that winter – as his army headquartered there – plunder and violence occurred on a daily basis. Eight months later, in a move to avenge Nathan Bedford Forrest's brazen raid on the Gayoso Hotel in Memphis, Union General "Whiskey" Smith burned down Oxford. These were the stories the young Faulkner grew up on some forty and fifty years later.

Don Doyle and others have persuasively argued that the South that lost the first Civil War won – in the late 1870s – the second Civil War. An exhausted President and Congress in Washington DC withdrew their support, gradually and increasingly, from the newly freed blacks. Following Grant's refusal to send down federal troops to safeguard elections in 1875, Mississippi's Republican governor Adelbert Ames noted with horror: "A revolution has taken place – by force of arms – and a race are disenfranchised – they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom – an era of second slavery" (quoted in Doyle, *Faulkner's County* 289).

For the first half of the twentieth century – Faulkner's formative and creative years – the tenor of Mississippi's racial politics was inalterably hostile to a black population scarcely less unfree than it had been before 1861. Redneck politicians such as Theodore Bilbo and James Vardaman worked hard to keep it that way. Soon after becoming governor in 1903, Vardaman declared, "Six thousand years ago, the Negro was the same in his native jungle that he is today."<sup>2</sup> A year later he expanded on his subject: "You can scarcely pick up a newspaper whose pages are not blackened with the account of an unmentionable crime committed by a negro brute, and this crime, I want to impress upon you, is but the manifestation of the negro's aspiration for social equality, encouraged largely by the character of free education in vogue" (quoted in Williamson, *Southern History* 157). The closed society: essentially an entire culture was engaged in policing its public utterances on race. In 1962, US marshals, a segregationist governor (Ross Barnett), and the National Guard faced off in anger – steps away from lethal violence – over the prospect of James Meredith being admitted into the University of Mississippi Law School. Looking back at this moment, Doyle writes: "The violence and hatred that exploded in Oxford that fall was the past living on in the present, determining every thought and gesture" (383). What does it mean that *this* is the history Faulkner was born into?

He would at first – like all children – have missed most of it or have got it wrong, taking as truthful the legendary narratives fed to him by the older

members of his Oxford family.<sup>3</sup> The War would figure for him for many years (and some dimensions of it forever) as the Lost Cause. The oldest of four sons – and apparently precocious from his earliest years – he would have sorted out his family history in dribs and drabs, in time imagining his way into the hidden patterns by way of the visible pieces. His father's surly unease around his own flamboyant father: how long before William would have begun to recognize a pattern repeating his grandfather's relationship to his own father, the colorful, half-mythic Colonel W. C. Falkner? As a self-orphaned child making his way in 1839 to Pontotoc, Mississippi, nine-year-old W. C. Falkner had at first been accepted by his maternal aunt and her husband, John Wesley Thompson, then later rejected by Thompson from the latter's flourishing law practice. Years thereafter, a veteran of the Mexican War, W. C. Falkner married, begot a child, and lost his young wife to illness. For reasons one can only speculate on, he gave up the baby to the Thompsons, who apparently stipulated that he was never to ask to have the child back. Seemingly he never did ask to have the child back, instead remarrying and beginning a second family. Meanwhile, that child – J. W. T. Falkner – grew up with his 'adoptive' family and became a successful Mississippi politician, banker, real estate owner, and railway tycoon. Known as the "Young Colonel," he never matched the larger-than-life figure of his disowning father, the Old Colonel, and he may never have forgotten that he didn't. What he did do, decades later and now a father himself, was sell out his profitable railroad at precisely the moment – 1902 – when his eldest son Murry was efficiently running it and making sense of his own life by doing so. This same Murry, William's taciturn father, was known by his sons suddenly – at the sound of an approaching train's whistle – to stop whatever he was doing and stare into space: when might William have begun to grasp the emotional resonance of that whistle? When would he have figured out that fathers often find the most ingenious ways of destroying their sons – a dark insight that gives a bitter and foundational flavor to some of Faulkner's greatest fictions?<sup>4</sup>

