

MRS SHORTLEY'S NEW PLANET: ALTERNATE GEOGRAPHIES  
AND DEEP TIME IN SOUTHERN MODERNISM

WIESŁAW KUHN<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT

The literature of the American South has often been seen as an example of literary regionalism and of writing turned inward upon its own history. This article, however, argues that this literature in the period between 1919 and 1945 was decisively shaped by its thematic and formal interactions with post-Versailles Europe. The event of the First World War was a critical point in this re-orientation of southern literature toward the extra-regional and toward modernist experimentalism. It was a lifelong literary task of William Faulkner, beginning with his earliest fiction in the 1920s and culminating in *A fable*, to try to understand this war as a collective southern experience (which in *A fable* is achieved through the symbolism of the Black Atlantic and that of the Unknown Soldier). The article employs Wai Chee Dimock's theoretical categories of planetary extension and deep time to show that the South of the southern modernists was a transatlantic South, one permeated by alternate geographies and long durations. Works such as Faulkner's *A fable*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, man of the mountain* and James Agee's *Let us now praise famous men* not only extend beyond the territorial borders of the regional South but reach into the long duration of theological time and of evolutionary biology. In this regard, the article particularly stresses the unexpected influence of Weimar political theology on Faulkner and Hurston's work. Through their bold use of planetary geography and long durations Faulkner, Hurston and Agee emerge as radical critics of their region and its agrarian ideology, offering an imaginative counter-statement to such fixed southern entities as segregation, endemic agricultural poverty, and internal colonization.

Key words: Deep time; spatiality in literature; southern modernism; William Faulkner; World War One; Black Atlantic; Weimar political theology.

In *Through other continents: American literature across deep time* (2006) Wai Chee Dimock uses the concepts of alternate geographies and deep time to break through the spatial and temporal boundaries that historically have delimited

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, e-mail: [kuhn@amu.edu.pl](mailto:kuhn@amu.edu.pl); ORCID: [0000-0002-0938-0543](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0938-0543).



U.S. literature.<sup>2</sup> What applies to the study of U.S. literature applies with double force to the study of the literature of the U.S. South. For southern literature has been particularly constrained within geographical and chronological borders. Historically, the literature of the South began with Michael Drayton's ode, "To the Virginian voyage" (1606); spatially, it refers to what lies south of the Mason-Dixon Line. The effect of these spatial and temporal borders has been to create a solid South, a self-sufficient domain that can be analyzed through homogenizing critical typologies such as regionality, sense of place, the intrusion of the past in the present, and the Southern Gothic. But in the last twenty-five years, concurrent with Dimock's landmark study, a paradigm shift has been taking place in southern literary studies. The concept of a solid South is being replaced by a global South, a region that is permeated by other geographical spaces.<sup>3</sup> There is now a general scholarly recognition that even the Old South was part of a worldwide plantation economy and formed part of what Paul Gilroy has called the "Black Atlantic". The South has always, in this sense, been modern and its slaves were "the first modern subjects", who were "torn from their homes" and transplanted to the New World (Friedman 2015: 62). Nineteenth-century African Americans such as Frederick Douglass looked to European sources for the understanding of this fractured modern subjectivity, especially to Hegelian philosophy and its drama of the constructive self in history.<sup>4</sup>

But if the South had always been modern, then its participation in transatlantic modernity was intensified in the years between 1914 and 1945. In this period the South became part of a closed global system in which Europe was at the centre: this pulled the South toward Europe's totalizing wars, racialized politics, internal colonization, and economic depression.<sup>5</sup> One literary effect of this alignment was an outpouring of modernist writing by the authors of the interwar Southern Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> The heyday of southern modernism can roughly be

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<sup>2</sup> The term "alternative geographies" is first used in Dimock (2007: 3).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kathryn McKee & Annette Trefzer. 2006. Global contexts, local literatures: The new southern studies. *American literature* 78 (4). 677–690.

<sup>4</sup> Gilroy argues that Douglass's account in *Autobiography* [title in italics] of the fight with the slave-breaker is a re-writing of Hegel's master-slave narrative (which "places slavery at the natal core of modern sociality") (1993: 63).

<sup>5</sup> The concentration of this article on Europe, it could be objected, neglects connections of the South to less developed parts of the globe and thereby reinforces an ideological meta-narrative that privileges the dominant West. In defence, I would counter that it was the themes and forms of interwar Europe that had a pre-eminent role in the writings of the southern modernists. As the Tennessee author James Agee put it, "Europe is the burning-glass in which the great meanings of the time are collected". James Agee, "Monsieur Verdoux", James Agee Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Box 9, Folder 17.

<sup>6</sup> From the very first in Anglo-American literary criticism the term "modernism" has been associated with writers of the South. Probably the first use of modernism as a literary critical

demarcated as beginning with the First World War, when Allen Tate said the South “reentered the world” (1968: 592), and ending with the Second World War. An epilogue is provided by Flannery O’Connor’s “The displaced person” (1955) in which an exaggeratedly regional character, Mrs Shortley, finds that by the late 1940s she is living on a new planet. Mrs Shortley is perturbed by the appearance of a Polish refugee on the Georgian farm where her husband works. In Mr Guizac’s smile, “Europe stretched out in Mrs. Shortley’s imagination, mysterious and evil, the devil’s experiment station” (O’Connor 1955: 296).

The appearance of Displaced Persons in Georgia is not only a historical event, but it is also an event in the realm of literary form. Mrs Shortley’s consciousness succumbs to an inadvertent surrealism: she associates Mr Guizac with a newsreel she has seen of piled bodies in a concentration camp, head and limbs askew, and with a battle of letters in which “dirty” “Polish words” overcome “clean English words” (O’Connor 1955: 300). Transatlantic modernity enters into Mrs Shortley’s regional consciousness as linguistic rupture and as disorder of body image: in short, this *modernity*, to use Susan Friedman’s phrasing, has an “expressive” outlet in Mrs Shortley’s inchoate literary *modernism* (Friedman 2015: 53, 54). The experimentalism of the Southern Renaissance—the inner monologues of Faulkner, Tate’s neo-Symbolist poetics, or James Agee’s ethnographic surrealism of cotton tenant life—was at least partly an attempt to bring to literary representation the new materialities and often subversive political forms opened up to this spreading, relativized South.

One of these new modernist techniques in particular is an attempt to find a symbolic form for what Wai Chee Dimock calls “planet as ... extension” (2006: 1). This is the “spatial form” named by Joseph Frank, who in 1945 observed that an instantaneous conjunction of events or objects widely separated in space or time was *the* central figure of modernism (Frank 1945: 225, 653).<sup>7</sup> Frank’s spatial form is at work in Faulkner’s *As I lay dying* (1930) and particularly in the mind of its main protagonist, Darl Bundren, a Mississippi farmer’s son who has fought in the First World War. In the scene of the river crossing, Darl’s discourse superimposes the wartime landscape of France over that of the Mississippi and its flood of 1927.<sup>8</sup> One indication of this superimposition is that Darl describes the flooded land through the trope of the severed earth, a trope that Faulkner had found in the trench writing

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term was by John Crowe Ransom in a short critical essay in *The Fugitive* in 1922 (Young & Hindle 1984: 25).

