

The Significance of the Past for Gail Hightower

--One Aspect of Light in August--

by

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With reference to the world of W. Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren makes a noteworthy remark: "The fact is that he writes of the two Souths: he reports one South and he creates another. On one hand he is a perfectly straight realistic writer, and on the other he is a symbolist."<sup>1)</sup> As a realistic writer, Faulkner examines the evils of the actually deteriorated conditions of the South, and transfers them to his fictions written on the basis of Yoknapatawpha County. In this characteristic world of his appear many topics and themes, which lead to the universal phases of the world despite the fact that the world of his fictions is founded on his own "little postage stamp of native soil."<sup>2)</sup> On the other hand, however, we cannot help recognizing in him the essence of a symbolist as well as a realistic writer as is pointed out by Penn Warren. As symbolist, Faulkner creates another South in his fictions, where he attempts to embody his 'truth,' which he seems to keep consciously in the background of his works. Yet, in spite of such an apparent technique as this, the fact that its presence strongly impresses us cannot be denied. What then is his 'truth'? The purpose of this paper is to bring it to light through the peculiar world of Gail Hightower in Light in August.

Some critics have so far pointed out that Faulkner has a strong consciousness of being a descendant of the defeated side

in the Civil War--the war by which the old order and values of the South had been completely destroyed and the Southerners had psychologically suffered an incurable wound. From this standpoint, he conceives a burning love for his native place, the South. So in his fictions he tries to search for the way it will be able to survive, although he has a keen insight into the evils and moral chaos of the South. That ardent love of his, we presume, can be traced in his reply at an interview:

Yes, we are country people and we have never had too much in material possessions because 60 or 70 years ago we were invaded and we were conquered. So we have been thrown back on our selves not only for entertainment but certain amount of defense. We have to be clannish just like the people in the Scottish highlands, each springing to defend his own blood whether it be right or wrong. Just a matter of custom and habit, we have to do it; . . . 3)

What Faulkner states here is a strong vindication of the fact that the Southern people have had to be clannish above reason, as a result of the Civil War. This feeling is expressed in his novels dealing with reputable families in the South: for example, Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!, and so on. About this, Irving Howe makes an illuminating comment: "Clan rather than class forms the basic social unit in Faulkner's world. Pride in family and reverence for ancestors are far more powerful motives in behavior than any involvement with class."<sup>4)</sup>

'Pride in family and reverence for ancestors' are what Quentin Compson stubbornly embraces in his mind, while detesting the South cursed and degenerated by its own slavery. And the 'pride in family and reverence for ancestors' are crookedly rooted in Hightower.

Hightower shows an abnormal interest in his ancestors, especially in his dead grandfather, the cavalryman. What is

the significance of the grasp of his grandfather instead of his father? And the following passage seems to answer this question to some extent:

He found no terror in the knowledge that his grandfather on the contrary had killed men 'by the hundreds' as he was told and believed, or in the fact that the negro Pomp had been trying to kill a man when he died. No horror here because they were just ghosts, never seen in the flesh, heroic, simple, warm; while the father which he knew and feared was a phantom which would never die. 'So it's no wonder,' he thinks, 'that I skipped a generation. It's no wonder that I had no father and that I had already died one night twenty years before I saw light. And that my only salvation must be to return to the place to die where my life had already ceased before it began.' 5)

From this passage we can understand the outline of the characteristic world of Hightower. The place where he desires to return for his salvation, needless to say, is Jefferson where his grandfather was killed. Here, in order to seize the meaning of his leaping a generation, and of his salvation, we have to trace his own story.

Hightower "grew to manhood among phantoms, and side by side with a ghost"(449): The phantoms were his father, his mother, and an old negro woman, and the ghost, his grandfather. His heart palpitated with excitement and pride to hear the legendary story of his heroic grandfather told by an old negro woman. Of his father, however, he had a loathful impression: "He was more than a stranger: he was an enemy. He smelled differently from them [Hightower and his mother] . He spoke with a different voice, almost in different words, as though he dwelled by ordinary among different surroundings and in a different world . . ." (450). His loathing does not merely come from his special circumstances like the fact that "when he was born his father was fifty years old, and his mother had been an invalid for almost

twenty years"(442), but has a different source. We can probably trace it to his father's history.