The maternal lineage, though less spectacularly troubled than the paternal one, was no less damaging. The childhood of Faulkner's mother, Maud Butler Falkner, had not been easy. Her father, Charles, had abruptly abandoned his family in the late 1880s, absconding with bank money, perhaps "eloping" with another woman as well. Maud's dreams of higher education yielded to the need to support her vulnerable mother – an embittered Leila Butler who not only moved into Maud and Murry's home in 1896 but apparently distrusted from the beginning the heavy-drinking and inarticulate man that her fine-grained daughter had agreed to marry. Leila

was to live with the Falkners until her death in 1907; her insistence on addressing letters to her married daughter as Miss Maud Butler can only have aggravated a marriage already steeped in misunderstandings. Both Leila and Maud already knew what they knew about the weaknesses of men; the Falkners' union may have been half-doomed before it even got underway. It may be unsurprising that marriages in Faulkner's fiction rarely prosper.

Colonel W. C. Falkner had even more to "give" to his hungry and talented great-grandson, but first the young writer would have to get past the sentimentalities encrusting the handed-down family portrait. In doing so, William might have found his way into a further piece of concealed family history: the possibility that the restless Old Colonel – separated from his second wife in 1863, having withdrawn from military action after failing to be promoted – may have fathered a child on a mulatto Falkner slave living in his yard named Emeline. Some twenty-five years later, the Old Colonel might even have pursued a sexual liaison with another young mulatto woman, named Lena, plausibly the offspring of that same Emeline. Is the notorious murder of the Old Colonel by Richard Thurmond in 1889 also a love mystery? Both Emeline and her daughter Fannie had lived in Thurmond's household. W. C.'s abuse of Lena – if abuse there was – might have rankled Thurmond no less than the railroad and political imbroglios we know were at play. All this is irremediably speculative, yet think of the narrative grist it may have provided for Faulkner's imaginative mill. Old Carothers McCaslin's incestuous rape of his own slave daughter in *Go Down, Moses* (1942) acts as the breaking point for young Ike McCaslin. It is the discovery in the decaying family ledger that drives Ike to repudiate his inheritance. Is this moving fictional vignette seeded as much in private family rumor as it is in public historical realities?<sup>5</sup>

The pertinent point is that, if Faulkner found his way into these insights into his family's past, he would have done so indirectly, in piecemeal fashion, over extensive time – long after the events themselves had played out. And he might thereby have grasped that one's learning arc itself is hardwired into retrospectivity: one cannot know fully at once, in the present moment. Faulkner's childhood offered a treasure trove of materials and insights into the distress of his larger culture, but it took him three novels to figure out what had all along been waiting there for him, to realize that "the actual" and "the apocryphal" are one and the same.<sup>6</sup> *Soldiers' Pay* (1926) and *Mosquitoes* (1927) both explore experiences kept at an emotional distance – the Great War Faulkner had lied about participating in, the New Orleans bohemian world he mockingly examined from an outsider's perspective.

Only in *Flags in the Dust* (written in 1927, truncatedly appearing as *Sartoris* in 1929, posthumously restored and published in 1973) did his writing come home, recognizing that the mysteries that mattered were lodged at home – some of them buried deep inside as well.

If becoming aware is necessarily retrospective – what he would call (in response to a student’s question at the University of Mississippi in 1957) an affair of “was” – then how does one do justice to the messiness of present turmoil, of what (in that same response) he called “is”?<sup>7</sup> How does one acknowledge that “is” looks and feels nothing like the crisp and clear constructions we later deploy when it has taken recognizable shape as “was”? Is it even possible to *write* “is”? Something like this question propels the extraordinary breakthrough of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Lyrical stream-of-consciousness narratives that restlessly move in present time from one interior voice to another, these two fictions break new ground in two ways that are biographically resonant. Both novels generate narrative out of the intimacies of childhood – Faulkner’s own, but anyone’s in the sense of childhood as a time when you participate in dramas whose causes and consequences remain unknown to you. Both novels take on an abiding challenge for the Southern writer as well. How can one narrate Southern experience without falling into the pitfalls and blandishments of the *master’s* authorizing voice? The two breakthroughs are joined at the hip: to not know in advance (to be immersed in “is”) is perforce to lack masterly authority. It is to operate, often, in a speechless territory where (as Faulkner put it in *The Sound and the Fury*) “its [sic] not even time until it was” (178).

