

November 2008

William Faulkner and the Mithraic Midwife

Owen Elmore

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elmore, Owen (2008). William Faulkner and the Mithraic Midwife. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(2), 175-185.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss2/14>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

William Faulkner and the Mithraic Midwife

By Owen Elmore¹

Abstract

The two parts of William Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*—"The Wild Palms" and "Old Man"—mirror one another; the second story reflects a more familiar way of illustrating the same theme as the first. Each story emphasizes the other, building the shared theme subversive of traditional gender roles. It is also my feeling that Faulkner inverts Arthurian motifs to tell both stories (especially "The Wild Palms," though most assume "Old Man" to be the more romantically accessible tale) exactly as Nathaniel Hawthorne did to tell *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's bifurcating of the Grail legend in order to reclaim feminine principles and so regenerate his community (and/or his inherited guilt) must have seemed ideal to Faulkner in his own cause to do the same for the South and his own Sins of the Father.

Keywords: William Faulkner, American South, gender relations

"Who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?" --*Job* 38:8

After reconstructing his own self-deconstruction in *Absalom, Absalom!* by resurrecting Quentin Compson and putting him to work re-telling the South's tangled past, William Faulkner set out to accomplish the same regeneration with one of the American South's specific and divided selves: the rationalized walls built between society and the Feminine ethic; without an open border or at least a fertile limen between the base pair out of which all human community radiates, the community stagnates and falls into barrenness – social Waste Land, so to speak. In the book that resulted from Faulkner's goal, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, a representative of the Thin Male Line, Harry Wilbourne, must be subverted and brought into the service of Woman, much as Mithra had to wield the knife and Pilate pass the sentence; without these acts, their aims could not be achieved. Charlotte Rittenmeyer is the subverter here, an artist of the grotesque on the margins of society in every way: a Modernist Hester Prynne. She draws Harry out to her across the demarcation, inundating his already unstable socialization.² Together they are spun from the Garden of Respectability by reverse whirlpool where they whirl "in sin," unmarried and in orbit of the Center at the margins and unable to escape the negative gravity. But something *is* brought back to Center to destabilize that gravity: a space for Woman will be cut out of it.³

¹ LSU Alexandria oelmore@lsua.edu

² "[T]he drowsing demarcations between one dawn and the next, unraveling one by one out of the wine-sharp and honey-still warp of tideless solitude of lost Tuesdays and Fridays and Sundays" (574), reborn a self-buoyed being, borne up by self-determination for the first time in his life. "Before she had called him Adam" (569) and like Eve she switched on his free will – as if God could give free will to them but they had to decide to use it for it to be what it was designed to be. Where would we be without Eve?

³ Think of the Arabic tales of the 1001 Arabian Nights. At the outset of the *Arabian Nights*, the king has lost his mind; he is marrying a woman every night and then killing her in the morning, certain each would betray him if allowed the slightest opportunity. Obviously, this is no future-viable community. The king,

Many readers of Faulkner's *Jerusalem* tend to overlook the book's primary story, "The Wild Palms," in favor of the friendlier, "Old Man," probably because – if the criticism out there is any indication as to the cause for its neglect – most would rather avoid having to think about the controversy (unless controversy was their goal) of what has been seen as the central issue in the story: a botched abortion. But it is my view that this is a misdiagnosis of the central action of story; rather, the "abortion" seems to me a successful birth, midwifed by Harry Wilbourne, the "father" and wielder of the knife, but mothered of Charlotte Rittenmeyer's will – she of the free, creative will who bears up Harry's hand like Christ bore the necessary burden of Calvary. Like Calvary, there is death, certainly, but also the birth of something: the re-genesis of the will of Woman in a Southern culture that has marginalized feminine principles and female individuals since the institution of slavery. From this perspective, "The Wild Palms" is a gender-subversive Mithraic myth and so not easily identifiable as the Christian analogue it is.

