

Taylor Hagood
Florida Atlantic University

“They Aint Human Like Us”:

Compromised Bodies and Spatiality in *Pylon*

The fact that William Faulkner uses T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as a primary source for structuring his novel *Pylon* alone points to the importance of the body in the text. Besides the fact that the drunken reporter might well be a type of patient etherized upon a table, the novel’s focus on bodies, especially those marked in ways considered “abnormal,” is relentless. This focus results from the novel’s extended and fraught relationship with space and place, for in *Pylon* Faulkner offers one of his more radical redefinitions of space whether it be his problematic recreation of New Orleans as New Valois, the strangely placed nonplacedness of Hollywood films, or the “dead wirehum [. . .] into cold space” (825) of the telephone. In this novel, which as Peter Lurie has recently argued so depends on forms of vision, Faulkner attempts to come to grips with the ways that perspective as dictated by and constitutive of constructs of space redefines and ultimately compromises human bodies.

Yi-Fu Tuan’s discussion of the experiential nature of space and place provides particularly fecund ground for considering spatiality in *Pylon*. He writes that “[h]uman spaces reflect the quality of the human sense and mentality. The mind frequently extrapolates beyond sensory evidence” (16), and he goes on to explain that in

the Western world systems of geometry—that is, highly abstract spaces—
have been created out of primal spatial experiences. Human beings not

only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images, and thoughts in tangible material. The result is sculptural and architectural space, and on a large scale, the planned city. Progress here is from inchoate feelings for space and fleeting discernments of it in nature to their public and material reification. (17)

Asserting that place is an object, Tuan further asserts that “[b]iology conditions our perceptual world” and exploring the development of perception during the progression of childhood, he notes that when an infant begins to become mobile, moving “the body along a more or less straight line is essential to the experiential construction of space into the basic coordinates of ahead, behind, and sideways” (20). The particular physiological capabilities of a given moment of development determine the spatial constructs of that moment, so that because “the first few weeks of life the infant’s eyes cannot focus properly” only so much surrounding space can be negotiated (20). Tuan introduces a Marxist slant to his discussion, observing that while a “child’s biological equipment” limits its constructionist abilities, the “inability, for most people, to recapture the mood of their own childhood world suggests how far the adult’s schemata, geared primarily to life’s practical demands, differ from those of a child” (19-20). In fact, the adult’s market-driven perspective dictates his or her experiences of space, as Tuan points out that “the human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance” and that spatial “prepositions are necessarily anthropocentric, whether they are nouns derived from parts of the human body or not” (44-45); in this regard, he offers the observation that a book is *on* a desk

because [that preposition] immediately helps us to locate the book by directing our attention to the large desk. It is hard to imagine a real-life circumstance in which the [statement] “the desk is *under* the book” is appropriate. We say an object is on, in, above, or under another object in reply to practical and even pressing concerns. (45)

Rosemarie Garland Thomson further explores the material hegemonic drive of experience by focusing on distinctions between normate and aberrant bodies. She challenges “entrenched assumptions that ‘able-bodiedness’ and its conceptual opposite, ‘disability,’ are self-evident physical conditions” working instead to “defamiliarize these identity categories by disclosing how the ‘physically disabled’ are produced by way of legal, medical, political, cultural, and literary narratives that comprise an exclusionary discourse” (6). Thomson focuses on constructed space and disability, offering comments similar to Tuan’s when she discusses the fact that disability is defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as “having an impairment” and observes that such a definition depends

on comparing individual bodies with unstated but determining norms, a hypothetical set of guidelines for corporeal form and function arising from cultural expectations about how human beings should look and act. Although these expectations are partly founded on physiological facts about typical humans [. . .] their sociopolitical meanings and consequences are entirely culturally determined. Stairs, for example, create a functional “impairment” for wheelchair users that ramps do not. Printed information accommodates the sighted but “limits” blind persons. Deafness is not a

disabling condition in a community that communicates by signing as well as speaking. People who cannot lift three hundred pounds are “able-bodied,” whereas those who cannot lift fifty pounds are “disabled.” Moreover, such culturally generated and perpetuated standards as “beauty,” “independence,” “fitness,” “competence,” and “normalcy” exclude and disable many human bodies while validating and affirming others. [. . .] Thus, the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degrees of disability or able-bodiedness, of extra-ordinariness or ordinariness. (6-7)

