

## Introduction

12. *So I made it on the bevel.*
13. *It makes a neater job.*

*They came from some place out in Yoknapatawpha county, trying to get to Jefferson with it.*

— William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

### 1

Readers of the volumes that issue from the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference expect, every year, a new set of perspectives on some topic arising from or applied to our understanding of Faulkner here in his home town, at the university he attended and where he was employed for a while. As you might expect, there is a committee, made up of local Faulkner scholars and interested professors from Southern, American, and other literary fields, and this committee meets throughout the year to talk about topics, potential speakers, the budget, and the various logistical challenges inherent in hosting a few hundred guests each July from across the United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. We are hyper-conscious of the fact that thousands of Faulkner readers on this planet have as a goal to someday get to Oxford, to see what Faulkner saw, maybe even to see *as* Faulkner saw, to walk in Yoknapatawpha. Faulkner anticipated the day in *Requiem for a Nun*, his one tourist novel, when strangers would seek out the small Mississippi town that had forfeited any ambitions of anonymity when it became the town that raised the Nobel Laureate:

you, a stranger, an outlander say from the East or the North or the Far West, passing through the little town by simple accident, or perhaps relation or acquaintance or friend of one of the outland families which had moved into one of the pristine and recent subdivisions, yourself turning out of your way to fumble among road signs and filling stations out of frank curiosity, trying to learn, comprehend, understand what had brought your cousin or friend or acquaintance to elect to live here.<sup>1</sup>

“Here” is Oxford but it is also not Oxford, but Jefferson—the town of Faulkner’s imagination, the town he built; and “here” is also Lafayette County but not Lafayette County, rather Yoknapatawpha, the county he constructed. *The two worlds*. One just happens to be Oxford, and it belongs to the people of Oxford and to Lafayette County, Mississippi. One

by the labor of a lifetime of writing became Jefferson and is owned by no one, or it is possessed in turn by everyone who can read it and enter, and become what Faulkner called a Yoknapatawphian. I remember moving to this town in 2000 and entering the Lafayette County Courthouse (to me, *The Courthouse*) to get my automobile tags and thinking, when faced with the woman behind the counter (who said yes to the debit card), that this is nothing more than a place for a civil servant to work, and all I am doing is getting my car tag.

Faulkner labeled those people who were here (either as residents or as “you,” stranger) and who were aware that they lived in two worlds “the irreconcilable Jeffersonians and Yoknapatawphians.” These were people “who had . . . actual personal dealings” with the Courthouse on the Square quite specifically in Oxford and with the Courthouse in Jefferson quite generally everywhere the books are read and translated and read again. There is a discernible process by which people become “not just Mississippians but Jeffersonians and Yoknapatawphians” (642). In the novel, as you recall, it has to do with being able to read the deeper significance of Cecilia Farmer’s name etched into the window pane of the jail-house window.

suddenly you would realise that something curious was happening or had happened here: that instead of dying off as they should as time passed, it was as though these old irreconcilables were actually increasing in number; as though with each interment of one, two more shared that vacancy. (642)

And the narrator of *Requiem for a Nun* predicts that one day there will be hundreds—and we can now say thousands, more

—by now you had already begun to understand why your kin or friend or acquaintance had elected to come to such as this with his family and call it his life, [to become] not just Mississippians but Jeffersonians and Yoknapatawphians: by which time—who knows?—not merely the pane, but the whole window, perhaps the entire wall, may have been removed and embalmed intact into a museum by an historical, or anyway a cultural club of ladies. (642–43)

It is true, something happened here, something so singular in the world of letters and so phenomenally irreconcilable with the material reality of the place that you have to look again and again, and see if you can get it “to move under your eyes,” as Faulkner wrote about it, “seeming actually to have entered into another sense than vision,” to see the two worlds, to “burn away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth the dream” (648). This is northern Mississippi, after all, not anywhere near urban or cultural centers, not anywhere near where we would have

expected, in the early twentieth century, to see the emergence of an intellectual and literary phenomenon that would redefine narrative, reinvigorate the novel, and forever change the course of literary history. The 2004 conference topic, “Faulkner and Material Culture,” grapples with the fact that the two worlds intersect continuously, they must intersect if either is to be recognizable. Underwritten by the University Museums, the 2004 conference coincided with the reopening of Rowan Oak, fully renovated and restored to replicate the way it looked when Faulkner would have last seen it (which was always a little better than it actually was), before his death in 1962.

