



PRESENTING THE ABSENCE. A CELEBRATION OF WILLIAM FAULKNER'S LITERATURE IN HIS 123TH ANNIVERSARY

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There exists an inclination to fear when it comes to speaking of giants, of literary legends such as William Faulkner. One dreads the consequences of either praising or condemning past deeds, therefore one should stick to the facts. He was first and foremost a fiction writer, which complicated the task of getting to know the man behind the pages, if or when one desired to do so. He would later add the *u* to his last name so as not to share his great-grandfather's, with whom he did share the taste for writing. He also added it as part of the many disguises he would enjoy playing with for the rest of his life. Faulkner decided to join the Canadian Royal Air Force (he was rejected in the US) for which he had to fake an accent, a nationality, and a name. The story is well known: he had not finished his training when the armistice was signed and he came back home to Oxford with a brand-new RAF uniform and a (very probably faked) limp. This was just one of the many personae he would adopt. "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history," he once declared. That is indeed a peculiar claim for a man who so enjoyed his flashy disguises. 123 years ago today William Cuthbert Falkner was born in Mississippi. His desire to be "voided from history" was not fulfilled, for both man and place would become a myth in universal literature.

Throughout his life he wrote more than a hundred short stories, several poems, essays, illustrated fables, and nineteen novels. Only five of those novels are set outside Yoknapawpha County. He once claimed that the aim of artists was "to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed, so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life." That might have been his intention in crafting Yoknapawpha, the *umbilicus mundi* where both Deep South History and universal human experiences (which is life) painfully bloom. Painful as well is the reading of his work at times: hard, *difficult*, whatever that might mean. I have encountered people who deny this, yet pain is not necessarily a negative



quality, as it is my belief that no growth (of any sort) happens without pain. Most of his novels require engagement on the part of the reader due to the complications stemming from the long sentences, the elaborate syntax and the more than obscure pronoun references (if the reference is not lost altogether). To say his is a difficult (at times, beautifully poetic) prose would be stating the obvious. Yet the reasons behind such difficulty are of great interest because one finds textual complication and opaqueness of that sort in contemporary fiction as well.

Faulkner was writing at a time of great innovation and experimentation, there is no questioning that. Yet his stream of consciousness, his interior monologues, are not Joycean or Woolfian. His is a unique and regional voice that speaks the unspeakable, the original sin of a nation still crippled by its original sin. His fragment is necessarily so because his unspeakable truths cannot be directly disclosed. The effect of the past on the present, the crisis of identity, the South's death of God... these are unutterable experiences. Yet they need to be expressed, they strive to be expressed, just like Morrison's *Beloved* "is not a story to pass on," both unspeakable and necessary. Faulkner's compulsive hiding and revealing the secret is seen in contemporary writers, such as Toni Morrison or Jesmyn Ward, whose work is also infused with an ancestral crime (only not committed by *their* ancestors) which burdens their characters' identities.

Numerous authors in different countries, times, and traditions have been inspired by Faulkner's prose. Literary critics from the most formalist tradition to postcolonial or queer studies have analyzed his novels and have drawn disparate conclusions. His work is complex and layered regarding racial issues and his public comments on the topic swung from progressive (for the time) to reactionary. Yet these poetics of obscurity are still found today, which must mean they continue to be (aesthetically, morally even) useful to tackle primeval conflicts. This might be the "human heart in conflict with itself" he referred to when accepting the Nobel Prize. In fact, he was probably a human heart in conflict with itself coming from where he came, seeing what he saw, hating injustice as he did...

"In the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both:" he concluded this quotation regarding the wish to be a private individual, "he made the books and he died". If one is to believe these words, Faulkner would be quite displeased with what has become of his wish. So now that the man is dead, long live his texts.

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