<sup>7</sup> Frank was influenced in this essay by the southern New Critics, particularly by Allen Tate (who was editor of *The Sewanee Review* in which Frank’s essay appeared). Frank refers to Tate’s comment that Ezra Pound juxtaposed ancient, Renaissance and modern in a “timeless” and unhistorical “continuum” as the germ of his concept of spatial form (1945: 652–653).

<sup>8</sup> This has been convincingly argued by Susan Scott Parrish (2018: 214–216).

of Henri Barbusse.<sup>9</sup> Darl says that the flooded road by the river has “soaked free of earth and floated upward” (Faulkner [1963](#): 112). The elaborateness of Darl’s use of transatlantic spatial form comes to a climax in his last monologue as he is taken by two guards to the state asylum:

One of them sat beside him, the other sat on the seat facing him, riding backward. One of them had to ride backward because the state’s money had a face to each b\*ackside and a backside to each face, and they were riding on the state’s money which is incest. A nickel has a woman on one side and a buffalo on the other; two faces and no back. I don’t know what that is. Darl had a little spy-glass he got in France at the war. In it it had a woman and a pig with two backs and no face. I know what that is. (Faulkner [1963](#): 202)

Darl pulls together areas that are geographically and temporally separated: the France of 1918 and the Jefferson (the fictional Oxford, Mississippi) of 1927. What is more, he looks through a spy-glass in order to configure modern Mississippi through an obscene geometry: that of the beast with two backs.<sup>10</sup> This image of the woman and the pig reminds Darl of his mother in the act of adultery and he threads the scandal of this act, together with a surrealist conceit of the fronts and backs of bodies, into recent welfarist transformations of the state. The “state’s money”—a paper money of front and back—has been used to finance Progressive-Democrat schemes such as the new insane asylum in Jackson (voted for in 1927); this paper money is “incest” because the social order of Mississippi has become one of an interrelationships of abstract, identical selves (which is also implied by the mimetic doubling of the guards). It is not just that Darl is experiencing traumatic recall of the war through the spy-glass. He is plotting out, in spatial figure, three interrelated components of transatlantic modernity: the war, the ecological disaster of the Mississippi flood of 1927, and recent local developments of the managerial state.

These transatlantic affinities and circuits revise the notion of the twentieth-century South as an anomalous region still dominated by a neo-feudal worldview. It might be more appropriate to say that the South was modern in a peculiarly 1930s way: in the South’s tendencies toward authoritarian populism; its racialized politics and “color-line”; its slide into agricultural recession; and its non-synchrony of development. This special political sensibility in the interwar South creates

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<sup>9</sup> In an early essay “Literature and war” (1925) Faulkner noted that Barbusse in *Under fire* could depict a hill so soaked by rain that “the very particles of earth rise floating to the top of the atmosphere, and air and earth are a single medium” (Meriwether [2004](#): 254).

<sup>10</sup> As Susan Scott Parrish writes, Darl’s spy-glass is the equivalent of “the glasses of modernization and modernist art”; it turns the Mississippi landscape into “startling art objects” (Parrish [2018](#): 215). One example of such an object is Darl’s representation of Addie’s coffin as a “cubistic bug” (Faulkner [1963](#): 173).

a difference from the rest of the United States. After 1918 the rest of the U.S. felt that their country was entering a peaceful, postterritorial world in which the U.S. would play the dominant economic role. Some southern commentators, speaking from their vantage point of a marginalized sector within the U.S., were more sceptical of this postwar geopolitical order.<sup>11</sup> Such scepticism meant that the South's literary travellers of the interwar years had an acuter political understanding of the new Europe than their northern and western counterparts of the Lost Generation. The latter's impressionistic reportage of France and Spain was closely tied to the export power of the American dollar in the 1920s ("the world seemed a good place to buy in" says Hemingway's Jake Barnes during his classic exposition of the expatriate's good life) (Hemingway 2021 [1926]: 153). Southern literary travellers tracked darker routes of preoccupation: Faulkner went to World War One battlefields in 1925, Katherine Anne Porter to late Weimar Berlin in 1931, Robert Penn Warren to Mussolini's Italy between 1938 and 1940. As a result, Katherine Anne Porter in her electrifyingly acerbic essay "The wooden umbrella" (1947) could rebuke Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald as aesthetes blind to a "falling world" (2008: 560).

What has caught the attention of critics such as Robert Brinkmeyer in *The fourth ghost* is the "mirror" image of Fascism in the South, particularly in works concerning Huey Long's Louisiana such as Robert Penn Warren's *All the king's men* (1946) (Brinkmeyer 2009: 328–329). Brinkmeyer's work is a powerful exposition of the continuities between the literature of the interwar South and both the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy. But perhaps one also could see southern literature as reflective of a wider range of interwar European history, notably the reorganization of the continent after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Hannah Arendt in her classic study *The origins of totalitarianism* drew attention to the way in which the postwar treaties gave rise to groups of stateless, minority and refugee peoples, peoples usually without legal rights who could exemplify nothing but their basic biological life. Arendt thought that the presence of these peoples gave rise in interwar Europe to a new version of nineteenth-century colonialism in which nationalistic ideologies sought the exclusion of these peoples from civic life of the state. The African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois, arguably, arrived at this insight into internal colonization before Arendt and did so with a peculiarly southern perspective. He observed that the "color-line" in the South replicated that of colonial Africa and that a version of this "color-line" could also be applied to the minority peoples of Europe after World War One (1986: 372). One southern writer

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<sup>11</sup> One sign of this scepticism is Faulkner's mockery throughout his fiction of a world peace on Wilsonian or post-Versailles terms. The emasculated passivity of the aesthete and YMCA non-combatant, Horace Benbow, in *Flags in the dust*, for example, is an ironic index of his longing for the "meaning of peace" (2006: 676).

on the near-Communist left, Erskine Caldwell, intuitively grasped this Du Boisian parallel. In *North of the Danube* (1939) a photo-essay composed with Margaret Bourke-White about a trip made to Czechoslovakia just before the Munich Agreement in 1938, Caldwell attributes to minority peoples, such as Slovakian peasants under Hungarian landlords, some of the social physiognomies of damage used to delineate African Americans and poor whites in the authors' previous volume, *You have seen their faces* (1937), a photo-essay on the Depression South.<sup>12</sup> For Katherine Anne Porter, too, the map of dispossessed peoples in Europe and the South could double over, allowing her in stories such as "Noon wine" (1938) to hover compulsively over such figures of statelessness and de-bordering as the agricultural migrant.<sup>13</sup> In that story the Swedish farmworker Mr Helton, "a stranger in a strange land" (Porter 2008: 241), gets employment on a Texan form, displacing the African American hands; his efficiency is at first the basis for his Texan employer's agrarian euphoria, then the cause of this euphoria's collapse. So much could Porter's experiences in interwar Europe, notably Weimar Germany, be tracked back to the South in stories such as "Noon wine" and "Holiday" that she could say in her essay on "Noon wine" that these experiences "served me in a way I had not dreamed of ... it gave me back my past and my own house and my own people" (2008: 722).

