Hannah Smay

Major Figures: William Faulkner (ENG 333)

Kristin Fujie

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A Meandering Reversal: Examining Quentin’s Drowning within

William Faulkner’s Early Career and the Southern Landscape

If William Faulkner ever heard the saying ‘you can’t step in the same river twice,’ he wrote Quentin Compson into *Absalom, Absalom!* in order to defy it. In his famously looping narrative structure, Faulkner rewrites the neurotic Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury* into another storyseven years later. Critics have argued that by returning to this particular character, Faulkner explains Quentin’s suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* through the tumultuous historical context of the South. While the relationship between these two versions of Quentin is indeed retroactive, *Absalom* also follows the progression of Faulkner’s early career. In order to understand how *Absalom* falls within both Faulkner’s thematic evolution and his narrative structure of reversal, I examine the waterways of Faulkner’s landscape. While the many waterways of the Mississippi Delta flood Faulkner’s real and fictional landscapes, their forward and backward flow is a powerful metaphor for Faulkner’s career. The water found in Faulkner’s earliest fiction as a psychological phenomenon accumulates under the environmental fabric of his later works. As Faulkner approaches *Absalom, Absalom!,* this water bursts open into the wider material world. While the Quentin of *The Sound and the Fury* looms large over the Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!,* neither Quentin can be fully understood without looking back to the environmental psychologies first explored in Faulkner’s early stories. By tracing how Faulkner’s narratives are envisioned through water from his early short stories forward, Quentin emerges as a creation of both Faulkner’s chronological evolution and his narrative reversal.

Although one could argue that all of Faulkner’s works are somehow an addendum to those that came before, *Absalom, Absalom!* stands out by resurrecting Quentin from *The Sound and the Fury.* However, in tracing Quentin’s tragic and watery trajectory, it is helpful to consider him as a particularly “environed” (Anderson 31) character. The waterways of his natural environment, such as the branch on the Compson estate and the river in which he ultimately drowns, appear within Quentin’s psychological narration in *The Sound and the Fury.* According to Eric Gary Anderson in his article “Environed Blood: Ecology and Violence in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Sanctuary,*” an “environed” character like Quentin is one “who most intensely and insistently think[s] ecologically (or position[s] themselves in or against “nature,” or simply find[s] themselves entangled with or otherwise up against nature) [and] are very troubled characters indeed. Environing is a form of turbulence… even a reason for suicide or murder…” (Anderson 32-33). As suggested, Quentin is a very “troubled” character. Like the “honeysuckle” (*SF*129), Quentin is existentially “all mixed up” (*SF* 129). His psychology is “entangled” with visions of his sister and the inherited stories of the South told in *Absalom.* Both of these entanglements can be located in the landscapes of these novels. From *The Sound and the Fury,* Quentin carries a persistent Southern ecology with him into the landscape of the North. To escape from the psychological “turbulence” exacerbated by his environment, Quentin commits suicide in the river coursing through his college town. In each novel, Quentin struggles to understand the boundaries between his mind and his physical and cultural environment.

If Quentin’s condition is somehow related to the landscape of the South, a rough understanding of the geology and environs of the Mississippi Delta provides a basis for determining the boundaries between Faulkner’s narratives and landscapes. Yoknapatawpha County is often interpreted to be a fictionalization of the actual South. According to Charles Aiken, Yoknapatawpha is most likely located in the Mississippi Delta of northern Mississippi, embedded within the culture and geography of the Lowland South (Aiken 335). As illustrated by the map in the appendices of *Absalom, Absalom! (AA* 314-315)*,* the town of Jefferson lies between the Tallahatchie and Yoknapatawpha Rivers. While the Yoknapatawpha River is obviously fictional, the Tallahatchie is an actual river in northeastern Mississippi. This cartographical feature reinforces the location of Faulkner’s world in the actual South. In geologic terms, the Mississippi Delta is an alluvial plain of agriculturally rich sediments created by frequent flooding of Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers (GEOL). One particular flood that wrecked considerable havoc across this region was the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 (Parrish 74). Though this event destroyed the human settlements in its path, the agricultural production of the region relies on fertile sediments distributed by floods like this one. This relationship between catastrophe and fertility is particularly apt regarding Quentin’s obsession with Caddy. Waterways of various sizes meander across this flat, fertile, and perpetually saturated landscape. The backdrop of Quentin’s world is thus a landscape etched by rivers and fertilized by catastrophic floods.