Space, place, and what Thomson calls “extraordinary bodies” are fundamental components of Faulkner’s *Pylon*. In its exploration of space, constructed or otherwise, the novel considers the ways that bodies are compromised within topographical and architectural incarnations of larger discourses of labor and mobility. To help draw large lines in such an exploration, it is perhaps most useful to remember the two primary spaces of the novel: land and air. These two tend to embody the difference that Tuan and others draw between place and space, with place being the particular and defined and space the open and undefined (although, as Tuan and others note, these two configurations tend to overlap). The land in the novel is made of up of numerous distinct places, most notably New Valois, itself, the city overlaid on the model of New Orleans. Certain characters never leave the ground, and two of these are striking for possessing perhaps the most aberrant bodies in the book. The first is the mechanic Jiggs, who is definitely extraordinary, being a “short thick musclebound body like the photographs of

the one who two years before was lightmiddleweight champion of the army or Marine Corps or navy” and he wears “cheap britches overcut to begin with and now skintight like both they and their wearer had been recently and hopelessly rained on and enclosing a pair of short stocky thick fast legs like a polo pony’s, which descended into the tops of a pair of boots footless now and secured by two rivetted straps beneath the insteps of [. . .] tennis shoes” (780). He walks with a “fast stiff hard gait like a mechanical toy that has but one speed” (782). Jiggs is thus a man-pony, as he is called—a centaur.

No less extraordinary is the body of the reporter, whom Jiggs encounters early in the novel. Faulkner writes that the reporter is

a creature which, erect, would be better than six feet tall and which would weigh about ninetyfive pounds, in a suit of no age nor color [. . .] which ballooned light and impedimentless about a skeleton frame as though suit and wearer both hung from a flapping clothesline;—a creature with the leashed, eager loosejointed air of a halfgrown highbred setter puppy [. . .].
(788)

Faulkner repeatedly describes the reporter as looking like a “scarecrow” and having a “cadaver face,” noting at one point that he “collapsed upon the chair with a loose dry scarecrowlike clatter as though of his own skeleton and the wooden chair’s in contact” (803), as though he were an insect-man, with an exoskeleton. Jiggs the man-pony and the reporter the insect-man (or bat-man, as he is also described) are hybrids, representing both Self and Other, and thus falling into the category of what Thomson along with Leslie Fiedler and others identify as “freaks.” Indeed, Fiedler observes that the freak “stirs both supernatural terror and natural sympathy, since, unlike the fabulous monsters,

he is one of us, the human child of human parents, however altered by forces we do not quite understand into something mythic and mysterious” (24).

Fiedler’s noting that a freak is “one of us” is striking not only because the statement consciously echoes Tod Browning’s 1933 film *Freaks* but more importantly because Faulkner actually has one of these “freaks” in *Pylon* use similar language in his Othering of a group of characters whose bodies are not visibly marked as Other at all. It is unknown (and probably unlikely, despite his having been in Hollywood at the time) that Faulkner saw Browning’s film, but when the reporter describes the flyers to the editor, his language eerily recalls the film’s line “dibble-dabble one of us.” The reporter actually casts these flyers as monsters and thus even further removed than freaks, when he tells the editor, Hagood,

they aint human like us; they couldn’t turn those pylons like they do if they had human blood and senses and they wouldn’t want to or dare to if they just had human brains. Burn them like this one tonight and they don’t even holler in the fire; crash one and it aint even blood when you haul him out: it’s cylinder oil the same as in the crankcase. (804)

Later, he thinks aloud to himself regarding the child Jack, saying “Yair; cut him and it’s cylinder oil; dissect him and it aint bones: it’s little rockerarms and connecting rods” (933-34). As denizens from beyond the Earth, these characters seem to be in the reporter’s eyes almost space aliens, and his comments resonate in light of Jeffrey A. Weinstock’s observation that “[a]lthough never ‘human,’ the extraterrestrial can fall anywhere on the continuum between human and monster” and that when the “freak show” vanished in the 1930s it gave way by the 1940s to the “Golden Age of Science

Fiction” in which “freaks” were repackaged as aliens who “fall somewhere between monster and human: into the freak zone” (328).