The spread northward of the patriarchal⁴ Waste Land of the early Roman Church into the European lands of the Celto-Germanic tribes resulted in the sixth-century beginnings of the still current male/female binary in Western culture. By the Middle Ages, although the Church still feared the goddess image, all *outward* manifestations of her had been vilified or destroyed. Her archetype remained, however, buried inside popular myth – most significantly in the Arthurian material. Later, when religious Puritans, operating on a "perfected" patriarchy sans even glorification of the disinfected Virgin, first brought and planted the disease into an untainted, untamed America, the goddess rose up again, threatening "chaos" within Puritan borders. To beat her back, the Puritans cut boxes of dust into the undomesticated wilderness, purifying one piece at a time the landscape of their New Jerusalem. They had cut themselves off from Old Jerusalem, but by this boundary-setting they were able to maintain a seeming orderliness, and as they continued cutting and defining the natives of the land, naive of the depths of danger facing them, all at last fell away and the puritanical, patriarchal "order" held sway

perhaps representative of the people as kings so often are in medieval stories, has become stuck in a nonsensical cycle that nonetheless makes sense to him, since his one care has become the prevention of the operation of feminine cunning. Luckily, this community has a woman whose cunning can evade even this king's detection, and her name is Shahrazad. Shahrazad, not even chosen, places herself at the head of the list for marriage, and that night she tells the king a story. There's a cliffhanger to the story and so the king lets her live an additional day so he can hear the conclusion to the story, but if Shahrazad can come up with one cliffhanger ... and thus the 1001 nights. Presumably on the one-thousandth and first night (the tales have no ending, meant to expand and contract as they weaved themselves throughout community after community during the Middle East), the community is saved and Shahrazad, storyteller *par excellence*, survives to tell another day. The king has been cured, but how? When you read the stories (not Sir Richard Burton's versions but the near-originals translated by Hussain Haddawy), you will notice how the same theme has been embedded by Shahrazad within each night's story. That theme is this: "women can be rotten, yes, but most are decent, and anyhow the ratio of bad to good is the same as for men, if not slightly better." Simple, yes, but imagine the patience and subtle skill it would take to bring a mass murderer like the king to it? Faulkner's skill in attempting to rescue the South from its own self-immolation had to be as good.

⁴The term "patriarchal" is here to be understood as referring to that jumble of Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman ideology that is the dominant European and American social order and should infer that culture whose imbalance results from devaluation of the goddess as a religious symbol and complementary conjunction as the primary social tool for reconciling existing social paradigmatic features to difference. Around the world totemic cultures have tried to subsume the invading West, expecting the West to be similarly malleable. How wrong they have been.

over the land. Later still, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a direct descendant of the original Puritans, sought to regenerate the Waste Land at the foundations of America with an emissarial salve produced out of the mythic symbolism of the bottomless Romantic past. What the Goddess was is gone but since “*memory exists independent of the flesh*” what she will be remains.

As Hawthorne did, Faulkner inverts his Medieval players along gender lines, creating not only a synecdochic Fisher King (Harry: the embodiment of the Waste Land) but also his savior, Charlotte, who is, conversely, also a Maimed Queen in need of saving. In essence, then, they are each hero and king, each only savable by the other – which is only appropriate for a balanced social organization. Charlotte’s legal husband, Rittenmeyer (“Rat”), Harry’s father, and the middle-aged doctor at the beach, all stand as Dragon archetypes; like Hawthorne’s Chillingworth, they represent the rational shadow-ego guarding the border between pairs of opposites. And yet the dragon is an opposite too, against his intentions facilitating the lovers as much as hampering them. Faulkner’s use of this three-headed Dragon opposes his use of Harry and Charlotte as complementary wounded heroes where the two serve as halves of an ill-separated whole. The Dragon serves a dualistic purpose not in the sense that it alone is an ill-separated whole but that it is one half trying to *act* as a whole (mother *and* father, etc.), representing an imbalanced social hierarchy where a masculine ethos seeks to fill both masculine and feminine roles within the community. As a consequence the Dragon is an impotent figure, sitting atop a treasure it is unable to use.⁵

