



**Anca Peiu: *Faulkneriana. Back to (and beyond)*
*Yoknapatawpha***

Bucharest: C.H. Beck, 2019

Reviewed by

Aliz FARKAS

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca

Department of Human Sciences, Miercurea Ciuc

farkasaliz@uni.sapientia.ro

Anca Peiu's *Faulkneriana* is a collection of academic essays and studies on William Faulkner, a worthy tribute to the great American novelist's entire oeuvre. The volume includes updated and elaborated versions of twenty scholarly papers published in a range of academic journals, and several introductory studies accompanying the Romanian translation of Faulkner's novels and short stories – some of them translated by Anca Peiu herself. The writing and first publishing of the papers collected in this work spans about twenty years (the oldest one dating back to the turn of the 21st century), the stretch of time alone betraying the author's fascination by Faulkner's genius and her dedication to spread his words among Romanian readers by translating and sometimes even retranslating (as is the case of the novel *Intruder in the Dust* (1948)) Faulkner's works. Apart from translation, which is challenging and demanding due to the "baroque narrative style" and the "exquisite stylistic particularities" (p. 168) of the Faulknerian text, Anca Peiu contributes to the writer's reception through fine-grained literary analyses of his stories.

There is a close affinity between the manner the American novelist incrementally constructs his imaginary county called Yoknapatawpha by continually adding new stories and characters, and revising old ones throughout his writing career, and the Romanian literary critic's fashion of revisiting the same books via a different route every time, with the fresh perspective opened up by new literary, cinematic, and personal experiences gained over the course of two decades.

Anca Peiu's interest in Faulkner's curious habit of charting and recharting his virtual territory is obvious right from the beginning. The first essay in the volume, entitled "Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha – A Double Fictive Map Alive", dwells on

Faulkner's puzzling way of placing his stories on the two maps designed and drawn by him nine years apart from each other, presumably with the intention to assure some coherence across his main works by unifying them via this visible and tangible evidence – the map, substantiating the stories and ushering the reader at the same time. The focus is on how two masterpieces written in the same year (1930), the novel *As I Lay Dying* and the short story "A Rose for Emily", occur on two different maps: the first one is placed on the 1936 version of the map, and the second one surfaces only nine years later, on the 1945, redesigned version. This distribution of the two works to different maps is all the more curious since they both have a very definite common core: they both feature a woman as the main character, and they both scandalize with the stench of decomposing corpses.

Through a series of essays, Anca Peiu tracks the making of Yoknapatawpha County visualized on the two maps, interpreting it to be more than a symbol of the Old South, as most critics regard it. In her interpretation, Yoknapatawpha "is a fine fictive microcosm often representing the entire United States of America" (p. 112). The most promising environment for Peiu's investigation is *The Snopes Trilogy* consisting of the novels *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*, completed in about twenty years by the American writer. Even though separate essays are dedicated to all three parts of the trilogy, discussions about the novels recur regularly in the volume. This recurrence of the discussion about the same or similar stories is not an end in itself but a reflection of Faulkner's habit of recycling short stories written earlier in his career, revising and integrating them into his later novels, which, on their turn, were conceived to be the building blocks of an even greater structure: a trilogy. The detailed knowledge of the early short stories as well as their later transformation into novels lead Anca Peiu to the realization of the multiple polarities characterizing Faulkner's maps: "On the map of Yoknapatawpha County, these stories establish such polarities as the following: countryside (Frenchman's Bend) – city (Jefferson); self – other; center – margin" (p. 182).

A more observant look on the literary critic's part reveals that Jefferson, which is situated at the very core of Faulkner's maps, is not even a city but just a small town inhabited by "an amorphous primitive mob" (p. 170), very much resembling the writer's hometown, Oxford, Mississippi. Even the name of the town is misleading. Most readers would probably assume that the town was named after Thomas Jefferson, the great American statesman and author of the *Declaration of Independence*. And they would be right as far as the ambition of the townspeople is concerned to pick the name of such an illustrious person. However, the town was not directly named after the third American president but after an intermediary called Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew, the respectable postman of the town, whose anti-heroic family name cannot possibly be counterbalanced by his grandiose first names, rendering him ridiculous rather than illustrious. And

if someone as well-versed in Faulkner's work and life as Anca Peiu complements the picture with the autobiographical detail of Faulkner's short-lived job as a postmaster in Oxford in his youth, the reader gets a foretaste of the complexity of the Faulknerian multilayered narrative, where dignity, heroism, irony, and self-irony form such a unique blend. The volume abounds in debunking such Faulknerian twists by bringing together details from different novels, short stories, intertextual references, and autobiographical evidence.