The reason why Hightower hates his father may be explained on the whole by the following passage about his father, an abolitionist:

That was where his disapproval of slavery lay, and of his lusty and sacrilegious father. The very fact that he could and did see no paradox in the fact that he took an active part in a partisan war and on the very side whose principles opposed his own, was proof enough that he was two separate and complete people, one of whom dwelled by serene rules in a world where reality did not exist.

But the other part of him, which lived in the actual world, did as well as any and better than most. He lived by his principles in peace, and when war came he carried them into war and lived by them there; . . . when there was the saving of wounded men under fire and the curing of them without proper tools, he did that too, again without other equipment save his strength and courage and what he could pick up as he went along. And when the war was lost and the other men returned home with their eyes stubbornly reverted toward what they refused to believe was dead, he looked forward and made what he could of defeat by making practical use of that which he had learned in it. (448-49)

Furthermore, Hightower's ill feelings against his father who had established himself as a doctor after the Civil War may be recognized in these sentences: "the son [his father] had taught himself a profession on the invader and devastator of his country"(448); his father "had been a minister without a church and a soldier without an enemy. . ."(449). Such ill feelings cause him to have not only a strong fear of but an antipathy to his father the more because he knows too well that his father is strong enough to match the moment and compass all difficulties, and that he also has to do like his father, but

he cannot. For him, to live in the pursuit of the illusion of his dead grandfather is the only prop with which to confront the hard situation of the actual world. So he fervently tries to hold that illusion in the center of his mind. Such a tendency seems to have been fostered from his childhood: in that period he felt pride in his grandfather's brave deeds, saying, "'Tell again about grandpa. How many Yankees did he kill?'" (445); moreover, he experienced "horrified triumph and sick joy" at the cloth with the blue patches of the United States, wondering "if his father had killed the man from whose blue coat the patch came"(445). Thus, the heroic figure of his grandfather possesses his whole heart now that the values and virtues of the old times had been blasted and he has no will and strength to revive them. His escape into the past, however, leads straight to his insensitiveness to the actual world. Here exists a danger of his becoming lifeless in it--that is, becoming one of "the stubborn back-looking ghosts"<sup>6)</sup> with which the 'barracks' of Quentin Compson are filled.

In order to achieve his salvation, to wit, 'to return to the place where his life had already ceased before it began,' Hightower is to commit two grave faults, as is said by the author himself: "He had failed his wife. . . . and he failed his Christian oath as a man of God . . ."7) He takes advantage of the marriage with his wife to be called to Jefferson as a minister. Such an intention of his may easily be guessed from his idea of marriage: "to him it [marriage] was not men and women in sanctified and living physical intimacy, but a dead state carried over into and existing still among the living like two shadows chained together with the shadow of a chain" (454). Therefore, it may not be too much to say that in their

married life she is a mere abstraction for him, and that her death is brought about by his selfishness. The other fault is also ascribed to his self-centered aim. He knows well that "that which is destroying the Church is not the outward groping of those within it nor the inward groping of those without, but the professionals who control it and who have removed the bells from its steeples"(461). Nevertheless, he dares to be a clergyman so that he may accomplish his own purpose of being sent to Jefferson. As to this, he recollects later: "I acquiesced. Nay, I did worse: I served it. I served it by using it to forward my own desire"(461).