For Carl Jung, a Dragon represents the rational ego-consciousness which blocks the ability of a hero to act spontaneously from their own nature, instilling fear and hopelessness and barring success in the Quest. Rat and the two doctors assume such a blocking role in Charlotte’s and Harry’s Quest for Love (that is, the Grail – which might also turn to its opposite when the heroes stray from the Quest). This dual male/female hero dialectic is a multifaceted bifurcation of the old tale which resonates exactly with the problem of gender relations at the time Faulkner wrote. But *JER* is full of hope; Love is nature made manifest, and the lovers rollick around patriarchy’s “world” in Pearl’s scarlet plumage with no law, nor reverence for authority, nor regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong mixed in its composition, its only discoverable principle being the freedom of a broken law: patriarchy’s prohibition of adultery. Charlotte’s capacity for creative Love, though fugitive, mocks the living-dead patriarchs. Like Chillingworth, The Dragon as a divisive symbol of imbalanced society obstructs the creative possibilities of each situation the lovers find themselves in, in order to divide the heart and separate Harry from his intuition.

But like Hester, Charlotte knows the Dragon’s nature and that is her power; though she is “officially” its wife the Dragon has no control over her, hence his impotence, but the impotence can spread to Harry and so repress Charlotte’s regenerative work through him. Before meeting Charlotte, Harry had always regarded his own intuition as a demon to be repressed, but now, since Charlotte has helped him, the Dragon steps in. Her love for Harry is *unofficial*, not sanctioned by the system and so null and void, of which the pain in her abdomen constantly reminds her, like a Scarlet Letter branded into her very womb. But she like Hester is stronger than the brand: a Goddess

⁵ You may also recall King Kong’s bewildered fascination with and ineffectual poking at Faye Wray in the movie that bears his name.

rising up in America after so many generations of slander and a narrow definition forced upon her like a marble image, a static form. Charlotte is the wounded Fisher Queen, Faulkner's reversal of the Grail legend's maimed king. She is not without her own feelings of guilt which wound her, for in the late confrontation with Rat (645-49) she comes to believe that although she had cast off all duty towards other human beings there remained a duty towards Harry; and something whispered to her that she was betraying it in pledging herself to keep Rat's counsel, for Harry is physically and emotionally weaker than she, as men are weaker than women in that they lack the strength that could have borne up, as hers had, hemmed in by that Letter: a predetermining iron maiden closed onto her by society (Rat) and biology (the doctors) alike.

Harry Wilbourne is born the same year Quentin Compson dies, making Harry the *second* second coming of Quentin (if you recall *Absalom, Absalom!*) and "Charlotte could be considered a successful re-creation of Caddy Compson, taking Caddy's incipient Modernist strengths to their potential" (Singal 244). Caddy (from *The Sound and the Fury*) had stereotypically masculine qualities just as Quentin possessed feminine ones, for she was the strong one while he was the weaker. There was also, you'll remember, a sexual association made by the author for his readers between brother and sister. A sexual linking of brother and sister is Poe-esque, and as Romantic symbolism, the link is an acknowledgement of sometimes horrifying ties between seeming opposites, like the "double leaves" in the Walden-like, loon-haunted pond where Harry and Charlotte spend a season (the reflection of the first leaf rises "to meet the falling one" [563]), or like Pearl reflecting Pearl in a wilderness stream, who beckons from two directions even as her mother and father do likewise and cross successfully the mirrored surface of that limen; Arthur has definite feminine attributes while Hester develops masculine characteristics, and against expectation this is what saves them. When our expectations are contradicted, we as readers lose our footing; the ground we thought secure becomes a flood plain as gender roles flow freely out of banks. Like Arthur, Harry clings to Charlotte as a child fearing water deeper than it can fathom holds to the safety of its mother. Quentin could not reach Caddy and Arthur could not reach Hester, but this Harry might hold on and eventually learn from Charlotte to see the measureless depths himself without sinking ("[T]he drowsing demarcations between one dawn and the next, unraveling one by one out of the wine-sharp and honey-still warp of tideless solitude of lost Tuesdays and Fridays and Sundays" (574)), reborn a self-buoyed being, borne up by self-determination for the first time in his life. "Before she had called him Adam" (569) and like Eve she switched on his free will – as if God could give free will to them but they had to decide to use it for it to be what it was designed to be. Then together they are spun from the Garden of Respectability by reverse whirlpool.