As well as incorporating the planet as extension, the literature of southern modernism also opens out into the dimension that Wai Chee Dimock calls "deep time", "threading the long durations" of "other cultures" into "the short chronology" of the United States (2006: 3). Southern modernists were particularly open to this durational or non-serial time, which Dimock sets in opposition to the serial time of standard historical chronology. But the character of this *longue durée* differs according to the place these writers occupy in the spectrum of southern political positions available in the Depression decade. Allen Tate tried to make his version of the South as an agrarian, traditionalist community the inheritor of the long histories of Roman or Catholic Europe. *Longue durée* then becomes in Tate's view convertible with myth, particularly the Virgilian myth of the founding of Rome by Aeneas as the origin point of a classical-agrarian society. In Tate's "The Mediterranean" (1933), for example, the consuming of bread platters by Tate and his friends at a Mediterranean picnic in 1932—a recreation in the present of the closed classical world—reiterates Aeneas' similar meal of such platters or "tables" when he landed on the shore of Italy in *The Aeneid* and thereby fulfilled a prophecy that he would build a new Troy when he ate

<sup>12</sup> At the apex of this neo-colonial pyramid of mid-European nationalities, Caldwell quotes one Czech landlord as saying, is the "German God Almighty" (Caldwell & White 1995 [1937]: 62, 63).

<sup>13</sup> The largest class of landless individuals in the South were African American, but often writers such as Porter and O'Connor use ethnicities such as Swedes or Poles, which in their stories are metonymically linked to African Americans.

“tables” (1977: 66).<sup>14</sup> Tate’s use of a stacked series of figurae is in keeping with Joseph Frank’s argument that spatial form opened into the “timeless world of myth” (Frank 1945: 653). Even modern ruptures in this pattern of prediction and fulfilment—as in Aeneas’s cry by the Potomac in “Aeneas at Washington” (1933), “The city my blood had built I knew no more”—confirm the priority of figurae as an ordering function (1977: 69). However, Tate’s *longue durée* of myth does not completely match Wai-Chee Dimock’s “deep time”. Tate’s version unifies past and present in an organic continuity and excludes the non-synthesizable part of time that belongs to historical change.

Southern modernists who are more inclined to radicalism, such as Faulkner (at least the radical Faulkner of Joseph Urgo’s analysis) and the unorthodox Communist James Agee go not to myth, but to the long durations of biology and of theology. They use these to dislodge the present from its regional self-sufficiency.<sup>15</sup> The agrarianism, populism and segregationism of the interwar internal politics of the South are interrogated. *As I lay dying*, for example, does not so much recreate the organic time of epic in the funeral journey as it uses the long durations of landscape formation and biology to place the narrative of the Bundren family precariously within a narrative of the planetary biomass.

The central event in the novel is the crossing of the flooded Mississippi by the funeral cortege of the Bundren family. The flood that Faulkner refers to is probably the Great Flood of 1927, a man-made disaster that was caused by cotton monoculture and deforestation (such as Tull’s cutting down of oaks on his land). Indeed, in the novel Faulkner contributes to a 1930s mode that might proleptically be called that of the southern Anthropocene, a mode full of red gullies, tobacco roads, and floods. In other words, the flood is an event that can be placed on “a new kind of timeline” (Parrish 2018: 7). This is the timeline of long petrological time and of the human intervention within that time that can be measured as a geological effect. Through Darl’s monologues Faulkner couples the First World War with the agricultural devastation of the 1920s: both events are part of a human war on the planetary biomass.<sup>16</sup> They are both global events that cross the strict borders of the South and re-constitute it from within.

<sup>14</sup> The prophecy is originally made in Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book III and fulfilled in VII.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Urgo counters the Southern Agrarian argument that Faulkner was a mythopoeic and conservative writer in *Faulkner’s apocrypha: A fable, Snopes and the spirit of human rebellion*. Jackson (1989). For Urgo, Faulkner is a radical defender of the dispossessed rather than a conservative southern agrarian.

<sup>16</sup> For Georges Bataille, the First World War resulted from the need to burn off the accumulation of fossil fuel energy, which had been building up over the nineteenth century, in an act of gratuitous expenditure. Faulkner correlates his wastage of energy resources in war with the ecological damage caused by the toxic monoculture of cotton agriculture in Mississippi in the early twentieth century. See Georges Bataille, *The accursed share: An essay on general economy. Volume one: Consumption* (1988: 24–25).

Faulkner's reference to the biomass points to another use of deep time in the novel, that of biology—particularly evolutionary biology. This biologism is most effectively condensed in Addie, the amoral mother-matrix or mother-cell of reproduction (one might consider how her lying in her coffin the wrong way round, like a child about to be born from the womb, puts life and death into a biological eternity). When Vardaman, Addie's young son, asserts that "My mother is a fish" his primary meaning is that he wants magically to recompose his dead mother into the whole figure of the fish that he caught while she was still alive (Faulkner 1963: 67). But he also articulates Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic thesis that the ontogenetic forms developing in the foetus recapitulate the phylogenetic forms of the evolution of species: the foetus goes through the intermediate stages of being, amongst other animals, a fish.<sup>17</sup> Addie as mother-matrix or all-inclusive foetus contains the biological order of all species. From this position of the completeness of the mother-cell, Addie in her monologue can look magisterially on her husband's feckless masculine words, which she calls "just a shape to fill a lack" (Faulkner 1963: 136). But the reader can also approach Addie's organic completeness from within Faulkner's critique in the novel of Mississippi agriculture as a form of ecocide. For if Addie stands for this biological order, then she can also, especially in Darl's mind, stand for what happens to this order in the southern Anthropocene—she herself imagines that she belongs to the "red bitter blood boiling through the land" or to the red gullies that blend with the passion of her adultery (Faulkner 1963: 138). For Darl, his mother is the primordial being in the French spy-glass; it is this biological order gone wrong.