We understand from the above argument that Hightower's intention to come to Jefferson as a minister is not to serve as a man of God, but to fulfill his own dream. Accordingly, that intention of his directly finds expression in his daily talking or in his abnormally queer sermons:

As if he did not care about the people, the living people, about whether they wanted him here or not. And he being young too, and the old men and the old women trying to talk down his gleeful excitement with serious matters of the church and its responsibilities and his own. And they told Byron how the young minister was still excited even after six months, still talking about the Civil War and his grandfather, a cavalryman, who was killed, and about General Grant's stores burning in Jefferson until it did not make sense at all. They told Byron how he seemed to talk that way in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream. Not a nightmare, but something which went faster than the words in the Book; a sort of cyclone that did not even need to touch the actual earth. And the old men and women did not like that, either. (56)

As we see from the passage quoted above, his preaching is nothing else but sacrilege. It is no wonder that to the people

of Jefferson "he sounded like it was the town he desired to live in and not the church and the people who composed the church, that he wanted to serve"(56). He altogether mixes up religion and the galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather not only in the pulpit but in his private life. Attacked and rejected by the townspeople, and at the same time feeling presumably a guilty conscience over his wife's shameful death, he reluctantly resigns his church at last, but obstinately refuses to leave the town in spite of all pressures upon him. Finally the people decide to let him alone "as though the town realised at last that he would be a part of its life until he died, and that they might as well become reconciled"(67).

What makes Hightower stick so tenaciously to Jefferson? As is already suggested, it is because he wishes to keep on cherishing the memory of his dead grandfather which for him is the only truth, in other words, the only prop that helps him endure in real life. He keenly realizes the change time has brought--the change with which the old values, as well as the possibility of any heroic action, are gone. Moreover, he has a full understanding of the true situation in which his hallucinated world, filled with the heroes like the cavalryman grandfather, has no sense at all. Despite it, nay, because of it, he tries to protect his own world against the varied invaders and pressures from the outer world. Therefore, he completely confines himself in his house, a sanctuary from social connections, with the single exception of Byron Bunch., Thus begins "his dead life in the actual world"(346). Byron makes a cogent comment: "A man will talk about how he'd like to escape from living folks. But it's the dead folks that do him the damage.

It's the ones that lay quiet in one place and dont try to hold him, that he cant escape from" (69).

However, Hightower is to be involved in two events which force him to come into contact with the outer world: One event is the confinement of Lena Grove, and the other is the murder of Joanna Burden by Joe Christmas. After Lena's childbirth, he says to himself as if he came to the recognition of the significance of life: "More of them. Many more. That will be her life, her destiny. The good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth; from these hearty loins without hurry or haste descending mother and daughter. But by Byron engendered next"(384). But this praise for life does not lead him to come back to the actual world. For he resolutely refuses Byron's request to prove an alibi of Christmas by saying, "'I wont! I wont! I have bought immunity. I have paid. I have paid'"(292). He has secured immunity against the hard situations around him so as to live in peace. So we think it is unbearable for him to be drawn back into the external world, because returning to the actual world may break his peaceful world. When Christmas has come into his house, followed by Percy Grimm, a Southern patriotic youth, however, Hightower cannot help but cry to the men: "'Listen to me. He [Christmas] was here that night. He was with me the night of the murder. I swear to God--'"(439). In spite of his will to rescue him, Christmas is finally killed by Grimm. But that is all he can do for Christmas, because he desires to avoid the disintegration of his private world. After these events, he again goes back to his illusory world.

Returning to his own world, however, Hightower is driven to feel a great remorse for his past faults. As to his wife,



he suffers the qualms of conscience, thinking himself to have been "her seducer and her murderer, author and instrument of her shame and death"(462). His guilty conscience also brings him to think of himself as a disqualified minister:

He seems to watch himself among faces, always among, enclosed and surrounded by, faces, as though he watched himself in his own pulpit, from the rear of the church, or as though he were a fish in a bowl. And more than that: the faces seem to be mirrors in which he watches himself. He knows them all; he can read his doings in them. He seems to see reflected in them a figure antic as a showman, a little wild: a charlatan preaching worse than heresy, in utter disregard of that whose very stage he preempted, offering instead of the crucified shape of pity and love, a swaggering and unchastened bravo killed with a shotgun in a peaceful henhouse, in a temporary hiatus of his own avocation of killing. (462)