Rowan Oak is emblematic of Faulkner’s sense of two worlds, and it also emerged by the work of his hands and his mind. It was, on the one hand, “The Bailey Place” when he purchased it in 1930. It was built in the 1840s by Colonel Robert B. Shegog, who came to Mississippi from Tennessee. Faulkner renamed the estate Rowan Oak, but not because the property held either rowan or oak trees—the naming would not come from *that* world. According to Joseph Blotner, Faulkner knew from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* that Scottish farmers would place cuttings from the rowan tree over barn doors to prevent evil spirits from casting spells and stealing milk. The rowan tree (which is a mountain ash, not an oak) is indigenous to Scotland and signifies peace and security.<sup>2</sup> Faulkner’s impulse was not unlike Sophonsiba Beauchamp’s insistence, in *Go Down, Moses*, that the Beauchamp house be called Warwick. Nonetheless, Faulkner was more successful than his vampish (and in his creation of her, self-deprecating) character in recasting his home as the intersection of two worlds. The difference is significant. Whereas Sophonsiba Beauchamp looked back to an actual place in England to define her legacy, naming her Mississippi estate “Warwick after the place in England that she said Mr. Hubert was probably the true earl of,”<sup>3</sup> Faulkner looked not to what was but to what, absent his intervention, would never have been. There is, at bottom, something outrageous about christening a ramshackle, dilapidated, and abandoned structure “Rowan Oak”—as daring, that is, as renaming an obscure county in northern Mississippi “Yoknapatawpha.” In 1930, both names issued from Faulkner’s pen: *As I Lay Dying*, published in 1930, is the novel in which the name of the county, “Yoknapatawpha,” is introduced for the first time. *As I Lay Dying* was completed in January 1930; Rowan Oak was purchased in April of the same year, and the newlywed Faulkners took up residence soon after, although the house was barely habitable. Even so, “Rowan Oak” stationery was ordered, using Gothic script,<sup>4</sup> staking the territory of Faulkner’s household and domestic vision. Both represent intellectual excursions: Yoknapatawpha and Rowan Oak

issue from one mind in parallel purpose, and Faulkner worked to make each, in its own media, a real thing.

Neither was not without great labor. William and Estelle Faulkner took possession of the L-shaped, "half two over two" house in May 1930, according to Rowan Oak curator William Griffith.<sup>5</sup> The house had been neglected for some time, long enough for chickens, mice, and other varmints to make a home of it. Faulkner went to work immediately to make the structure habitable, replacing the floors, chunking years of accumulated junk and debris, removing decaying plaster from walls, jacking up the house so that it rested on bricks, above ground, and replacing two main foundation beams. The walls of the house were then replastered. (During this initial reconstruction, from May through July 1930, Estelle did not stay at the house very often.) In July 1930, the couple placed an order for wallpaper. In the summer and fall of 1930, Faulkner built the front porch, placed urn stands on either side of the steps to the front door, and built and installed window screens throughout the house. In all these renovations, Faulkner had assistance from local retired men, whom he would pay by the hour or in whisky. While he wasn't reflooring and replastering Rowan Oak in 1930, Faulkner was revising *Sanctuary*. In December 1930, he sent his publisher, Cape and Smith, the results of his thorough reconstruction of that novel,<sup>6</sup> making, he later said, "a fair job" of the work.<sup>7</sup> Aside from painting and minor repairs, Faulkner was also done, at the end of 1930, with initial renovations to Rowan Oak, and the house remained unchanged until 1931-1932. It had no electricity or plumbing, but in Mississippi in 1930, very few of Faulkner's neighbors enjoyed such luxuries in their homes. Work on the house may have been interrupted as well by the death of Alabama Faulkner, born prematurely on January 11, 1931, and living only a few days.