In order to trace how Faulkner positions waterways within and without the psychologies of his characters, I first turn to “Nympholepsy,” a short story written in 1925. In this story, Faulknerexplores how a character’s internal psychology shapes the external landscape*.* Following a working man taking a twilight stroll home after a day of labor, the central drama of this short piece takes place within a treacherous stream. In a dream-like pursuit of a female form that promises safety, the man runs through the hilly landscape and tumbles into a stream:

“Then the water took him. But here was something more than water… But here beneath his hand a startled thigh slid like a snake, among the dark bubbles he felt a swift leg; and sinking, the point of a breast scraped his back. Amid the slow commotion of disturbed water, he saw death like a woman, shining and drowning and waiting, saw a flashing body tortured by water…” (N 335)

Immersed within the turbulence of the stream, the character encounters “something more than water” that is both physical and psychological. The man collides with various pieces of debris in the water and feels the textures of the river bottom as he struggles to swim to the other side. However, the character understands these physical sensations to be the overarching spiritual “Presence” (N 334) of a woman. The water becomes the location of his nymphomania where he collides and entangles with the body of this ethereal woman. Instead of finding safety or sex, his fantasy quickly turns nightmarish and evil. The water froths with “dark bubbles” as a “swift leg” slides beneath his hand “like a snake” and he feels a sharp nipple “scrape” in violent arousal against his back. This “snake” leg, perhaps a loose root in the stream, is an uncanny allusion to biblical temptation. When the character falls into the water, he encounters the temptation of the female body which becomes snakelike, torturous, and thoroughly dangerous. While he collides with these disembodied parts “amid the slow commotion of disturbed water,” it is uncertain whether the “leg” and the “breast” are actually parts of the woman he seeks. By the dreamy and nightmarish quality of this scene, it is more likely that these sensations are only a projection of a frenzied female within a landscape inscribed by the character’s psychology.

The character in this early story constructs his landscape entirely through perceptions and sensations. The waterways of *The Sound and the Fury* emerge out of this exclusively psychological frame. While the underlying structure of women and death located within a stream persist within Quentin’s story, the landscape, the woman, and the drowning are all far more real than in “Nympholepsy.” In this way, Faulkner’s early experiments lay a sort of blueprint for his later works. Keeping “Nympholepsy” in mind, consider how Quentin’s adolescent recollections of Caddy explore the ecological associations between his sister, the watery environment of the South, and his own psychological disturbance. The night when Caddy loses her virginity, Quentin finds his sister at the branch:

“she was lying in the water her head on the sand spit the water flowing about her hips there was a little more light in the water her skirt half saturated flopped along her flanks to the waters motion in heavy ripples going nowhere renewed themselves of their own movement” (*SF* 149)

Here, the Southern landscape engulfs Caddy as she merges with the branch from the waist down. Quentin notices “water flowing about her hips” which saturates her sexual anatomy. While critic William Grant interprets this scene as a “ritual cleansing” or a baptism (Grant 708), Caddy’s immersion in the branch both here and in her childhood bears a closer resemblance to the biblical temptations of the serpent in “Nympholepsy.” The branch indicates the stain of female sexuality and loss of virginity. This is a catastrophe for Quentin. Physically and symbolically muddied, Caddy’s body and clothing flow together like sea grass undulating in the current as her head rests on the sandy bank. Caddy’s body displaces the water in “heavy ripples going nowhere.” This constantly “renewed” movement of water is triggered by Caddy’s presence. These “ripples” emanate from the location of her womb like tides propelled by the moon. Like the lunar compulsion of tides, these “ripples” resemble Caddy’s own cycles of fertility that control the fluids within her ripened body. Her sexuality floods outward like the Mississippi River itself in “heavy ripples” which lap onto the bank where her brother stands watching her. To Quentin standing on the bank, Caddy and the horrors of her sexuality are embedded within the movements of the landscape, central to both the branch ecology and Quentin’s psychological crisis.

While the branch is a rivulet within the drainage system of the Mississippi Delta, the river where Quentin drowns is outside of this Southern landscape. However Quentin carries the Southern landscape and its embedded traumas with him during his migration to the north. Like the character in “Nympholepsy,” Quentin inscribes his Southern obsession onto his northern environment. Thus, when he encounters the river in Cambridge he projects the South and its “highly charged power” (Anderson 37) onto this waterway:

“Niggers say a drowned man’s shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. It twinkled and glinted, like breathing… and debris half submerged, healing out to the sea and the caverns and the grottoes of the sea.” (*SF* 90)

This “nigger” myth, framed in this way by the racial landscape of the South, positions a “drowned man’s shadow” looking up at the “drowned man” from the water. This “shadow” lurks beneath the surface apparently waiting for its owner to follow it into the depths. When Quentin stands beside the river, he gazes at his “shadow” in the water from the same place on the bank where he gazes at Caddy “half submerged” in the branch. Caddy, like the entire environment of the South, follows Quentin like his “shadow” and seems to beckon him towards the water. In the same way that the man in “Nympholepsy” seeks safety in the woman he chases, Quentin seeks “healing” in the watery journey out to the “caverns and the grottoes of the sea.” As hollow vessels which fill with ocean tides, these “caverns and grottoes” are clearly womb-like or yonic spaces like Caddy’s hips in the branch. Again, a feminine presence lurks in the water with the promise of “healing.” Just as the nymphomaniac discovers “death like a woman,” Quentin drowns in a waterway that he believes will heal him with a feminine power.