However disadvantageously may Jefferson be portrayed, Faulkner still considers it important enough to situate it in the core of the Yoknapatawpha microcosm "quite like a beating heart" (p. 23), as "a live metaphor (...) of the Faulknerian urban space" (p. 33). But instead of the effervescent atmosphere and spiritual sophistication one might expect to find in an urban area, Jefferson astounds with its stifling, paralysing ambience. As Anca Peiu points out in her essay "Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha – A Double Fictive Map Alive" discussed earlier, neither the spinster in "A Rose for Emily" nor the fecund woman Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* has anything to do with the living – "the Jefferson they belong to is a town of ghosts" (p. 6). Emily lives as a recluse with the horrendous secret of hiding a corpse in her bedroom for years, while the Bundrens drag Addie's coffin with her inside for nine days so that she can finally reunite with her family of origin – in the Jefferson cemetery.

Being a keen observer, Anca Peiu confidently puts her finger on every unusual spot of both the content and the graphic representation of the narrative such as Addie being laid in the coffin in a reversed position so as not to crease her wedding dress or the insertion of simple drawings in the body of the text whenever words seem to be inadequate. As an avid reader of Faulkner from a tender age, Peiu has learned that when reading Faulknerian narrative "the reader must contribute his fair share of ingenuity to the game of fiction" (p. 207). She has worked out the rules of the game, and she ingeniously plays along. Applying the rule of reversal to her own interpretation of the text, she surprises us with the question referring to Emily and Addie, whose deaths are announced in the stories: "But are they *the dead*? (...) It is rather Addie's family and friends, and likewise, Emily's neighbors (the numb townspeople of Jefferson, rigid in their narrow-minded gossip and sterile assumptions) who are the dead – in both stories" (p. 8).

The only type for whom Jefferson ensures a favourable environment is the despicable and profit-hungry businessman represented by Jason Compson and the Snopeses, whose attitude towards life and conduct is discussed in a number of essays. Other extensively discussed phenomena include Faulkner's preoccupation with failed motherhood, insanity, suicide, war, Africanism, and miscegenation, as well as dysfunctional dreamers of the alluring American dream – all of them unravelled from Faulkner's writings and supplied with a rich web

of references to other literary works belonging to American and world literature, but also to films and history.

The main strand that holds all these wide-ranging topics together is the author's ambition to locate all the stories and characters on Faulkner's palimpsestic map, where – beneath the graphic representation of the fictitious Yoknapatawpha – she can palpate Faulkner's autobiographical places, and she draws our attention to an even deeper stratum, where eternal human values, ambitions, struggles, and tragedies reside.

Apart from the twenty essays, the volume contains a chronological and biographical key to William Faulkner and his contemporaries, as well as the reproductions of the two maps of Yoknapatawpha.

The book cover designed by Ion Aramă evokes the recurring image of a *dark house* amply discussed in several essays as a twice opted for and twice dropped title of two Faulknerian novels eventually entitled *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936). The dark house motif rooted in such prominent literary works as E. A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, or F. M. Dostoevsky's *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* appeals to Faulkner's imagination as a building never meant to become a home, although "a home is the ultimate desire" for many Faulknerian protagonists (p. 125). Tragically, all of them spend most of their lives behind prison-like buildings with bleak walls and grated windows very much resembling Ion Aramă's sketch. Some of them waste away in Parchman prison, such as Mink Snopes, others in Jackson asylum, such as Benjy Compson and Darl Bundren, and the rest "just" endure in the parental place "pretending it is (...) her home", such as Judith Sutpen and Linda Snopes (p. 151).

In order to get a closer understanding of all these characters' fate, we "require the book, plus the map, plus the chronology, plus the genealogy. And the meaning within it all will still stay a mystery" (p. 38). Anca Peiu's insightful essays are meant to dispel some of the mystery and reveal latent correlations across Faulkner's own works and other great works of world literature, cinematic art, history, and important current affairs.