In the above citation, he calls to his mind not only his sacrilegious figure in the pulpit but a comic, barbarous one of his grandfather on the battle-field. It is as if he is about to deny and abandon the odd dream of his cavalryman grandfather. His characteristic world seems on the verge of collapse. But in the passages following the above quotation, he tries to justify himself for his past conduct: "Perhaps I accepted more than I could perform. But is that criminal? Shall I be punished for that? Shall I be held responsible for that which was beyond my power?"(463) Upon him, however, the Face (probably meaning God) renders a critical judgment: "'It was not to accomplish that that you accepted her [ his wife ]. You took her as a means toward your own selfishness. As an instrument to be called to Jefferson; not for My ends, but for your own'" (463).

Thereby, his thinking begins to waver between a bitter remorse for his past deeds and a frantic self-justification for

them. He says to himself: "' . . . I have bought my ghost, even though I did pay for it with my life. And who can forbid me doing that? It is any man's privilege to destroy himself, so long as he does not injure anyone else, so long as he lives to and of himself--'"(464). Immediately after this passage, he is seized with the thought that he might have been "instrument of her despair and shame"(464). And finally he cannot choose but utter a hysterical cry in his mind: "I dont want to think this. I must not think this. I dare not think this"(464). This inner voice, reminding us of the cry of Quentin at the last scene of Absalom, Absalom!, indisputably shows that the peace of his mind is sorely disturbed since his world stands on the verge of being destroyed. And then he comes to a bitter recognition that he has "been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed"(465), and yet he no more desires to have a connection with the outer world, but remains steadfast to his dream. He does not try to pray, although he thinks that he "'should try to pray'"(466). The only thing that he can do now is to live with firm faith in his own truth, that is, the dream of his dead grandfather. Thus again, he begins to indulge himself in the hallucinated dream of the past:

He hears above his heart the thunder increase, myriad and drumming. Like a long sighing of wind in trees it begins, then they sweep into sight, borne now upon a cloud of phantom dust. They rush past, forwardleaning in the saddles, with brandished arms, beneath whipping ribbons from slanted and eager lances; with tumult and soundless yelling they sweep past like a tide whose crest is jagged with the wild heads of horses and the brandished arms of men like the crater of the world in explosion. They rush past, are gone; the dust swirls skyward sucking, fades away into the night which has fully come. . . . it seems to him that he still hears them: the wild bugles and the clashing sabres and the dying thunder of hooves. (466-67)

As is already mentioned, the aim of this paper is to consider the nature of the author's truth through the world of Hightower. Now that we have traced his story, we have to find the key with which to get a peep of the world of the author himself. Probably his Nobel Prize speech gives us the key:

I decline to accept the end of man. . . . I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. 8)

In this speech, he firmly negates the end of man and glorifies human endurance. We can find a similar remark by the author: "That without those verities [courage, honor, pride, compassion, and pity] he [man] would have vanished, just like the mastodon and the other ephemeral phenomena of nature have come and gone in the history of the world. Man has endured despite his frailty because he accepts and believes in those verities."<sup>9)</sup> Faulkner, as a realistic writer, knows full well that the old order and values had completely disappeared from the modern world. Yet, as symbolist, he means to revive in the mythic form the old order, namely, the old South in his works. So his picture of the traditional order has a symbolic function in contrast to the modern world described in his novels. From this comes his tendency to glorify the spirit of endurance. For to endure is the only possible way of life for those who cannot adapt themselves to the modern world, in which the

traditional order and values are gone, and with them, the verities of human heart--courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of the past.