Although Caddy’s presence in the branch is considerably less vague and ambiguous than the female presence in “Nympholepsy,” the landscape in *The Sound and the Fury* remains within the consciousnesses of her brothers. While “Nympholepsy” inscribes the landscape within a singular psychology, *The Sound and the Fury* inscribes the landscape within multiple. Both Benjy and Quentin associate the branch with Caddy, each conjuring her out of the landscape either by her “muddy drawers” (*SF* 152) or how “Caddy smelled like trees” (*SF* 42). The collective narratives of *The Sound and the Fury* construct a shared landscape that is rooted in the physical world but also contains the memories and experiences of its inhabitants. By “environing” his characters within the same landscape, Faulkner deliberately connects the trauma of losing Caddy to the Compson environment. Further, by writing a Quentin that carries his Southern environment with him to the North, Faulkner anticipates the full importance of landscapes and their stories that emerges in *Absalom.* In *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner begins to explore how cultural inscriptions embedded within the Southern landscape can wield influence on a scale beyond one character’s imagination.

However, as he superimposes the landscape of the South onto his northern surroundings in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin’s relationship with the water remains nearly as psychologically bound as in “Nympholepsy.” Although Quentin’s landscape contains an actual woman and an actual drowning, Faulkner’s narrative structure in *The Sound and the Fury* ultimately confines the landscape within the psychological sphere. As Faulkner submerges again into the narrative of Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*, critics such as Charles Sherry have noted the different narrative techniques Faulkner employs between “the two Quentins” (Sherry 49). While *The Sound and the Fury* scavenges the very depths of Quentin’s interior, the narratives of *Absalom* flood outwards through the chorus of many voices. In the same way that *The Sound and the Fury* widens the psychological scope of “Nympholepsy,” *Absalom, Absalom!* widens the scope of the Southern landscape to a nearly global scale. Although *Absalom* abandons the pattern of women tortured by water, the water itself determines the very narrative structure of the text.

Reading backwards through *Absalom,* Quentin’s psyche becomes infused by the potency of the Southern landscape instead of the other way around. Notably, it is the external narrator who reveals the sheer magnitude of the Mississippi River in the Southern world. Not only does this river determine the entire hydrology of the South as illustrated by its geological preeminence, but it also occupies a ubiquitous symbolic space. Cutting through the narrative strata like the river itself cutting through the fertile sediments of the delta, the narrator describes the omnipotence of the Mississippi River:

“…a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River which runs not only through the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical, not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is the very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature…” (*AA!* 208).

This passage lies under every other narrative voice in the text as if embedded in the pure bedrock of the story. This structure places the river at the very foundation of the novel and locates it outside of the psychologies of the characters as “the very Environment itself.” Although an important aspect of the Mississippi’s supremacy is its “Continental” span, this river is far more than simply a physical landscape. Indicated by the mystical Catholic vocabulary of “geographical transubstantiation,” the river has the ability to conjure blood and flesh from mere water and topography. This “transubstantiation” establishes the physical river as a remarkably creative force that itself transforms “the beings within its scope,” rather than being inscribed by the psychologies of these “beings.” As the “geologic umbilical,” the Mississippi River feeds and connects the narratives told by the characters. This is a distinct departure from the psychological landscapes of *The Sound and the Fury* and “Nympholepsy.” Here, Faulkner places the physical landscape above and beyond his characters. In doing so, he makes the river and its watery landscape external to Quentin as a physical component of his Southern identity.