The theological or Biblical is the other version of deep time used by southern modernists such as Faulkner in *A fable* (1954) and Zora Neale Hurston in *Moses, man of the mountain* (1939). Wai Chee Dimock quotes Emerson on religion as the most global and durational of symbolic systems: "the only bond of connection which can traverse the long duration which separates the ends of the world and unites the first people to the knowledge and sympathy of the last people, is religion" (2006: 35). Like the long duration of evolutionary biology, that of religion acquires an anti-regionalist and subversive edge when southern modernists bring it into relation with the political distortions of the southern present. As rhetorical southerners, Faulkner and Hurston were predisposed to the religious forms and tropes of the Bible Belt: these were at the foundation of their language, quite apart from the question of whether they were individual believers. In addition, *A fable* shows that as Faulkner moves out

<sup>17</sup> Haeckel's *Anthropogenie* (1874), translated as *The evolution of man* (1879), featured lithographs of human embryos in different stages of growth and placed in parallel grids with those of dogs, fish and other animals. These lithographs were copied in American school textbooks such as Benjamin C. Gruenberg's *Elementary biology* (1919). See Nick Hopwood, *Haeckel's embryos: Images, evolution, and fraud* (2015: 265).

of Yoknapatawpha county into the Europe of between 1914 and 1926 he responds to a specific form of intellectual modernity that is encoded in the space of post-Versailles Europe: that of Weimar political theology.<sup>18</sup> After the First World War, the secular politics of the nineteenth century suddenly seemed to have lost its telos of meliorism and scientific progress. Weimar political theologians such as Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt went back to older theological ideas that formed the substructure of the political, such as those of community and sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> Central to this Weimar work is the binding function of what might be called the people's collective body—a secular updating of the church as *corpus mysticum* or the medieval king's second body.<sup>20</sup> Faulkner was to embody this collective flesh in *A fable* as the Chaulnesmont crowd and its Christ-like embodier, the corporal (the pun on corporeal appears intentional). Another major revision of the Weimar political theologians was that of their politics of time. They replaced the homogenous, incremental time of the nineteenth century with vertical concepts of the temporal, such as that of the messianic moment and the exception.<sup>21</sup> These vertical concepts were ways of theorizing the possibility of such German revolutions as the Communist coup that set up the Munich Republic in 1919 or its reactionary counterpart in the Kapp putsch. This eschatological mood in post-World War One Europe carried over into southern apocalypses, often based on the Book of Revelation, such as Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale horse, pale rider" (1938), John Crowe Ransom's "Armageddon" (1922), and Faulkner's *A fable*. In Porter's story the Pale Horseman who appears in Miranda's dream infects her with the flu virus, a metonym of overseas conflict and of its domestic counterpart, the Wilsonian managerial or war state (2008: 281–282).<sup>22</sup> In Ransom's poem, Christ is the permanent eschatological disturber of the realm of the Antichrist, his archenemy, who stands for the post-World War One settlement of universal peace and universal positivism. The Antichrist tries to conscript Christ into this false eternity of peace and its Platonic universals of science, but Christ rejects the offer. The eschatological time frame and its abrasive, incarnational materiality is restored (Ransom 1955: 24–26).

<sup>18</sup> I have tried to show this in "'One more little instant': Faulkner's *A fable* and the political-theological crisis in interwar Europe", in *Modernism/modernity* 31(2) 2024: 357–375. My discussion of *A fable* condenses some of the argument made in this article.

<sup>19</sup> As Claude Lefort interprets these Weimar thinkers: "human society can only open on to itself by being held in an opening it did not create" (2006: 157).

<sup>20</sup> Eric Santner calls this second body "the 'sublime' life-substance of the People, who, at least in principle, become the bearers of sovereignty, assume the dignity of the *prince*" (2011: xi).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Benjamin's thesis 14 of "Theses on the philosophy of history" criticizes the idea of progress as "homogenous, empty time" and instead elevates "time filled by the presence of the now" (1973: 263).

<sup>22</sup> Jeanette Keith attributes "the rise of the modern managerial state" to "the Wilson administration's war measures". See Keith (2004: 4).

Faulkner did not get to the political theological narrative of *A fable* all at once. It is as though the First World War set Faulkner the problem of a new kind of war. He kept trying to tease out the meaning of this war throughout his literary life, an attempt that lasted from his earliest works to *A fable* (1954). At first it seemed an insuperable undertaking. In one review of a First World War novel Faulkner went so far as to say that front-line or “personal experience” of this war was un-narratable (Meriwether [2004](#): 187). In *Soldiers’ pay* (1926) the brain-damaged aviator Donald Mahon is a zombie-like figure suspended between European war and an amnesiac South, incapable of mediating between the two zones. In *Flags in the dust* (1927)—the first of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels—the narrator’s task is how to join the grand récit of the Civil War with the less intelligible narrative of its modern successor. An abrupt lacuna between the two récits is evident in the last scene of the novel. Aunt Jenny, the matriarch of the Sartoris family, visits the family graveyard in 1919, but this Lost Cause-like attempt to find a Burkean continuity with the great society of the Confederate dead comes up short. The tomb of one of the Sartoris twin heirs, the combat aviator Johnny, is empty and his body lies undiscovered in Flanders. Next to Johnny’s tomb lies that of his twin brother and fellow aviator, Bayard, who witnessed Johnny’s fall from his plane. Bayard survived the war but, far from understanding his role in the conflict, he can only re-enact his brother’s death in a repetition-compulsion of shock and speed.<sup>23</sup> Bayard kills himself in 1919 flying an experimental plane in circumstances that imitate his brother’s death.

In a review of Faulkner’s novel from 1938 Jean-Paul Sartre circles around Bayard as a “man who has secrets”. Sartre says he is another example of the dominance in the novel of “gestures”, including those of the performative “epic splendor” of the Confederate tradition. But, says Sartre, “The real drama is *behind* ... behind the gestures, behind the consciousness” ([1952 \[1938\]](#): 96). Sartre, however, does not explain what this “behind” might be.<sup>24</sup> Pearl James in *The new death: American modernism and World War One* provides one persuasive answer: Bayard’s interrupted mourning is not only for his brother’s death but also for his lost body (a mourning experienced by many bereaved Americans in the war who had no tangible remains of their loved ones)

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<sup>23</sup> As Freud was to observe in *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920), repetition compulsion caused by trauma is not retrospective knowledge of the experience, but an attempt to master the original shock by replaying it. Freud set off a very influential psychological metanarrative of the war but, as Faulkner implies in the cul-de-sac of Bayard’s story, this analysis did not provide a political understanding of the historical event.

<sup>24</sup> The nearest that Sartre comes to an answer is when he says that Faulkner tries to posit “an absolute obscurity” that thickens the consciousness of silent characters such as Bayard. For Sartre, this positing shows Faulkner’s southern Protestant need for an “ultra-puritanic stoicism” ([1952 \[1938\]](#): 99).