In August 1931, Faulkner began work on *Light in August*, under the working title "Dark House."<sup>8</sup> That November he traveled to New York, where by his own account he had "created quite a sensation" as the author of *Sanctuary*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. As he wrote to Estelle, "I have learned with astonishment that I am now the most important figure in American letters. That is, I have the best future."<sup>9</sup> Back in Oxford, in the winter of 1931-1932, no doubt buttressed by indications of financial security, Faulkner resumed work on Rowan Oak, adding an "indoor outhouse" to the second floor. The room was installed on the back porch, so that one went outside, on to the porch, and then into the enclosed water closet. (Later, in 1935, Faulkner finished Estelle's room, adjacent to the indoor outhouse, and connected the rooms.) On the first floor he added two French doors to the side porch off the dining room, for privacy, and to extend the downstairs living space. The doors opened to a

secluded side yard, which Faulkner enclosed by building a wall extending from the house, further defining and making private the yard outside the dining room. Work was also done to improve the heating system, and Faulkner installed a coal-oil furnace and radiators. This completed the second phase of renovations, and except for minor repairs, painting, and maintenance, the house remained in this condition for twenty years. It was livable, and presentable, but far from luxurious. Turning to the completion of other household matters, Estelle would give birth to Jill Faulkner in June of 1932.

According to Jill Faulkner Summers, after her high school graduation in 1951, Estelle made an extended visit to Victoria and Bill Fielding, sometime in 1952.<sup>10</sup> While Estelle was away for three months, Faulkner went to work on the house, in a third phase of renovations. This phase of renovations coincides with a return to work on *A Fable*, the book on which Faulkner had labored since 1943. While Estelle was away, Faulkner plastered in the first- and second-floor back porches and created a new room downstairs (this they would call the music room, according to Estelle, so-named because it was where the record player was installed). Upstairs, Faulkner enclosed a hallway and built a closet for his hunting equipment. Downstairs, a side hallway was created to provide the house with another entrance (or exit), and off this hallway Faulkner built his office/bedroom, which also included a door to the outside (to the backyard), and a fireplace. On the walls of the new study Faulkner wrote an elaborate outline of *A Fable*, painted over the outline and revised it—the intellectual labor, in effect, indistinguishable from the carpentry. That is to say, the evidence suggests that work on the office and work on the novel proceeded in parallel. The revised and final version of the outline on the walls of the 1952 study is among Rowan Oak's more distinctive and idiosyncratic features, where visitors confront with immediacy the two worlds of Faulkner's creation, standing in the study he built, contemplating the cosmos he created.

Estelle returned home to find this work complete, all of which was planned and executed without consulting her. She was particularly upset because her husband had removed a goldfish pond and flower gardens in the course of the work, landscaping features in which she had taken considerable pride. One cosmetic addition Estelle did like very much. Faulkner hung ceiling-to-floor Swedish wood and glass beads in the new doorways (what a later generation would call hippie curtains). Faulkner liked them also, because they made a good bit of warning noise when someone passed from the front to the back of the house, closing in on his private study.

The house got a face-lift in 1954, when Jill got married. A portion of the five thousand dollars advanced from Random House to pay for the

wedding also provided paint, wallpaper, and curtains to Rowan Oak. At the same time, a small interior staircase was added to the upstairs, as well as a large storage closet and a second bathroom, in anticipation of guests. In 1957 Faulkner built a new barn, using money earned from his University of Virginia salary. He kept three horses there; two were his, Tempe and Stonewall, and the third, Lady Go Lightly, was Jill's. Faulkner returned to Charlottesville in 1958 for a second term as writer in residence at the University of Virginia, and in 1959 purchased a house in Charlottesville. In the last years of his life, he would divide his time between Charlottesville and Oxford, until his death in 1962. Estelle Faulkner died in May 1972; that same year Jill Faulkner Summers sold Rowan Oak to the University of Mississippi.