Faulkner knew such unpreparedness for the onslaught of experience in ways that go beyond childhood and cut deeper. Crucial events of his later life broke upon him in the form of crisis or shock – of experience as unnegotiable. There was, first, the question of marriage (in 1918) to his childhood sweetheart, Estelle Oldham. At the sticking point – they were both barely twenty and her family was pressing her to marry the far more eligible Cornell Franklin – they could not agree to elope. Estelle married Franklin. Grievously wounded, Faulkner fled to New Haven and then Toronto, seeking to get into the Great War as a fighter pilot.<sup>8</sup> Eleven years later, Estelle’s marriage in tatters, she divorced Franklin; and – pushed by her and his own conscience – Faulkner made right what he had not made right the first time. That is, if it could be made right. Can a later marriage erase the scar imposed by an earlier one that failed to materialize? Can a thirty-one-year-old bachelor/writer reprise the ardor of a twenty-year-old youth? Can a divorcée with two children – marked by a decade of

marital complications – ever align with her lover’s Keatsean dream of a “still unravished bride”?

A troubled marriage entered into in untimely fashion: to this one could add the War not entered into at all, despite Faulkner’s urgent attempts, his training with the Canadian RAF, and his decades of pretending that he had seen action as a pilot over France, been wounded in the head and the knee. The plane he did not know how to fly metamorphosed – a decade later – into the plane he took secret lessons to learn how to fly. This plane then metamorphosed into the expensive Waco that he bought (rashly) on earnings anticipated from his potboiler *Sanctuary* (1931) – earnings that never materialized. Aggressively, now that he did know how to fly, he infected his brothers with his passion; they became known in the early 1930s as “the flying Faulkners.” Then, with fatal generosity, he sold (so cheaply that it was nearer to a gift) the Waco to his youngest brother Dean in 1935. The most talented pilot of them all, Dean was at loose ends; the Waco was intended to help him make a living as a commercial flight instructor. Less than a year after receiving the gift, Dean fatally crashed the plane – an unruly flight student having apparently prevented him from righting the craft in time. No one ever blamed Faulkner for this freak accident; but the lives of Dean’s pregnant wife, his mother Maud, and his brother William were irrevocably changed.

Faulkner’s entry into literary stardom took shape as well, like these other formative events, more as an act of violence than as a becoming. The first four masterpieces (*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*) were published, all but unbelievably, in just three years (between 1929 and 1932); they made Faulkner suddenly the hottest fiction writer in America. “I have created quite a sensation. In fact, I have learned with astonishment that I am the most important figure in American letters” (quoted in Blotner, *Biography* 291), he wrote from New York to an unbelieving Estelle, back home in Oxford. Bennett Cerf of Random House and Alfred Knopf of Knopf were clamoring for his attention; Tallulah Bankhead was pressing him to do a screenplay for her. Immersed in a firebomb of editors’ adulation, he took refuge (not for the first or last time) in out-of-control binge drinking. Achieving fame turned out to be no less hectic than the other careening realities that penetrated Faulkner’s life.