(James [2013](#): 179). But Bayard's inarticulacy about the disappearance of his twin brother, however, perhaps also screens a deeper inarticulacy—the question of why the twins and the South are in a European war in the first place. This question breaks the surface in Bayard's momentary meeting with a “blind negro beggar”, which occurs just before he meets another white veteran to exchanges memories of the war. The beggar wears:

.... filthy khaki with a corporal's stripes on one sleeve and a crookedly-seen Boy Scout emblem on the other, and on his breast a button commemorating the fourth Liberty Loan and a small metal brooch bearing two gold stars, obviously intended for female adornment. His weathered derby was encircled by an officer's hat cord ... (Faulkner [2006](#): 639)

In this description there is an abundant surplus of military signifier, so much so that the superfluity serves to pastiche the presumptive aura of the signifier. There is no more reference to the beggar; his role is to create what Frank Kermode calls “hermeneutic potential” for the reader (a sign of the “peculiarly modern” in writing, Kermode says, is a “rediscovery” of the “oracular”) (40, 15).<sup>25</sup> What the binary star of Bayard the military aviator and the “oracular” beggar seems to point to is Faulkner's unacknowledged knowledge of the African American as cause of the First World War. In the beggar, Bayard's plantocratic scale of military and class values is reversed and emptied out. In such works as “The African roots of war” (1916) W.E.B. Du Bois argued that the reason for the First World War was the rivalry of European states in the late nineteenth-century over who would exploit the non-white peoples in the colonies. Moreover, in *Black reconstruction in America* ([1935](#)) Du Bois claimed that the colonial template of the “color-line” did not originate in Europe: this template was first conceived in the segregationist South after the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and then transferred to the imperialist countries of Europe. This transfer initiated the race for the colonies that would result in a war between the European powers.<sup>26</sup> Instead of the South importing modernity from outside, this was decidedly a case of the region exporting a racial modernity to Europe. The beggar is the shape of the black Atlantic in 1919.

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<sup>25</sup> Kermode's insight about the oraculism of modern texts corresponds to the curious conversation that Narcissa Benbow has with her brother Horace in *Flags in the dust*. Narcissa says that she prefers modern authors such as Michael Arlen to Shakespeare because modern authors keep secrets whereas Shakespeare tells all. Narcissa is attracted to Bayard because he is a man who has “secrets” (Faulkner [2006](#): 682).

<sup>26</sup> In *Black reconstruction in America* Du Bois, states that “Imperialism, the exploitation of colored labor throughout the world, thrives upon the approval of the United States, and the United States gives that approval because of the South. World war waits on and supports imperial aggression and international jealousy” ([1935](#): 706).

In the war story “Crevasse” (1931) Faulkner is less cryptic about the Du Bois thesis. The story concerns a party of British soldiers as they cross a Flanders war-scape. They inadvertently fall into an underground cavern and make out in the gloom the sitting corpses of Senegalese troops. The English lieutenant surmises that these are victims of the first use of gas in the war, which can be dated to an attack by Imperial Germany against French colonial troops at Ypres in April 1915.<sup>27</sup> But Faulkner tellingly changes the ethnic identity of these French colonial troops from the historical record, in which they are Algerian Berbers, and makes them Senegalese. The Senegalese have obviously a greater pertinence to Du Bois’ case that the “color-line” had a specifically southern origin and was exported to Europe from the South as a model for late nineteenth century imperialism. Faulkner surrounds this cavern with a dense iconography of burial, muteness, and still life. The cavern is broken into like a repressed historical memory; a capsule of the segregated South is literally buried in Flanders soil. By being transposed from the South to Flanders, the Virgilian virtue of the soil and its organic processes are poisoned: for the party of soldiers, grass in no man’s land grows like bayonet shafts and the tops of skulls appear through the soil as “whitish knobs” (Faulkner 1995: 469).

Faulkner’s final and most comprehensive attempt to articulate the historical meaning of the First World War is *A fable*. The novel opens the private kernel of experience of the veterans Bayard Sartoris, Darl Bundren and Donald Mahon by plotting out the war as a communal event. The novel concerns a failed mutiny in 1918 by a French corporal and his followers; the leaders are taken to Chaulnesmont and executed (under the direction of the general, whose secret identity is that of the corporal’s father) but their resistance inspires a British runner to lead a second mutiny, which is also put down. There is a post-war epilogue in which the corporal’s body accidentally ends up in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Paris. A sub-plot is set in the Mississippi basin where an African American preacher, Tobe Sutterfield, and a Cockney groom are guardians of a miraculous three-legged horse that wins all backcountry races (later they partake in the runner’s mutiny). The French and Mississippi plots are twinned by an identification of the corporal and the horse. The identity is at once theological, since both are examples of the resurrected life, and biological, since they constitute a species-citizenship of the planet.

At its 1954 publication few readers understood what Faulkner intended by this story of the corporal as a modern Christ. Most reviewers wrote the work off

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<sup>27</sup> See Peter Thompson, “The pale death: Poison gas and German racial exceptionalism, 1915–1945” (2021: 273–296). The first use of gas against colonial troops was not deliberately because they were specifically colonial, according to Thompson, but in the interwar period scientists such as Rudolf Hanslian did regard gas as an appropriate weapon for use by a so-called technological people against a colonial people (2021: 284).

as a clumsy religious allegory, not understanding Faulkner's use of allegorical symbols in the Benjaminian sense as jagged terms that require the reader to puzzle out them out in relation to contemporary history (Benjamin [1985](#): 166). The corporal's burial is not just a pietistic allegory of Christ's burial and resurrection; it is a political-theological symbol that needs to be charged with the reader's decision (with what Benjamin called "time filled by the presence of the now") so that the tomb of the Unknown Soldier can bring forth a resurrection of the communal body (Benjamin [1973](#): 263).

An exception to this early misunderstanding of the novel was Hannah Arendt, who sensed at once the novel's Weimar background (her university studies were in Weimar Germany). She said in a speech of 1959 that after thirty years a novel had finally appeared that had caught "the inner truth" of the First World War ([1968](#): 20). Arendt recognized that *A fable* was a fictionalization of one of her central insights from *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951): that the peace treaties after the First War had created a Europe of stateless peoples, those who, not coming under the protection of state law, lacked what Arendt called the "right to have rights" ([1958](#): 296). In a quintessentially Arendtian phrase, Faulkner calls the mutineers "rightless aliens on their own land" ([1994](#): 890). He also bizarrely makes the corporal and his associates come from a mountainous area in Central Europe, anomalous enough for French infantry but quite appropriate, after the Treaty of Trianon that split up Austro-Hungary, for the mutineers' identity of post-war statelessness. The crowd and their representative, the corporal, are examples what Faulkner calls "one vast tongueless brotherhood of dread and anxiety" ([1994](#): 669), an exposed humanity outside state definition.