From the moment they mount the steps to the front porch at the entrance to Rowan Oak, visitors embody space envisioned and constructed by William Faulkner. Standing in the study, contemplating the outline to *A Fable*, visitors enter a space where he not only wrote and lived, but which he constructed out of nothing, laying the floors, hammering the nails, plastering the walls, even destroying the work of others in his way if he found it necessary. Rowan Oak is distinctive among the preserved homes of American writers because the greater part of what stands today stands as Faulkner's handiwork. The two barns on the premises are completely his making. And the name Rowan Oak has become immemorial, seemingly organic to the site itself, as if Faulkner simply informed the world of an alternative name belonging to the spot, overlaying Rowan Oak on the Bailey place as Yoknapatawpha overlays Lafayette. It stands today as a refuge, a kind of sanctuary from the increasing sprawl of the town of Oxford and the expansion of the University of Mississippi, a quiet place of contemplation where one may easily do what the fiction of Yoknapatawpha does, sublimate the actual to the apocryphal, and move between the two worlds.

## 2

We begin on the ground, with a definition of material culture ranging from created objects to "invisible features that produce landscape expressions" and including as well the distinctive odors that define a place to our senses. Charles S. Aiken, "Faulkner and the Passing of the Old Agrarian Culture," surveys Faulkner's representation of terrain and concludes, contrary to much critical interpretation, that to Faulkner, Yoknapatawpha was not "a microcosm of the South but a place in the Lowland South"—a particular and very specifically delineated place. The specificity of Yoknapatawpha County may be sensed, for instance, in the "dusty smell"

on Will Falls's "clean faded overalls," a smell brought into the bank because Falls has walked to town "through the dry flour-fine loess soil of the unpaved roads" in the county. Aiken examines the "great alterations" to geography and culture that occurred in Faulkner's lifetime, including the paving of roads, the introduction of such transformative items as tractors and lunch meat, and the "fossils" produced by great alterations, the abandoned "plantation big houses, furnish merchant stores, cotton gins, mule barns, and tenant houses." Tenant dwellings in the era of the New South were scattered across farmlands for proximity to farm sections. Two material changes resulted in the relocation of tenant homes in central locations. The introduction of the tractor altered the farmer's sense of proximity, and the coming of electricity demanded that houses be located centrally so that they would be electrified efficiently. Faulkner lamented some changes, documented many, and embraced others. Aiken reminds us that despite his nostalgia for mules and horses, "Faulkner was one of the first Americans to learn to fly and to own an airplane."

Moving consciously from ground to mind, we go next to Jay Watson, "The Philosophy of Furniture, or *Light in August* and the Material Unconscious." Tracing the etymology of the word "material" to the Latin *materia*, or wood, and linking further back etymologically to the ancient Greek employment of the idea of wood (that is, from forest to idea, and from object to representation) in order to explore the "conceptual underpinnings for the idea of material itself," Watson works out a comprehensive explication of "the economies of wood in *Light in August*." In Watson's hands the novel emerges as one "extraordinarily overinvested . . . in a material economy involving the production and distribution of timber, lumber, and other wood products and in a signifying economy wherein references to wood and wooden objects are constantly working their way into the language and imagery of the text." Traversing seamlessly across disciplines from literary theory and philosophy to the history of wood-working and furniture-making, social and intellectual history, the material history of forests and lumber, and invoking a wide range Faulkner novels, Watson's analysis of the text's material unconscious reveals an interlocking and progressive building of real things and metaphors, "from the extraction of forest materials, through the production of rough lumber at the sawmill and the value-added process of planing, to the distribution and ultimate consumption of finished wood products at various points along a well-developed transportation network of roads and rails." The essay amounts to nothing less than a revelation of the secret life of *Light in August*, "an integrated economic subplot that shadows, at every moment, the novel's more overt social and political content," grounded at once in organic matter and the everyday materials of human intervention.