In this will-stifling way, even a Garden can be a Waste Land. In Wolfram Von Eschenbach's medieval grail romance *Parzival*, the hero (whose name, invented by the French cleric Chrétien, actually means "pierce the valley" between opposites) intuitively sees the truth during the initial procession of the Grail: only he sees the little bits of white and black all shattered together within the Grail's nature. But he honors his courtly system and fails to speak, and so does not earn the Grail this time, nor heal the King, prolonging the imbalance. Parzival, when moved by the King's suffering, should inquire of it, show his concern for it, *and recognize* the impropriety of his wound. Instead, he thinks, "A knight does not ask questions [...], and so, in the name of his social image, he continues

the Waste Land principle of acting according to the way he's been told to act instead of the way of the spontaneity of his noble nature" (Campbell, *Transformations* 255). Parzival, like Harry at medical school, initially fails in the Quest, though it was his "integrity of heart that marked [him] for a destiny beyond the bounds and gifts of any social order, proving him eligible to approach the Grail, bringing him directly to his counterpart, a young woman resisting to the death a powerful, highly respected king who, though offering her the world, had not awakened love" (Campbell, *Creative* 455-56). Again from *Pazival*:

The wounded king is symbolic of the whole problem of the Waste Land [...]. [Long ago,] out of the forest came riding a pagan knight [...]. The Grail King's lance killed [him], but the knight's lance castrated the king and broke off, the tip of the lance remaining in the wound [...]. Wolfram is telling us here that [...] the energy of nature has been killed. The death of the pagan knight symbolizes it, and the spiritual impotence of the Grail King symbolizes it [...]. The King, in terrific pain, rode back to the court. When the lance tip was withdrawn from his wound, on it was the word *Grail*. (*Transformations* 254)

Expulsion from the Garden is hardly a chosen course downstream on a slow, placid river, as Faulkner himself well knew. To Joan Williams, he wrote, "You are faced with a choice too. [If you choose art] you must expect scorn and horror and misunderstanding from the rest of the world who are not cursed with the necessity to make things new and passionate; no artist escapes it" (Faulkner *Selected Letters* 343). In *Jerusalem*, as noted by Anne Goodwyn Jones, Faulkner "contest[s] the ontological certainty of the gender dichotomy itself" (143). Jones goes on to note Faulkner's sense of his artistic self as feminine, noting that when he thinks of himself as an artist he is a mother but when he sees himself as a hack he is a whore (143-44). To extend the observation, the masculine or non-artist side of Faulkner was terrified of this feminine artist. As Faulkner saw it, one might conclude, both these sides extant within his one person created a paradoxical being in constant contention with his society even as he pursued an undeniable fidelity to the work of "mak[ing] things new and passionate" in the very society that feared him. Harry, Faulkner's masculine fear,

drowns in the furious waters of love and sex – truly the rivers of Babylon of the [titular] psalm, where [...] no security and stability, no fixed point to anchor one's hopes, can be found. His life with Charlotte is a succession of what he calls "eclipses," followed by returns into time, that is, to his sense of guilt: each return marks the beginning of a more difficult and perilous journey, undertaken out of no social pressure or financial need, but of his own will, or suicidal desire, though narrower and narrower gates[...]. (Pitavy 120)

Gail L. Mortimer describes passages from a number of Faulkner pre-*Absalom* books:

All of these passages share the assumption that sexuality involves anxiety about engulfment, that the male experiences sexual closeness as threatening, that the

boundaries of the self will be lost, blurred, or annihilated. Anticipating his death by drowning (in effect, a fusion with the river that he identifies with his sister), Quentin Compson thinks, "I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot even distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand (98)." Such imagery pervades *The Wild Palms* and expresses the identity in Harry's own imagination between Charlotte and the ocean she loves.⁶ (32-33)