The question of Faulkner's understanding of Weimar political theology is a delicate one. Many readers of *A fable* might say that positing an influence on Faulkner, who did not read German, from esoteric writers such as Carl Schmitt is an overstretch. While accepting that this is a good counter-argument, I think that we also need to pay attention to Faulkner's statement that he was the recipient of a "pollen of ideas" coming from Europe (Meriwether & Millgate [1968](#): 30).<sup>28</sup> A "pollen" moves along the indirect pathways of micro-influence and perhaps Faulkner apprehended these "ideas" not in theoretical terms but through a poetic materialism that extracted such universals as the communal flesh from recent historical predicaments. In any case Faulkner must have been quite familiar with the turbulent political state of postwar Germany because he reviewed Erich Maria Remarque's *The road back* in 1931, a novel about the return of veterans

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<sup>28</sup> Even if readers cannot accept that this "pollen" contained political-theological ideas from Weimar Germany, Wai Chee Dimock's observation is pertinent: "Likeness here is probabilistic and distributional; it has less to do with common ancestry than with a convergence of attributes, issuing from environments roughly similar but widely dispersed. What matters here is not lineage, but a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels" ([2006](#): 74).

to their defeated country, and he asserted that German war novels, with their message that “defeat is good”, were of extraordinary interest for “the whole contemporary world” (Faulkner 2004: 185–188).<sup>29</sup> “Ad astra”, another text of 1931, also shows that Faulkner was familiar with the turbulent state of post-war Germany and the strange conjunctions of politics and theology that arose from this state. In this story the German aristocrat-revolutionary, a prisoner of American pilots on Armistice Day, speaks with the voice of the German socialist revolutions of 1918–1920 when he outlines his hopes for a “new race” and a “new earth”, one that will be born from the “quick” times as from the womb (Faulkner 1995: 417). The German pilot makes exact use of a figure from Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* in which the whole earth groans in labour as it is replaced by the Messianic order. The pilot’s use of this Pauline figure coincides with a similar activation of it in Walter Benjamin’s “Theological-political fragment” (from the 1920s). For Benjamin the figure of giving birth applies to the coming of the *eschaton*: a pulling against one another of, on the one hand, the messianic fulfilment of time and, on the other, the movement of historical time in a secular direction (Taubes 2004: 70–74).<sup>30</sup> This political-theological language in “Ad astra” anticipates its more comprehensive use in *A fable*. Even the German’s friendship with the Indian subadar, both “turbaned like prophets in the Old Testament”, foreshadows the trans-oceanic, anti-colonial critique of this novel (Faulkner 1995: 423).

In *A fable* Faulkner’s mountain-top dialogue of the general and the corporal goes to the heart of the dispute over foundations in Weimar political theology, its shading of historical time into the non-serial or theological time of origins.<sup>31</sup> The general and the corporal become two “articulations”—the general standing for the “earth” or for state power and the corporal for “unfact”, the theological leap out of the hold of the ‘what is’ (Faulkner 1994: 988).<sup>32</sup> These two “articulations” set out the two alternative political theologies found in the Europe of 1918–1926; these are two rival foundational projects, the corporal’s being from the bottom up, the revolutionary or Benjaminian version, and the general’s from the top down, the counter-revolutionary or Schmittian version (the two versions had actual counterparts in, respectively, the Munich revolution of

<sup>29</sup> Faulkner also felt that Remarque’s stress on the post-war struggle for survival in the soldiers left out a “missing significance”, thereby leaving space for his more political-theological interpretations in “Ad Astra” and *A fable*.

<sup>30</sup> “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now”, says Paul (*Romans* 8: 22). As Jacob Taubes was the first to notice, Walter Benjamin made use of this Pauline figure in “Theological-political fragment” (2004: 70–74).

<sup>31</sup> The foundation is the point of the juncture mentioned by Claude Lefort in which the contractual aspect of the political polity opens into the surplus of community (2006: footnote 16).

<sup>32</sup> The corporal’s position is similar to that expressed in Paul’s 1 Corinthians 1: 28, which says that God has chosen “things which are not, to bring to nought things that are”.

1918–1919 and the Kapp Putsch of 1920). In the general, state and ecclesia are identified in a Trinitarian order: with the two Allied generals, he belongs to “a triumvirate consecrated and anointed” (Faulkner 1994: 887) that now includes industrial and financial complexes. All the corporal has to set against this order is what Benjamin called “weak Messianic power” (Benjamin 1973: 255), an idea which originates in Paul’s reference to Christ’s power as one that “fulfils itself in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12: 9).<sup>33</sup> But the corporal senses his father’s fear of this “weak ... power”, a fear that is intimated in the earthly temptations that the father offers his son. The corporal asks in response to his father’s bribes, “Are you that afraid of me?” (Faulkner 1994: 986).

The corporal’s weak Messianism simply uncouples power from the *nomos* of military or industrial institutions. Faulkner links the corporal’s ability to dissipate strong bonds to a similar quality in the Chaulnesmont crowd. In the opening chapter of *A fable*, the crowd in Chaulnesmont push back the soldiers sent to coerce them: the “passive and invincible humility” of the crowd is compared to water (flimsily held together, but unstoppable as collective force and capable of sweeping the soldiers back like “martial effigies” in a “flood”) (Faulkner 1994: 671).<sup>34</sup> This weak power of the crowd has an aural equivalent that forms a backdrop in the town of Chaulnesmont: a “mass voice of the ancient limitless mammalian capacity” for “grieving” (Faulkner 1994: 671, 874).<sup>35</sup> The word “mammalian” is carried across the Atlantic to the Mississippi plot where it becomes the extraordinary power of the horse, a fusion of biology and spirit. Indeed the watery crowd replicates the loose connectivity that Wai Chee Dimock in *Weak planet: Literature and assisted survival* (2020) calls the low-level, affiliative dimension of the transnational link itself and that she aligns with a quality that sociologist Mark Granovetter found in crowds: “the strength of weak ties” (Dimock 2020: 5). Dimock points out that Faulkner made unexpected leaps across continents in his Nagano seminar of 1955 when he compared the defeated South of 1865 to defeated Japan after 1945, both ready to learn the German’s lesson in “Ad Astra”: “Defeat will be good for us ... for art” (Dimock 2020: 156–158; Faulkner 1995: 413).

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin makes the claim in Thesis II, *Theses on the philosophy of history*. Agamben (2005: 98) is the first to observe that this claim of Benjamin’s refers to Paul, 2 *Corinthians* 12: 7–10, in which the Lord tells Paul that “my strength is made perfect in weakness”. In 1 *Corinthians* 7: 29–31, Paul says that in the “time that remains” believers should treat the things of the world “as not” (hos me).

<sup>34</sup> Faulkner writes that the crowd is “merely irresistible in the concord of its frail components like a wave in its drops” (1994: 670).

<sup>35</sup> Faulkner is remembering that in his early 1925 essay on war he said that war was unrepresentable in literature, like a sound outside the human range and hearable only by dogs. Now this “mammalian” sound becomes the realization of this unrepresentable voice, one that forms the oral or semiotic background to the book.