Everyday materials emerge, eventually, as everyday's trash, and Patricia Yaeger takes a close look at it in "Dematerializing Culture: Faulkner's Trash Aesthetic" and defines "two opposing narratives of modern detritus." There is "the trash that reeks of the sublime," objects thrown away that may become historical archives, "objects that the captains of capitalism have overlooked" and that may serve the cultural archaeologist like pay dirt. And there is the reading of trash as rubbish, "a sign of everything that's wrong with the outposts of modernity," the litter on roads and in settings of natural wonder that no contemporary mind can manage to sentimentalize. Taking the dichotomy to Faulkner, and juxtaposing Faulkner's trash aesthetic with representations of twentieth-century art as varied as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* and various works by Gordon Matta-Clark, Claes Oldenburg, Kiki Smith, and others, Yaeger reveals "how closely Faulkner's characters are allied with detritus, ranging from the body in decay, to matter out of place," to whole worlds turned trash. As a result, we discover a fresh, or perhaps freshly unfresh but entirely unprecedented context for reading Faulkner, the twentieth-century's trash aesthetic, wherein "Faulkner shares with other twentieth-century artists a preoccupation with detritus; it becomes a defining shelter for his character's lives and rebellions."

A materialist perspective offers a new reading as well in Kevin Railey, "*Flags in the Dust* and the Material Culture of Class." Railey finds that what have been considered the novel's critical defects—weak plot, lack of narrative unity—may be reconsidered as "a series of snapshots" in time where figures mark "a distinct moment in history" without necessarily bearing a narrative relationship to one another. Railey centers critical attention not on narrative but on objects of consumption, such as Old Man Falls's pipe, Bayard Sartoris's cigar, Aunt Jenny's glass pane windows, and on the town as consumer location for the distribution of cigarettes and automobiles into the hands of its citizens. Faulkner's attentiveness to objects transfers as well to his understanding of human beings within their material matrix. In Railey's terms, Faulkner's text demonstrates "how the consumption of objects works in two ways: to project subjective identities into things in order to make them valuable and desirable, and to turn certain subjective identities into valuable objects to be consumed." The identities of the novel's major characters, in other words, are tied intimately to the objects they handle and envision possessing, as they themselves become understood as commodities. "Through this lens," Railey argues, "*Flags in the Dust* can be seen to participate in that post-World War I literary generation that explored the alienating and mechanizing effects of the new twentieth-century world on human beings."

A strong material influence on Faulkner's intellectual development was the extensive time he spent in Hollywood, working on movies. Matthew

Ramsey, "Touch Me While You Look at Her': Stars, Fashion, and Authorship in *Today We Live*," argues that literary scholars have misunderstood Faulkner's Hollywood labor because they do not fully appreciate the material conditions of the work. Ramsey examines the business of the 1930s Hollywood star system, the status of movies as vehicles for the fashion industry, and the complexity of film authorship as a means of presenting a more materially grounded account of what happened to "Turnabout" when it became *Today We Live* in 1931. Bringing Joan Crawford on to the project, for example, saved the film from the obscurity of an all-male production (which, for business reasons, may have never reached completion) and assured a national distribution. Biographically, Faulkner's continued work on the film compelled him to master (or at least, become familiar with) the demands of a film intended to capture a female audience. Howard Hawks, in other words, took up "Turnabout" and gave it back to Faulkner along with the task of "imagining female desire, of finding not just a way to include an important female character but to represent the point of view of a woman sexually alluring, tragic, and noble all at once (in a very Joan Crawford way)." Ramsey invites speculation that Faulkner's intellectual attention to this assignment may have affected the subsequent imagination of Laverne (in *Pylon*) and of Rosa Coldfield, Charlotte Rittenmeyer, Eula Varner, and Linda Snopes Kohl.

As Faulkner always would, we return to Oxford, and Miles Orvell, "Order and Rebellion: Faulkner's Small Town and the Place of Memory," argues that "Faulkner's Jefferson is the place of memory in a culture of change." Focusing on the idea of the Southern town, the local community, and then examining even more closely the Confederate monument at the center of the town, Orvell situates Faulkner's Jefferson within the intellectual currents of the modernist struggle to comprehend and survive place. Faulkner, Orvell reminds us, came of age as a writer "at the height of the anti-village sentiment" in the twentieth century and embodied "the ambivalence of small town life." Periodically escaping Oxford (and in his novels periodically abandoning Jefferson), Faulkner always returned, ultimately finding in the small town the point at which "local events intersect with larger historical forces" and where the individual person moves simultaneously "backward into the past" and forward into a place where "the larger world of mass culture impinges upon small town life." The essay concludes with a particularly revealing study of the Confederate Soldier monuments installed in small towns throughout the South in the era of Faulkner's youth. The monuments embody the memory function of the small town in the face of rapid changes—another cause, nonetheless, defined by its loss. "What we are left with, in Faulkner's evolving representation of Jefferson, is a modernist paean to rootedness . . . brought presciently into the postmodern era of flux and impermanence."