In the pre-*Absalom* Faulkner, this divide between the two sides of the self remains against all literary challenges. After *Absalom*, however, here in *Jerusalem*, the attentive Faulkner reader will notice a progression beyond the standard static ending.⁷ First of all, the schizophrenic self remains, by force of will, linked, and though that willed linkage may cause their physical destruction by social forces, their love, their linked will, cannot be destroyed. Faulkner, "Charlotte[,] and Harry believe that the purity of their love is the source of their doom, that society cannot allow it to survive and remain itself intact" (Mortimer 32), and that proves to be the case. But in the fabliau mirror, "Old Man," the boat the Tall Convict "never forsakes is clearly a substitute womb: it keeps him afloat through that fabulous flood, it shelters him effectively from danger and death; and at the climax of his voyage, when the wave at last catches him up, it raises him out of reach of its deadly masculine power" (Pitavy 123).⁸ In fact, the Tall Convict's fidelity to the boat is as intense as it is to the Woman, if not to her as a woman certainly to her a creator and to his commitment to save her and, after the Calvary of snakes episode, to her creation that he midwived (650-51).⁹ Together they are become the most perfect Faulkner self for social service: the one capable of and sworn to regenerative art.

⁶ "I love water," she said. "That's where to die. [...] The water, the cool, to cool you quick so you can sleep, to wash out of your brain and out of your eyes and out of your blood all you ever saw and thought and felt and wanted and denied" (533).

⁷ It must be mentioned, however, that Harry's fear of Charlotte and what she represents is pervasive and continued, even after his commitment to her:

Harry muses often about her assumed feminine ability to assimilate even an illicit relationship into her life. He shares with other male characters an awe at women's ability to enter such an experience wholeheartedly, with a "serene confidence in their amorous destinies like that of birds in their wings" (530). Unlike men, they seem able to hurl themselves "full-winged ... into untried and unresponsive space where no shore is visible" (530). [...] Harry's behavior when he learns that Charlotte is pregnant symbolizes the boundary confusion that is the ultimate threat from women. He leaves Charlotte alone because he cannot breathe in the room with her and takes to walking through heavy snow, "among but mostly into the drifts which he had not yet learned to distinguish in time to avoid, wallowing and plunging..." (635). (Mortimer 33; 34)

⁸ Mortimer notes that

the river is described in androgynous terms. Actually, when Faulkner speaks of the river itself, the "Old Man" (543), the "Father of Waters" (602), he tends to use masculine images, such as that of a bucking stallion. When he speaks of the flood, however, he uses the imagery of engulfment and frowning that, for him, are feminine threats. It is precisely the flood which leaves the "Old Man" indistinguishable, and Faulkner makes much of the fact that its boundaries are not discernible *because of the flood*: "as if the water itself were in three strata, separate and distinct, the bland and unhurried surface ... the rush and fury of the flood itself, and beneath this in turn the original stream (537)." (33)

⁹ The Tall Convict, too, carries his share of fear through this adventure; "Faulkner depicts the convict as flailing at the waters with his "impotent paddle" (593); he is "the man falling from a cliff being told to

Together, they come to the house of a Cajun alligator hunter, and they live for a time as hill-man and hill-wife, both “stemmed at some point from the same dim hill-bred Abraham” (667). And suddenly a new kind of language comes out of Faulkner’s pen; descriptions of this hillman issue forth, a type all “of the same grudging dispensation and niggard fate of hard and unceasing travail not to gain future security, a balance in the bank or even in a buried soda can for slothful and easy old age, but just permission to endure and endure to buy air to feel and sun to drink for each’s little while” (668). They live together in “peace and hope” outside the ill-effects of social gravitation (where “he had been permitted to toil but not to work” [673]) until the flood finds them and washes them back full circle. But even after, the woman would remain inside the man. Faulkner is become Charlotte, the one whose artistic power early on in his career moved readers to emotion but not to compassion, to troubled tears or thrills but not to any regenerative movement. But now in *Jerusalem*, twice the author wins the favor of regenerative love: once in “The Wild Palms” and once in “Old Man.” Each time and place, Love bestows upon him an earned kiss, obliged to do so by his proper use of his power with words, the same thing Dimmesdale feared until he used it in protection and recognition of the love-trinity – Mother/Father/Daughter-Hope – beneath the gaze of the dry, old continuators of the bereft social order.