In *Absalom,* Faulkner reverses how his characters relate to their environment by reversing the direction of influence between psychology and landscape. Instead of characters superimposing memories and desires onto the landscape, *Absalom* suggests that the Mississippi River controls the psychology of “the beings within its scope.” Quentin is therefore “environed” because his Southern environment is so pervasive that it permeates his very being and follows him across North America. With this reversal, Faulkner crosses the river in order to address the same themes – female sexuality, Southern identity, Quentin’s suicide – from the opposite bank. From the side of *Absalom,* Quentin’s preoccupation with the womb spaces in the branch and the sea stems from the river being the “geologic umbilical” of the land. Recalling the geology of the Mississippi floods, the river reflects the reproductive quality of the female body by spreading fertile loam throughout the landscape. The “umbilical” cord of a womb delivers natal nutrients just as the Mississippi floods deliver nutritious soil to the “virgin swamp” of Sutpen’s Hundred (*AA!* 30). By its connective power and unbridled fertility, the river substantiates Caddy’s sexuality, the womb space Quentin seeks in the sea, and even the disastrous femininity of “Nympholepsy.” This passage takes Quentin’s environing in *The Sound and the Fury* and spreads it across a continental scale, embedding the Southern landscape and its symbolism into the narrative framework of *Absalom*’s mythology. In *Absalom,* the entire history and culture of the South becomes “environed.”

In this reverse ecology, Faulkner connects the two versions of Quentin like waterways in the Mississippi Delta. Faulkner returns to the water of Quentin’s psychological interiority in *Absalom* in order to illustrate how each Quentin informs the other. While Quentin and Shreve pass Sutpen’s narrative back and forth, Quentin speculates how the narratives of his own life and those of this Southern past likewise flow back and forth within one another:

“*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed…”* (*AA!* 210, italics in original)

While Quentin observes how the stories of Sutpen and the South continue to be told, Faulkner loops back to *The Sound and the Fury* in order to make Quentin “happen” once more. The many narrative threads of *Absalom* occupy these different “pools” and yet are connected across time via this “umbilical” union. By continuing to tell these stories himself, Quentin alters the Southern cannon with his own perspective while at the same time being formed by its pervasive history. Faulkner’s career can also be read through this twofold directionality of narrative interconnectivity. The “umbilical” carries the legacies of Faulkner’s early works forward while at the same time allowing Faulkner’s later texts to flow backwards. A “pebble” dropped into the waters of Faulkner’s career by “Nympholepsy” sends “ripples” of drowned women and psychological landscapes through *The Sound and the Fury* and beyond. These are the same “heavy ripples” that pulse outwards from Caddy’s body in the branch and from Faulkner’s landscapes into his psychologies. When Quentin “sinks” to the bottom of the river in Cambridge like a “pebble,” he too generates “ripples” that spread through *Absalom.* Quentin-at-large is a product of both iterations, created by the interconnectivity of Faulkner “umbilical” narratives.

This structure of interconnected waterways resonates both between Faulkner’s texts and within the actual landscape of the Mississippi Delta. By returning to the physical properties of the region, Quentin’s drowning can be located as if on a map. The structure of the pools in *Absalom* suggests that the entire narrative of Quentin can be read both forwards and backwards. In her book *The Feminine and Faulkner,* Minrose Gwin describes how the course of the Mississippi River “tends to rush into lowlands [and] make new channels by forging its way through the breaks and gaps in the natural levee” (Gwin 143). While the hydrology of the Mississippi River influences Faulkner’s body of work in many direct and indirect ways, this overflowing quality particularly informs the relationship between *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury.* In Figure 1, I have shown the looping structure of the Mississippi River and how the meanders cut so close to one another that they inevitably join (Figure 1). When this happens, the water upstream and downstream merges into one flow. Consider Faulkner’s career between *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom* structured along the curvature of the Mississippi River in Figure 2. As he loops backwards towards Quentin in *Absalom,* Faulkner follows the meanders of the river and opens a channel between the two Quentins of his career. By returning to *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner carves a waterway between 1929 and 1936 through which the river rushes, intermingles, and “feeds” itself.

This forces us to understand Quentin and his suicide through the “psychoanalytic” lens (Sherry 49) of *The Sound and the Fury* alongside the historic lens of *Absalom, Absalom!* In fact, by inundating Quentin from both sides of the river – the psychological side and the physical side that is rooted in the South – Faulkner effectively doubles the scale of Quentin’s trauma. As Quentin stands in the channel between 1929 and 1936, he stands in the wake of two colliding floods. In this way, Faulkner drowns Quentin twice. In 1929, Quentin drowns in the floods of his own psycho-sexual neurosis influenced by the landscapes of “Nympholepsy.” In 1936, Quentin drowns beneath the sheer force of the Mississippi River which traps him within bloody Southern history that he cannot escape no matter how far north he travels. Faulkner’s looping structure of narrative accomplishes this double explanation of Quentin’s death. By considering the legacy from Faulkner’s early works alongside the structure of *Absalom,* we can read Faulkner’s career as a continuous stream which doubles back on itself. Quentin exists within this fold, caught in a landscape which traumatizes him both internally and externally.

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