The runner is the Paul to the corporal's Jesus and he brings Paul's eschatological time to the novel.<sup>36</sup> An interminably loquacious speaker (his voice is described as "glib calm rapid desperate" (Faulkner 1994: 958), the runner creates a fluid narrative structure that throws its completion into the narrative future and, further than that, into the present time of the reader. After the second mutiny is crushed, the runner continues holding out the messianic promise until the general's funeral in 1926 and even beyond the end of the book. He disrupts the funeral and is beaten by the mob, but his final words are: "I'm not going to die. Never" (Faulkner 1994: 1072). Faulkner has found a way of incorporating into the narrative the Pauline "time that remains", the crisis-ridden shrinkage of time (1 Corinthians 7: 29). This Pauline phrase Giorgio Agamben elucidates through the concept of "operational time", the time it takes the reader to imagine time and which therefore perpetually postpones the narrative event of the actual ending of time (2005: 65–68).

The African American imagination represents a special case in the southern modernist fusion of literature and a political theology. The daughter of a preacher, Zora Neale Hurston had a distinctly theological way of looking at contemporary history: in the last twenty five years of her life, novels of the Biblical type such as *Moses, man of the mountain* (1939) and the unpublished *Herod*, which she believed had pressing relevance for the present, apparently meant more to her than the work now considered her masterpiece, the lyrical bildungsroman *Their eyes were watching God* (1937).<sup>37</sup> *Moses* compares the persecution of the Jews under the Third Reich with the African American experience of exile in America and both of these historical experiences with the Mosaic exile of the Hebrews in the desert.<sup>38</sup> Hurston makes her Moses an African (he is half-Egyptian) and she refers to the historic role of Moses in African-American religion as a political redeemer of an enslaved people. Both Jews and African Americans are peoples of exile, peoples of the desert (where much of Hurston's book is set). The whole agrarian sensibility of roots is denied them: their roots are planted upwards.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The runner gospelizes the corporal's near-silent resistance when he says that "even ruthless and all-powerful and unchallengeable Authority would be impotent before that massed unresisting undemanding passivity" of the troops (Faulkner 1994: 728).

<sup>37</sup> In *Jonah's gourd vine* (1934), for example, the narrator configures America's entry into the First World War as an entry into the end time: "the mudsills of the earth arose and skipped like the mountains of Jerusalem on The Day" (Hurston 1995b: 125).

<sup>38</sup> Hurston in the first chapter makes overt parallels between Hitler and the Pharaoh. The latter, for example, issues an edict that all boys born should be killed, thereby becoming the leader of a proto-eugenicist state modelled on the Nuremberg laws: "The Hebrew womb had fallen under the heel of Pharaoh" (Hurston 1995b: 341).

<sup>39</sup> "Roots planted upwards" is an expression of Jacob Taubes that appears in *Occidental eschatology* (18). "[C]olored folks is branches without roots" says the grandmother in *Their eyes were watching God* (Hurston 1995b: 187).

Hurston's Moses is an Enlightenment liberal in comparison to the patriarch of *Exodus*, who could be seen as the dispenser of a holy terror. Hurston's Moses, for example, "loved freedom and justice with a fierce love and he wanted Israel to be free and just" (Hurston 1995b: 578). This Enlightenment liberalism sounds like that of the Moses of Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-political treatise* (1670). Spinoza was Hurston's favourite philosopher and his treatise was her principle source in the novel (it was also one of the main texts of the Judaic political theology of Weimar Germany).<sup>40</sup> In Spinoza's interpretation of *Exodus* Moses becomes effectively the creator of the first liberal republic, one similar to the De Witts' government in Holland in the 1650s-1670s. For Spinoza, the miracles of *Exodus*, such as the parting of the Red Sea, are not supernatural events but rhetorical ways of saying that God or nature, over time, sanction these democratic forms of government. In particular, the anarchy of natural rights—which allow the Hebrews, as Hurston puts it, to be "free till they were foolish" (Hurston 1995b: 570)—must be replaced by a social contract (Spinoza 2007: 200).<sup>41</sup>

Hurston's Spinozan interpretation of Moses might imply that her portrait is of a plaster liberal saint. But Hurston's Moses is an ambivalent figure, whose authoritarian tendencies (such as his murder of his brother Aaron for priestcraft) bring him close to the dictators of the 1930s. The novel, as in Freud's *Moses and monotheism* (also 1939), also comes to stage an Oedipal dualism of leader and crowd, of law-imposing father and anarchic sons, that is suitable to the mass politics of the 1930s. A vengeful patriarch faces off against the amorphous crowd. Unlike Freud in his interpretation of Moses, Hurston's sympathies finally lie with this crowd, with the Hebrew masses. At the end of Hurston's novel Moses withdraws from the dualistic conflict and retreats to Mount Nebo, while the Hebrew crowd, described as a thick procession of bodies and sounds, pour over the Jordan to inherit the Promised Land without their leader. Hurston brings out an implicit thesis in Spinoza's political-theological treatise, which is that the people as a democratic monistic body are identifiable with

<sup>40</sup> In her autobiography, Hurston said that in her old age she would "re-read Spinoza with love and care" (1995a: 769). There are several cases of Spinoza's influence on Judaic political theologians from Weimar Germany. For example, Max Wiener in November 1932 claimed that the liberal argument of the *Theological-political treatise* had pressing contemporary relevance because of the threat to the Weimar Republic from the radical right. See David J. Wertheim, *Salvation through Spinoza: A study of Jewish culture in Weimar Germany* (2011: 97–98).

<sup>41</sup> As Hurston's Moses tells his successor Joshua: "You can't have a state of individuals ... A great state is a well-blended mesh of something of all of the people and all of none of the people" (1995b: 586). Graham Hammill explains the role of Moses in early modern works of political theory by noting that the "constituting power" that creates this contract must draw on the theological imagination to express "the overarching conceptions of justice, the conditions of social recognition and nonrecognition, that transcend political community and through which political community is achieved." (2012: 5)

the single monistic “substance” that underlies his ontology. This means that the fullest extent of democracy will be actualized in the future when the crowd brings to bear its full potentiality as substance (Negri [1991](#): 7–8, 195). The actualization fills up space to the borderless desert horizon with realized bodies. This is the people, in Spinoza’s distinction, as *natura naturans* (self-creating nature) rather than *natura naturata* (created nature), a moving border through space. In her letters Hurston imagined the Hebrews, up to the present day, as the immanent body in history and she saw the antisemitism of the 1930s as deriving from what was originally a Christian supernaturalistic fear of this *natura naturans*.<sup>42</sup>

In *Moses, man of the mountain* there is a move from man-made boundaries to natural boundaries, particularly to mountains (Moses’ revelation is on a mountain) and to the horizon as the natural edge of Spinozan democratic substance. Southern authors such as Hurston and Faulkner speculate with concepts such as the moveable border, nationless space, and the deep Biblical time of justice, concepts that coincide with imagining a specifically transatlantic South. Their spatial imagination offers a counter-example to the borders and “color-line[s]” of the Versailles map. One might compare this imagination to Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of violence”, an essay of 1920 written in response to the Versailles treaty. Benjamin argued that man-made borders are primordially associated with the violent act of institution of the law and that with these borders comes a legal guilt that is imputed to the stateless and to the poor. This is why radical authors such as Faulkner and Hurston directly address this “mythical” imposition of legal guilt as bare life and imagine its removal—by what Benjamin called the other type of justice, divine bloodless violence—in order to conceive of a completely traversable and borderless territory of Europe or, by extension, of the South and its “color-line” (Benjamin [1979](#): 151). The corporal’s mountain-top refusal of the general’s offer to sacrifice the mutineer Polchek in his stead is an example of withdrawal from mythical or sacrificial violence. The creation by Hurston’s Moses of a people in the empty desert can be seen as an example of the divine re-ordering of space.