Faulkner is Charlotte *and* Harry now, much as Hawthorne was the exiled Hester *and* Dimmesdale, the one whose power with language initially moves congregations to emotion but not to compassion, to troubled tears or ecstatic thrills but not to any permanent state of grace. Faulkner’s recurring symbol for a liminal space where this predetermination can be transcended is the beach, where the book begins and ends. In the sound-shadow of the palm’s dry clashing, love can flourish,¹⁰ the palm being the Tree of Life which Christ hung from. Faulkner’s “wild dry bitter” palm is, like Jung’s Shadow, “a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality[...]. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance” (Jung 669). This Shadow-palm is the opposite to the one in the Garden (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), because spitting out the Apple is more difficult than eating it. Yet Charlotte is a candidate, and so she watches the palm all day and broods as if it were her crucifix, feeling the pain gnaw at her sides. Harry does not see the palm and does not eat his own Shadow until he sits in his prison cell just after his sentencing and rejects Rat’s suicide pill (713-14). This final spontaneous act of commitment to the survival of his memory earns him his feminine heart and his whole mind, even though or especially since his admission to both is a sin in the eyes of the male order. Like Dimmesdale, Harry ascends the courtroom scaffold and presents himself to the community, confessing and refusing not to confess everything, self-inflicting Charlotte’s wound upon himself for everyone to see (710-11).

catch onto something and save himself” (611); “...he paddling again now, violently, as a man hurries toward the precipice for which he knows at last he is doomed” (609); [...] All he wants is something solid to land on, something that is not water: “it was earth, it did not move ... it did not accept you substanceless and enveloping and suffocating” (652). (Mortimer 34; 33)

¹⁰ Remember the rose growing even in the shadow-limen of the prison door on the very first page of *The Scarlet Letter*?

Like Judith Sutpen who is imprisoned in a less literal way, Harry will be for the rest of his life held a physical prisoner for being out of “*anonymous lockstep with the teeming anonymous myriads*” (531), and like Dilsey and Judith he chooses grief over non-existence, becoming midwife to the unfolding future; Harry is associated with death, which would seem a paradoxical complement to Dilsey’s Christ-like life associations – but Dilsey in fact has death associations, too, for by having more of a hand in socializing white children than did their white parents she nurtured the future, setting up the eventual death of her supposed masters’ racist culture; like Dilsey, Harry makes possible the eventual failure of patriarchal culture by keeping the memory of Charlotte alive. For the wounded mother within the person of the artist, the flood on Calvary is inescapable, but in the backwaters of Golgotha Harry’s fear of/resistance to its coming is transformed into love and fidelity.

While confession and memory are Harry’s creative acts, Charlotte’s destruction is an act of her own self-creation, for by Harry’s Mithraic cut Love flows again, flooding the Waste Land with regenerating energies. She has not “saved the world” but she has made the world savable, for Love will live amid human sorrow fueled by a pledge not to do battle forever with the world but to be alive in it in the firm belief that, in some brighter period when the world should have grown ripe for it, the Love that consumes Harry might subsume us all. Faulkner is illustrating that, transcendent of the opposites of power and weakness in both his betrayed heroes, there lurks a terrifying strength that, when they work together, has the ability to crack open one’s own ego and regenerate the desiccated insecurities inside. This terrible strength we can call Love, and it propels Faulkner’s twin heroes outside and beyond the reach of the Waste Land order of submission to a parched system and the suicidal illogic of that dead system,¹¹ both redeemed by the compassionate recognition of one another’s suffering.