These verities are those which we could easily find in the hearts of heroes such as the cavalryman grandfather of Hightower. They are the glory of his past. So the memory of the glorious figure of his grandfather is the pillar to help him endure all the more because he is aware of the true situation. O.W. Vickery makes a germane remark on this: "Eventually the legends of the past become the only truth and the only reality for Hightower, rendering his connection with the public world precarious at best."<sup>10)</sup> To live in the pursuit of the delusion of his dead grandfather is indeed the only reality for Hightower even if it is a sheer anachronistic deed. He is no doubt enduring although he has withdrawn from life to a form of death. Here we feel the need to listen to Faulkner's comment upon Hightower in order to know the distance between them, that is, the view the author takes of him:

He had wrecked his life. He had failed his wife. He had failed himself, but there was one thing that he still had--which was the brave grandfather that galloped into the town to burn the Yankee stores, and at least he had that. Everything else was gone, but since he had been a man of God he still tried to be a man of God and he could not destroy himself. But he had destroyed himself but he still couldn't take his own life. He had to endure, to live, but that was one thing that was pure and fine that he had--was the memory of his grandfather, who had been brave. 11)

In this remark we might feel that Faulkner wavers between criticizing and sympathetically understanding Hightower. Further, his comment enables us to get a glimpse of the essence of the

author as symbolist; for with due knowledge of the defects of Hightower, the author applauds his grandfather the memory of whom is the core of his life. This attitude of the author is pointed out by Irving Howe: "Faulkner's failure is more complex: he does 'detect' Hightower's weakness and delusion, but tries to endow them with a tragic grandeur they cannot possibly sustain. Between Faulkner and Hightower, as between Faulkner and most of his reflective figures, there is insufficient distance."<sup>12)</sup> We may indeed consent to most of his interpretation, but I cannot give straight assent to the words of 'Faulkner's failure.' For Faulkner seems to try to create the mythic world, as well as the realistic world of the South by writing the Yoknapatawpha Saga. And Hightower's apparently peculiar world is of the same quality as the mythic world created by the author--the world which is 'another South' as Penn Warren calls it in his essay.<sup>13)</sup>

Quentin Compson, who is one of the author's 'reflective figures,' is also the alter ego, like Hightower, of the author. In Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin makes efforts to seize the essential quality of the Southern myth, to wit, what Sutpen symbolizes for him. He does, however, unconsciously disclose the quality of a Southern youth, for eventually he comes to be possessed by the figure of Sutpen: According to the author's comment, Quentin "grieved and regretted the passing of an order the dispossessor of which he was not tough enough to withstand. But more he grieved the fact . . . that a man like Sutpen, who to Quentin was trash, originless, could not only have dreamed so high but have had the force and strength to have failed so grandly."<sup>14)</sup> Hightower also must be keenly aware of 'the passing of an order,' but he is still enduring, unlike Quentin

who committed suicide if we may consider him the same Quentin in The Sound and the Fury. Hightower knows well that he cannot rationalize the memory of his virile grandfather in the actual world, so he wishes to exalt the past and find a sanctuary there which leads him to the mythic world of the author. The memory of the past is the truth not only for Hightower but for the author, who says in an interview: "... to me, ~~no man is~~ himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is."<sup>15</sup>) For this concept of the presentness of the past is the kernel of the author's mythic world--'another South' which the symbolist Faulkner created in the Yoknapatawpha Saga. Hightower is one of the figures who sustain that characteristic world of the author.

Notes:

- 1) Robert Penn Warren, Selected Essays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 59
- 2) James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (eds.) Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner (1926-1962) (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 255.
- 3) Ibid., p. 191.
- 4) Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 8.
- 5) William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 452. This edition is used for all quotations from the novel.
- 6) Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), p. 12.
- 7) Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (eds.), Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958 (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 45.
- 8) Robert A. Jelliffe (ed.), Faulkner at Nagano (Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1956), p. 205-206.
- 9) Gwynn and Blotner, p. 133.
- 10) Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation, rev. ed. (Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 77.
- 11) Gwynn and Blotner, p. 75.
- 12) Howe, p. 208.
- 13) Penn Warren, p. 59.
- 14) Malcolm Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962 (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 15.
- 15) Gwynn and Blotner, p. 84.