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Postface Faulkner

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V - Postface

Faulkner

Ron Rash

Perhaps there are photos of William Faulkner smiling, but as I write this I cannot remember any if there are, but on those late nights as he wrote *As I Lay Dying* in a boiler room at the University of Mississippi, he must have smiled often and not just at the novel's darkly comic moments. I believe he would have smiled because he was writing on a level—and I know of no way to say this otherwise—seemingly outside the boundaries of his own abilities. I suspect the same feeling came to Melville while he wrote *Moby Dick*, to Twain as he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, and to Fitzgerald as he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. What makes Faulkner my country's greatest novelist is that it happened two more times with *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom*.

I recently reread *As I Lay Dying*, and what I realized more than in earlier readings (at least six) was how much of the Bundrens' journey is Faulkner's journey as well, not as a mourner but as a cartographer. *Flags in the Dust* and *The Sound and the Fury* gave Faulkner an increasing sense of the setting of almost all his future work; Jefferson, the county seat, is vividly depicted, but *As I Lay Dying* achieves something more. Significantly, this is the first work in which Faulkner gives his mythical county its name, and the novel's slow, wayward movement northwest to Jefferson allows a day by day rendering of a huge swathe of the county. With each page he wrote, each river and hill and farmhouse the Bundrens pass, Faulkner is meticulously charting the county map that would be published seven years later in the appendix of *Absalom, Absalom*. He is realizing Yoknapatawpha's vastness—large enough to encompass a whole lifetime of writing.

Those nights at the university, the furnace stoked, the town asleep, with his pencil in hand, paper laid on his wheelbarrow desk, he looked up, maybe to check the fire, maybe to loosen his neck or back, and he smiled. Yes, and as we say in the South, I'd bet the farm on it.