This is Love, and, as Hawthorne did with Pearl, a characteristic Faulkner instills in Love’s unassailable quality is its tendency continually to make manifest the imminence of social immolation when a society insists on separating its inseparable parts. Love will break such oppositioning, and herein lies the essential quality of Love’s dual nature: it functions not only as the Grail but as the scarlet letter, too. The old doctor, who is himself a Dragon-Mother nurtured at the galled bosom of the imbalanced culture, hallucinates upon Love’s sudden materialization there in his very presence, imagining he might be seeing a pagan demon come to torment him in his life of living death; “[love] doesn’t die,” Charlotte had warned Harry, “you’re the one that dies. It’s like the ocean: if you’re no good, if you begin to make a bad smell in it, it just spews you up somewhere to die” (551), and she could have been speaking of the doctor’s death-in-life as well as their own life-in-death. Illicit Love is its own blessing and its own retribution, both sovereign fairy and demon child, as Harry learns from Charlotte during his “apprenticeship to destitution.” The price for social respectability is life without true Love (that is, Love regardless of social sanction) a kind of death worse than death because you have to avoid

¹¹ Once along the journey Harry “was fired from a job which existed because of moral turpitude, on the grounds of moral turpitude” (560). This is a common situation in *Jerusalem*, but it is the surviving of life-sucking experience that makes the payoff so much more precious, as Charlotte believes: “love and suffering are the same thing[;] the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it and anytime you get it cheap you have cheated yourself” (526).

remembering every day you are actually dead. It is what life would have been had we remained in the Garden.

Love is the Grail and is neither the Apple nor not the Apple, and because Love transcends such oppositions when it comes it is both death and life being born and giving birth.¹² Until that time, just as Hawthorne ended *The Scarlet Letter* with questions about the viability of the ability of his words to change things, death is the coda at the end of *Jerusalem*. The ceaseless clashing of the wild, dry palms is the sound of agony the Waste Land makes: living-dead things vocalizing a deep root-thirstiness even as they languish on the edge of an ocean, even in the midst of rainstorms outside Harry Wilbourne's cell window. But Harry can now claim his name, his human birthright, having more right to it than his father. The other half of him, Charlotte, has died, and so the villainy of the imbalanced culture remains undaunted in its binary divisiveness; Faulkner in all honesty had to leave that un-ending as it appeared to him to exist in the world around him. But because it is an honest *un*-ending, a "splendid failure," rebirth only waits in the chrysalis, and Harry's acceptance of his grief (715) and his rejection of all forms of suicide (the same immolation Isaac McCaslin would repudiate as well) remains a faint but steady inside heart waiting to be born.

Faulkner, like Hawthorne before him, seems to draw the conclusion that regenerative words are, in the short term at least, worth nothing, for society simply goes about its business. Perhaps Faulkner still saw his *own* power with the Word, his own work's ultimate worth, in just this way: a gifted man with a useless gift, who could sometimes attract the affections of his daughter while he like Harry remained in emotional seclusion as the writing went on, tremulous with the vehemence of his/its appeal to the outside. Hawthorne and Faulkner reflect one another, both captive beneath the Shadow-structures of society, the latter pinned (penned) down by an apparent unshakable sense of responsibility for his male ancestor's failure to ascend the scaffold. But *they* ascend, and if others wake into life after them the Feminine may again extend a circle of influence. Slavery enslaved the enslaver more completely than the slave, and as inheritor of the patriarchy Faulkner was himself born into such a slavery, a prisoner to the ancient ancestral fears and hatreds of a misled social order which was itself inheritor of a long line of desiccated fathers motivated by an invidious dread in the face of the feminine principle's elementary ability to create, nurture, and sustain life more perfectly than any creation, nurturance, or sustenance they themselves could muster. Faulkner *knew* something was wrong with it all – *knew* something was wrong inside of him, in that blood of his ancestors flowing in his veins.

