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Economies of Loss in Faulkner’s Fiction

Grief, like few things else, is a private affair.
(William Styron, “As He Lay Dead, a Bitter Grief”)

The short story “Beyond” illustrates the way Faulkner represents unresolved grief not as a melancholic disorder but as a condition of subjectivity that has positive, even ethical, significance. Written around 1930, the story raises the alluring attraction of the afterlife, a transcendental realm where an unnamed judge might be reunited with his only child, a boy who fell to his death from a pony 18 years earlier. But the old judge, who dies at the narrative’s opening and posthumously narrates the tale, maintains his stance as a supreme rationalist; he refuses to believe that his son lives on in heaven. In rejecting the idea of religious immortality, the judge does not resign himself to existential nothingness.¹ Rather, he regards the finality of death and persistence of grief as a uniquely meaningful experience. Given the absence of any certainty about the rebirth of the dead in God, he affirms nearly two decades spent in mourning, insisting that sustained grief expresses his enduring connection to his lost son:

You see, if I could believe that I shall see and touch him again, I shall not have lost him. And if I have not lost him, I shall never have had a son. Because I am I through bereavement and because of it. I do not know what I was nor what I shall be. But because of death, I know that I am. And that is all of immortality of which intellect is capable and flesh should desire. Anything else is for

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peasants, clods, who could never have loved a son well enough to have lost him.²

The judge offers ongoing grief as a gift to his son, a testament of love that persists beyond the grave. But grieving in Faulkner’s story reflects more than a loving homage to the dead; it entails a creative mode of living, a means of honoring the dead by attending to one’s own mortality. When the judge founds his “I” in an experience of loss, he refuses to endorse a staunchly singular conception of the ego. Rather, he gives voice to an understanding of identity that is intersubjective and indebted to loss for its very constitution. Consequently, the judge recognizes the presence of otherness in the self, an intimation of his own mortality that has been made painfully clear in the wake of a beloved son’s passing. His address to the reader in a posthumous voice clarifies that acknowledging his son’s irreducible uniqueness, as well as his own mortal contingency, has led to a performance of mourning understood as ongoing and unfinishable.

As the example of “Beyond” clarifies, Faulkner represents mourning not as a communal ritual bent on resolving grief but as a private experience that manages to sustain attachments to loss. However, while “Beyond” might be said to focus on the bereaved psyche at the expense of the social order, two of Faulkner’s novels, As I Lay Dying and Requiem for a Nun, demonstrate how a world outside the self informs even the most seemingly private structures of bereaved feeling. Both novels challenge the view of grief as a wholly private affair.³ Given that Faulkner’s work dismantles the opposition between the inside and outside, the psyche and social, it is ironic, indeed, that his own death prompted William Styron, who covered Faulkner’s funeral for Life Magazine, to express one of the most persistent modern assumptions about mourning; Styron defines grief, as suggested in my epigraph, as a paradigmatic instance of private experience.⁴ In contrast, Faulkner’s work offers an extended consideration of the public determinants of loss. His texts define consciousness, even one in mourning, as an embodiment of external norms. Faulkner’s writing, as I discuss in what follows, demonstrates how a certain interiorization of loss might be brought into social discourse to challenge dominant currents, particularly the increasing commercialization of modern life, within the culture of modernity.