In James Agee’s *Let us now praise famous men* (1941), a documentary study of three cotton tenant families in Alabama in the 1930s, the “globe” is frequently invoked as the determinative figure that surrounds these tenants.<sup>43</sup> Although Agee’s work seems to deal with the most indigenous type of the Depression South, the poor cotton tenant, it is a work that can be placed within Wai Chee

<sup>42</sup> In a letter to Carl Van Vechten of September 1945 Hurston refers to the Hebrews-in-history as “just people, fighting for all those things which other people hold sacred and conducing to the rights and dignity of man” (Hurston [2002](#): 530).

<sup>43</sup> Agee prefixes his study with an extract from a school text book that states “The world is our home ([2005](#): 14). See also 85-87 for Agee’s references to the “globe”, “earth” and “planet”.

Dimock's model of "planet as duration and extension" (Dimock 2006: 1). Agee's use of "extension" results in a sweeping geographical anti-nominalism: hence places in Alabama wear their names "lightly" (Agee 2005: 218) and the lives of the three families are scaled up so that the smallest actions in their daily lives become part of the home front against Fascism and particularly part of the larger front of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>44</sup> Agee's use of Dimock's 'duration' draws on evolutionary biology. He conceives of the tenants as cells, fetuses, germ plasma, organisms, a micro-citizenry of the planet that reaches back to "the extremist reach of time" (Agee 2005: 63).<sup>45</sup> His chapter "Colon", for example, describes the biography in the womb of the tenant fetus, dragging up through the "blind bottom of the human sea" the phylogenetic forms of evolutionary development (Agee 2005: 99–100). This language of biological embodiment in the tenants, which grounds their pain and pathos, seems to fit in with a conservative or tragic-agrarian politics. Agee can see the tenants as beyond "hope, possibility, cure" (2005: 103). A similar conservative conclusion might be inferred from Agee's theological language of "creature" and of crucifixion to describe the tenants' lives.

Perhaps there is one countervailing force that Agee sets against this biological burden. This is the quality of pure difference that August Weismann, the discoverer of the germ cell in 1892, located in reproductive cells as distinct from other body cells. In Agee's biologicistic imagination, this aleatory element carries over into the tenants' lives, particularly in their material culture and their architectural sensibility. Agee notes how the tenants' wooden houses have the classical minimalism and elegance of "Doric architecture" (Agee 2005: 135). But he also notes that this cleanness of line also includes and sublimates irregularities. He observes that there is a corner that is not vertical or a window frame that is not square. In other words, the architectural sensibility of the tenants is aware of "a symmetry sensitive to so many syncopations of chance" (Agee 2005: 203). This power of resistance to given conditions in the tenant families is a political resource that comes out of biological deep time. Agee felt that in "Colon" he could match this aleatory sensibility of the tenants with a modernist writing technique. He searched for a synchronic mode of expression

<sup>44</sup> For these tenants, Agee said in his notebook for the tenants' project, "not one peacetime breath is drawn that does not contain a dreadfulness to equal the whole of war. Until this be known obsessively by many and generally acted upon, the motions of history are of no particular importance" (Lofaro & Davis 2005: 194). The defence of the fetus against the assaults of recent global history, including World War One, has to start in the womb: the tenant fetus has "feet drawn tight as if he were receiving the blow of a bayonet in his solar plexus" (Agee 2005: 100). The tenants are planetary inhabitants rather than provincial cases.

<sup>45</sup> This section on Agee draws on my article, "Reclaiming southern pathology: James Agee and the biological thought of Georges Canguilhem" *Er(r)go. Theory-literature-culture* 46(1). 2023. 153–168.

that would bring the long incremental sentence of Faulkner to nonfiction and will gather up the life of the tenant “in one sentence and spread suspension.” This mode, Agee hoped, would be able to register the “syncopations of chance” in tenant lives (Agee [2005](#): 106).

In southern modernism, to conclude, the *longue durées* of theology and biology—weak messianism; the collective body as “mammalian” voice or *natura naturans*; the organism as the source of constructive error—bring to the fore a more transatlantic and planetary South than the solid South and its strong themes of plantation, the “backward glance” (Tate [1968](#): 545), and gothic deviance. These long durations belong within what has recently been called “weak modernism” by Paul Saint-Amour: a modernism that links up across a transatlantic space and attaches itself to lateral, low-order points of filiation. This southern modernism, I have tried to show, is a reaction to the map of the Versailles treaty and to its impositions on the earth’s surface of law, guilt, and sacrifice. In the central hill-top episode of Faulkner’s *A Fable* the general praises these very impositions and works them up into a vision of a future of permanent war and of a totalized systematicity of world-space. He also welcomes a consummation of the Anthropocene in which the “last red” sunset will sink over the two last fighting machines. He acclaims it all because this future will give “man” a chance to show that “he” can “prevail”, a nihilism dressed up as stoicism (Faulkner [1994](#): 994). It takes the corporal’s simple de-activating of the general’s power to re-conceive the earth and the South as a messianic and traversable whole.

When Flannery O’Connor’s Mrs Shortley dies, she “seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country” ([1988](#): 305). She has replaced her old “country” for a transcendent one. Her radical reassessment of fixed southern borders has been sparked off by a European political event, the arrival of the Displaced Person. This episode with Mrs Shortley could be taken as an analogue for the reshaping of southern literature as a global subject of study rather than a regional one. This reconfiguration has consequences for the criticism of the writers discussed in this article, the southern modernists. Southern modernism has, after all, formed the backbone of the older, more territorial way of thinking about southern literature. Works such as Tate’s “Ode to the Confederate Dead” or Faulkner’s Quentin section in *The Sound and the Fury* became canonical because they dramatize a crux at the heart of southernness as traditionally defined: a tension between an emerging modernity in the region and its plantocratic or mythical inheritance. However, if the category of southern modernism is re-contextualized and relativized within a one world system and within the larger processes of modernization of that system, then southern modernists express “the South” not as a peculiar curse but as a complex, differentiated region that is intermeshed with the “planet as extension and duration”.

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