And so Dimmesdale and Charlotte die. But fictional death is, after all, not actual death; its portrayal is a convergence ritual which (*re*)creates death and suicide in order to soothe agonistic fervor and to prevent the outbreak or continued occurrence of the real thing. In other words, the death theme in Hawthorne and in Faulkner is the theme of avoiding a living-death as represented by most of the "surviving" characters. Literary death is not to promulgate continued clash with Other thought and ideology (although, ironically, fiction has often done just that within patriotic and/or religious context, as in

¹² Such an indeterminance of meaning when it comes to abstracts like Love and God and Death and Birth is common (see Melville's white whale). Let me mention that the empty place we call a womb is Grail-like as it is an emptiness that gives life, and as such it is probably the re-genesis place that the Grail symbolizes, as any way you read it the uterus is the crossroads of Love and God and Death and Birth.

the work of the imperial apologist Rudyard Kipling), or especially not to comment on the death waiting for those who openly encounter the Other (both of which are readings which can and have been done) – no, indeed: the theme behind Modernism is of *merger* with Otherness, and of the death which comes if one refuses to merge. This theme strays even further from the Western mentality of power than most Modernism, but it is a general Modernist theme (maybe *the* Modernist theme, though it has been largely ignored). In Virginia Woolf's under-read Modern masterpiece, *The Waves*, Percival himself plays the Parzival archetype, though he is dead—a dead man at the center of a flower that has dropped away from its petals. Percival nevertheless (though the ensuing “lack” of center both clouds and complicates inter-relationships for and between the six remaining characters, the six disconnected petals) empowers them to go forward as individuals to find their own way. Percival's sacrifice is direct, messianic; it is his own self Percival gives so that the others may live; when we needed gods, Percival was there, at the center; now, in Modern times, we need them to go away. It is as if Woolf were saying: *Yes, it's true: we are now, in many ways, lost and on our own – but “the living fabric of Truth,” of our inter-connectedness, just because it's harder to see and different from the old definitions, is still the living Truth. Only now, without Percival, we are free to overlay our own story onto the archetype, to define ourselves for ourselves ... no matter what the decadent mass of society might say or do – for after all, it is only by saving us, the individual parts, that the whole can be saved.*

References

- Campbell, Joseph. *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God*. New York: Penguin, 1968.
 - - - . *Transformations of Myth Through Time*. New York: Harper, 1990.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Ed. Sarah Lawall. New York: Norton, 1999. 1680-91.
- Eschenbach, Wolfram Von. *Parzival*. Trans. Helen M. Mustard & Charles E. Passage. New York: Vintage, 1961.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936. William Faulkner: Novels 1936-1940. New York: Library of America, 1990.
 - - - . *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. 1939. William Faulkner: Novels 1936-1940. New York: Library of America, 1990.
 - - - . *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*. Ed. Joseph Blotner. 1977. New York: Vintage P, 1978.
 - - - . *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. New York: Vintage P, 1990.
- Haddawy, Hussain, trans. *The Arabian Nights*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1994. 2202-2315.
- Holy Bible*. King James Version. New York: The World Publishing Company.
- Johnson, Karen Ramsey. “Gender, Sexuality, and the Artist in Faulkner's Novels.” *American Literature* 16.1 (March 1989): 1-15.
- Jones, Anne Goodwyn. “‘The Kotex Age’: Women, Popular Culture and The Wild Palms.” *Faulkner and Popular Culture: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 1988. Ed. Ann J. Abadie and Donald M. Kartiganer. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990. 142-62.

- Jung, Carl G. "On the Relation of Analytical Psychological Poetry." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: Bedford, 1989. 656-66.
- - - . "The Principal Archetypes." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: Bedford, 1989. 666-676.
- Mortimer, Gail L. "The Ironies of Transcendent Love in Faulkner's The Wild Palms." *Faulkner Journal* 1.2 (Spring 1986): 30-42.
- Pitavy, Francois. "An Ironic Chart for The Wild Palms." *Intertextuality in Faulkner*. Ed. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1985. 114-27.
- Tanyol, Denise. "The Two-Way Snake Bite: The Dead Doctor Wounds His Son in William Faulkner's 'The Wild Palms.'" *Mississippi Quarterly* 50.3 (1997): 465-75.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. 1931. New York: Harcourt, 1959.