There remains one massive dimension of life in Oxford and Lafayette County that could have come to Faulkner as no surprise – one that he experienced from infancy forward: the inextricable tangle of race relations. It began with Mammy Callie, a relic of the Civil War, a fixture in his parents’

family life since he was five years old, the caretaker of his own family from 1930 until her death in 1940. Warm and feisty (she went through four husbands), Callie taught him the old virtues of rectitude and responsibility. Perhaps more tellingly, she would have handled his childhood body, washed and hugged him – something that severe Maud Falkner seems to have been less good at. Black and unlike him, she was other, a member of a group that his people called niggers. Maternal and intimate, she was same, as even his mother and siblings were not. This double vision of sameness and otherness underwrites Faulkner’s unparalleled exploration of race in his greatest novels.

Even here, however, Faulkner’s grasp of racial realities oscillated between ingrained reactionary myopia and flights of liberating vision. The first six novels have a relatively restrained interest in racial trouble; the magnificent Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* is static, segregated from Compson manias by her very sanity. But everything changes with *Light in August* (1932), the novel in which Faulkner first seems to have wondered what actually underwrites the segregation of the races. He discovered – in the hypnotic figure of Joe Christmas – that perhaps nothing biological is even involved. Southern racial turmoil drew its inexhaustible venom and violence from an empty difference – yet one fetishized by his culture for that very reason as all-explaining. The Southern hysterias of racial touch and smell – hysterias normalized and afloat in the very air that he breathed during his Oxford childhood – arose, he was eventually to understand, out of a centuries-long history of miscegenation, of the same blood illicitly coursing in both races. “The Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men,” James Baldwin once proposed.<sup>9</sup> “Insane” because – as Joe Christmas and Charles Bon and Bon’s son all attest – only cultural construction speaks here, not natural fact. Treat a white boy in an orphanage as a nigger, and he will agonize the rest of his life over the question of his racial identity. Take a white-looking boy out of mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans, transplant him in Yoknapatawpha County and call him a nigger, and he will spend the rest of his life releasing the violence lodged in this abusive appellation.

Yet, when it was a matter of race on the ground and embodied in real human beings white and black – rather than race as he could grasp it within the capacious precincts of his imagination – Faulkner’s understanding faltered repeatedly. At such moments his views echoed the more predictable anxieties of Oxford and Lafayette County. When Civil Rights turbulence struck the South in the 1950s, he was and was not prepared to respond. On the one hand, his conservative plea to black leaders – “Go slow



now” – could only strike them as useless, if not worse. And behind the scenes (as opposed to courageous speeches and public utterances) his private letters glossed what he must have meant by “slow”: “[F]or the second time in a hundred years,” he wrote a concerned fellow Mississippian, “we Southerners will have destroyed our native land just because of niggers” (*SL* 391). Why won’t they be patient, wait out a change that in time must come – once Southern whites accept that it has to come? For it to come sooner than that – which is of course how it did come, in violence, by way of black leadership, and (reluctantly) backed by the authority of the US government – was something he could not bear to contemplate.

On the other hand, Faulkner’s outrage at his region’s racial brutality was not only consistent – potentially dangerous for him as well – but piercingly eloquent. Learning (while in Rome) of the murder and mutilation of young Emmett Till in September 1955, Faulkner wrote this letter to the American press:

Perhaps we will find out now whether we are to survive or not. Perhaps the purpose of this sorry and tragic error committed in my native Mississippi. . . . is to prove to us whether or not we deserve to survive. Because if we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don’t deserve to survive, and probably won’t. (*ESPL* 223)

He had little trouble identifying his position on his region’s racial turmoil as “man in the middle” – a wry recognition that he was condemned both to offend his Southern family and friends, for going too far, and to offend Northern liberals and black leaders, for not going far enough. As Grace Elizabeth Hale has argued, the “middle” stance of Southern liberalism lost its viability after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).<sup>10</sup> Thereafter you had to be for integration or against it, and most Southern liberals reluctantly retreated to a white moderate position. When the chips were down, they would not turn against the prerogatives of a society founded on segregation. Faulkner did turn against those prerogatives, but his was a lonely voice in doing so. Yet one may wonder, some sixty years later, whether a grain of somber wisdom did not lodge in Faulkner’s stance. He knew, none better, that Southern racism wasn’t going away any time soon. He knew as well that no governmental antibiotics existed for such longstanding ills in the body politic. Most of all he knew that he himself could articulate no cure for the racial cancer that so undermined his country’s fondest ideals.