The technology that would arrest change, or preserve what was, is the photograph, and Faulkner seemed especially aware of its effect and its usefulness, according to Katherine Henninger, "Faulkner, Photography, and a Regional Ethics of Form." Henninger studies Faulkner's fictional representation of photographs and the function of "fictional photography" within the visual project of his aesthetics. Finding in Faulkner an "image/text/oral nexus," Henninger sees Faulkner's employment of fictional photographs as a device to interrogate "Southern cultural 'realities'—dynamics, tensions, anxieties, and rewards—of representation, including the ethics of formal division and formal choice." Starting with Faulkner's own fascination with photography (the author, so protective of his privacy, left a lifelong photo-biography of himself), Henninger then surveys major photographs and photographic images in the fiction, particularly in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Her most sustained argument centers around the photograph in Judith Sutpen's locket, demonstrating how multiple readings may be generated depending on the identification of that famously ambiguous photographic image. Concluding that Faulkner's text demonstrates how "the meaning of a photograph lies in its use, its narration," Henninger probes further to show "that there is also something important about what is represented, or not represented, by the photograph's inscrutability." Calling upon a stranger—Shreve, the outsider, the newcomer—for the second look, the revisionist gaze, Faulkner's project depends upon what Henninger calls "a radically unforeseeable stranger, a reader, to interact with and enact his text," and this function is often filled, in the text, by the interactions between Faulkner fictional characters and their fictional photography.

The volume closes with Jackson Lears, "True and False Things: Faulkner and the World of Goods," a personal reminiscence of "professional Southerners" and a coda on Faulkner's antimodern modernism. Classifying the author with writers such as Willa Cather, Ralph Ellison, and Gabriel García Márquez, Lears sees in Faulkner the use of modernist forms "to produce a critique of bourgeois modernity." A widespread and persistent phenomenon, antimodern modernism "focused on the meretriciousness, the inauthenticity, of mass consumerable goods and exalted preindustrial craft as an authentic alternative." In Faulkner's hands, the phenomenon is complicated due to his own conviction that "appearances, surfaces mattered," and because of his own interest in such consumer goods as airplanes and sailboats. Lears surveys Faulkner's incidents of craftsmanship and commodities for the conflict they embody, revealing himself to be the rival of Henry James and Edith Wharton as "anthropologist of American material life," implicitly recognizing the ways in which "artificial materials could be used to fashion an authentic self." At

the same time, Faulkner's own "longing for lost things re-enchanted the disenchanted world of modernity, endowing even the most banal objects with power and significance." Having it both ways is one way the fiction draws us back, again and again, to see which way we've got it, and which world we inhabit, when we look.

Joseph R. Urgo  
The University of Mississippi  
Oxford, Mississippi

## NOTES

1. William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, in *Novels 1942–1954* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 642. Subsequent references cited parenthetically.
2. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, One-Volume Edition (New York: Random House, 1984), 262.
3. William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, in *Novels 1942–1954* (New York: Library of America, 1994), 6–7.
4. Blotner, 262.
5. Much of the information concerning Faulkner's renovations comes from an interview with Rowan Oak Curator William Griffith in December 2004.
6. Michel Gresset, *A Faulkner Chronology* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 30. Much of the chronological detail in this and subsequent paragraphs is indebted to Gresset's helpful work.
7. William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York: Modern Library, 1932), vii. The comment appears in the introduction to this later edition of the 1931 novel.
8. See Jay Watson's essay in this volume for evidence of how much Faulkner had learned about the lumber industry while working on Rowan Oak, knowledge put to extensive use in *Light in August*.
9. William Faulkner, *The Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977), 53.
10. As told by Mrs. Summers to William Griffith.