LAND AND WATER IMAGERY IN FAULKNER'S "OLD MAN"

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People or objects in Faulkner's "Old Man' are frequently portrayed as being held in suspension between earth and sky. This is true also in other of Faulkner's writings. Lena Grove in Light in August watches an approaching wagon which seems to "hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever" (7).[1] In Absalom, Absalom! Sutpen and his horse appear to the people of Jefferson "as though they have been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer Sabbath sunshine in the middle of a tired foxtrot" (32). The narrator of "Ad Astra" thinks of himself and his companions as "bugs in the surface of the water. Not on the surface, in it, . . . not air and not water" (466). "We were outside of time; within, not on, that surface" (482). The Texas ponies of "Spotted Horses" "huddled in camouflage, or simply on in pairs rushed, fluid, phantom, and unceasing, to huddle again in mirage-like clumps" (373). "Old Man" has at least eighteen references to suspension in air or mirage. A figure used so frequently must have some further significance than that objects suspended above water in mirage-like fashion give a literally accurate description of the appearance of a flood. A closer look at these references will give us a hypothesis to explain Faulkner's intent with this figure. All the insecurity the flood can mean to the tall convict of the story is embodied in his sense of suspension between air and water; all the security he can find is in his infrequent encounter with ground, and mud, and trees.

When the flooding of the river reaches the prison farm, the convicts are driven up the railroad ramp. They look across the tracks where the "other half of the amputated town seemed to float . . . ordered and pageant-like and without motion, upon the limitless liquid plain" (553). They pass a plantation house "Juxtaposed to nowhere and neighbored by nothing, . . . rigidly fleeing its reflection, burning in the dusk above the watery desolation with a quality paradoxical, outrageous and bizarre" (555-556). The lights of a distant city are "a faint wavering row of red pin-pricks . . . apparently hanging low in the sky" (556). The tall convict who is the focal character of the story is caught in the floating debris "above which the skiff seemed to hover in weightless and airy indecision like a bird above a fleeing countryside" (576). He sees

on the levees "entire towns, stores, residences, parks and farmyards, which leaped and played about him like fish" (580). He tries to keep ahead of a huge pursuing wave "until after a while it no longer seemed to him that he was trying to put space and distance behind him or shorten space and distance ahead but that both he and the wave were now hanging suspended simultaneous and unprogressing in pure time" (588). The towns he passes as he flees on are "apparently attached to nothing upon the airy and unchanging horizon" (592).

Later in the story as the tall convict and the woman he has rescued leave the island where the baby has been born, they see the island "fade slowly into the mist which seemed to enclose the skiff in weightless and impalpable wool like a precious bauble or jewel" (599). Again, as the steamboat on which they traveled puffs off into the distance, the ship grows ever smaller until it seems to "hang stationary in the airy substanceless sunset" (612). The man's own feeling of suspension is revealed when he, like the narrator of "Ad Astra," realizes that he "would ever be no more than the water bug upon the surface of the pond, the plumbing and lurking depths of which he would never know" (626). When he narrates the story to his fellow prisoners, his words recreate his own sensations as they "seemed to reach his listeners as though from behind a sheet of slightly milky though still transparent glass, as something not heard but seen--a series of shadows, edgeless yet distinct, and smoothly flowing, logical and unfrantic, and making no sound" (592).

This sense of suspension is in each instance produced by the flood waters. The convict's reaction to the ground he encounters is quite different. Early in his journey he watches, almost enviously, the trees rushing past. "They were fixed and secure in something; . . . He remembered in an instant of despairing rage the firm earth fixed and founded strong and cemented fast and stable forever by the generations of laborious sweat, somewhere beneath them" (565). As he rests, exhausted, on the Indian mound, he feels secure, for "It was mud he lay upon, but it was solid underneath, it was earth, it did not move; if you fell upon it you broke your bones against its incontrovertible passivity sometimes, but it did not accept you substanceless and enveloping and suffocating . . . it did not snatch you violently out of all familiar knowing and sweep you . . . for days against any returning" (597).

It seems clear that to Faulkner's tall convict, who is Everyman in his encounter with the unexpected exigencies of life, his frightening and bewildering encounter with a flood such as he has never before experienced creates this sense of unreality, of suspension

in time and space, even in the physical objects about him. He is a simple man--as all men against problems and decisions too big for them are simple men. If he had known them, he might have quoted Housman's words, "I, a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made." He is used to a certain setting, a predictable routine. The river, though it has long been just across the levee from the fields he has plowed, is unfamiliar and certainly unpredictable. Its rampaging destroys his sense of security. Things no longer seem in perspective. The horizon, before so steady, blurs before his vision. He endures, as Faulkner's simple folk often do, but only his contact with the ground--the thing he is accustomed to, which he knows by experience and habit--gives him assurance while he battles the river. All else hangs uncertain, insecure, suspended, out of its proper relationships of time and space, until he, surely almost happily, returns to the prison, where he can depend on horizons behaving themselves.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The quotations from Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! are from the Modern Library editions. All other quotations are from the Viking Portable Library edition.