No cure indeed: perhaps this is the note to close on. Oxford and Lafayette County gave Faulkner both what they had and what they lacked: regional

and family loyalty, pride in labor, determination to endure when the cards seemed stacked against you; the confounding complexity of race relations – at once a cauldron of love and hatred, trust and mistrust, intimacy and violence; and finally, the experience of a proud region undergoing defeat and sustaining (often with stoic dignity) the absence of any formula for turning that defeat into victory. It is no accident that he became our country’s most powerful writer of tragic dilemmas. His region, in all its bittersweetness, demanded (unknowingly) no less of him. Stung into greatness by the gap between innocent dreams and the “maelstrom of unbearable reality” (*AA* 124, italics removed), by the irresolvable tension between the tranquility of “was” and the turbulence of “is,” Faulkner is our supreme writer of distress. He writes the overcoming of defenses, the collapse of identity-sustaining boundaries. He grasps – in his race-focused masterpieces – the abidingly cultural resonance of individual pain. If he twists the conventional form of the novel all out of shape, that is because it promises resolution and he is bent on conveying unbearable trouble. Like the canary in the mine that is the first to know disaster is coming – but not how to avoid it – Faulkner outwits none of the problems his work so probingly explores. In an essay of the 1950s entitled “Mississippi,” he wrote that one loves one’s region not because but despite. He is Oxford and Lafayette County’s greatest native son not because but despite.

#### NOTES

- 1 This paragraph and the next two are indebted to Don H. Doyle’s extensively useful *Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- 2 Quoted in Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 157.
- 3 My argument about retrospective understanding and unpreparedness for experience when it actually “arrives” is developed at length in my *Becoming Faulkner: The Art and Life of William Faulkner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 4 John Irwin’s *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) is the *locus classicus* for an exploration of the destructive relationship obtaining between fathers and sons in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Judith Sensibar, in *The Origins of Faulkner’s Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), was the first to explore its counterpart in Faulkner’s family lineage as well.
- 5 Drawing on Williamson’s foundational work with obscure archival materials, I explore this speculative history more amply in *Becoming Faulkner*.

- 6 Faulkner used these terms – “the actual” and “the apocryphal” – in Jean Stein’s celebrated interview “William Faulkner: The Art of Fiction No. 12,” published in the *Paris Review* 12 (Spring 1956).
- 7 The larger passage is worth citing: “maybe peace is only a condition in retrospect when the subconscious has got rid of the gnats and the tacks and the broken glass of experience and has left only the peaceful pleasant things – that was peace. Maybe peace is not is, but was.” Quoted in *Faulkner in the University*, p. 67. My *Becoming Faulkner* opens up both terms, extensively.
- 8 All biographies of Faulkner attend, of course, to these familiar and decisive events. Blotner offers the most sustained discussion in *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974); André Bleikasten and Jay Parini refine his terms in, respectively, *William Faulkner: Une vie en romans* (Paris: Editions Aden, 2007) and *One Matchless Time: A Life of William Faulkner* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), while Sensibar proposes a revisionist reading, seeking in *Faulkner and Love: The Women Who Shaped His Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) to “rescue” Estelle from a narrative that, she believes, tends to levy too much blame in her direction. In *Becoming Faulkner* I conclude, with respect to their troubled marriage, that “they both – because of who they were, in all their intricacy – contributed to the marital suffering that they both assuredly experienced” (Weinstein, *Becoming Faulkner* 240n2).
- 9 James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction, 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1985), p. 88.
- 10 See Grace Elizabeth Hale and Robert Jackson, “We’re Trying Hard as Hell to Free Ourselves’: Southern History and Race in the Making of William Faulkner’s Literary Terrain,” in *A Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. Richard C. Moreland (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 28–45.