Thus, the reporter as freak seeks to Other the flyers as monsters, or at least aliens—either way, they are farther away from the normate than he, despite the fact that he seems to fit the bill for freak more than those he seems to label as such; what is important to note, however, is that it is not the reporter’s idea of these people’s anatomy alone that leads him to cast them as not being “one of us” but also the ways they are inscribed in and negotiate space. He repeats to the editor, they “aint human, you see” because they have no

ties; no place where you were born and have to go back to it now and then even if it’s just only to hate the damn place good and comfortable for a day or two. From coast to coast and Canada in the summer and Mexico in winter, with one suitcase and the same canopener because three can live on one canopener as easy as one or twelve—wherever they can find enough folks in one place to advance them enough money to get there and pay for the gasoline afterward. Because they don’t need money; it aint money they are after anymore than it’s glory because the glory cant only last until the next race and so maybe it aint even until tomorrow. And they dont need money except only now and then when they come in contact with the human race like in a hotel to sleep or eat now and then or maybe to buy a pair of pants or a skirt to keep the police off them. (805-6)

Of course, the fact is that the flyers do very much need money, and the need for money underlies the very compromises of bodies in the novel be they of land or sky, and

in this regard Faulkner depicts bodies and spaces as interacting, with bodies resisting the very compromises into which they are forced by labor and market-driven architecture. Consider, for example, the following description of the reporter's quest for breakfast after awaking, "like so many people who, living always on the outside of the mechanical regimentation of hours, seem able to need to coincide with a given moment with a sort of unflagging instinctive facility" (918): as the reporter rushes through the city streets, he passes the street lamps which are set to go out at a certain time of the day, eventually stopping at "one of ten thousand narrow tunnels furnished with a counter, a row of buttockpolished backless stools, a coffeurn and a Greek proprietor resembling a retired wrestler adjacent to ten thousand newspapers dubbed by ten thousand variations about the land" (919). The lights might go out at a certain time and the coffee-houses may be one of a thousand all designed to fit into the regimented clocks of the city's systems of labor, but those backless stools, you better believe, are buttockpolished. And then what of the Other—the Greek man with the extraordinary body of the wrestler? The Greek man is, of course, a product as well, for he is as myriad and interchangeable in this particular architecture as are "the immemorial grapefruit halves which apparently each morning at the same moment at which the street lamps went out would be set, age- and timeproved for intactness and imperviousness" (919). Meanwhile, the night in this world is the non-working time, as it were, when "the ill and the weary were supposed to be prone to die" (918).

The most significant confluence of space and economy that creates a compromise of bodies occurs on the occasion of Laverne's first parachute jump. Shumann and Laverne agree that she should wear a skirt for her jump because "her exposed legs would

[. . .] be a drawing card” (908). But Laverne is afraid to jump and before doing so crawls into the cockpit with Shumann which she literally turns into a cockpit to expunge her fear and anxiety before plunging into the open air. Floating through the air in what would seem a placelessness but which is in fact a space already circumscribed by the marketplace, her body on display for the gaze and pursuit of “a yelling mob of men and youths” is “not merely naked but clothed in the very traditional symbology—the ruined dress with which she was trying wildly to cover her loins, and the parachute harness—of female bondage” (909). Meanwhile, back in the cockpit, Roger struggles with another symbology altogether—“the perennially undefeated, the victorious [. . .] the upthrust, the stalk: the annealed rapacious heartshaped crimson bud” (909), which is the phallus that incarnates also as the central image of the novel, the pylon, which (as I have argued elsewhere) is also the pen, also architecturally circumscribed and compromised, thus marking three things: the sky (in the form of the pylons at the airport), the narrative (in the form of the pen), and the body of the Other (the child Jack, who very well may be the result of Shumann’s own ejaculation). The signal aspect of this event is that these bodily symbologies morph in different spatial configurations: in the space of the air, Laverne attains a certain power (Shumann cannot fight her off) while back on earth she is at the mercy of the mob of men. Meanwhile, however potent Shumann may be, sexually or otherwise, the space of air will not ultimately be colonized by the phallus, and his struggles to negotiate that space leave him dead in the end.

All the while, at the center of the novel stands the reporter who realizes the role of perspective and experience in definitions of space and bodily norms that Tuan and Thomson discuss, and it is this struggle that remains at the very end of the book when the

reporter writes not one but two different versions of Shumann's death for the newspaper. For it is Shumann's body that gets compromised in the reporter's abandonment of "literature" for "journalism" while Laverne's body is practically erased—vanished as she is from New Valois and the novel—a signal move of Faulkner's similar to the male voice's drowning out Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* While the first version the reporter writes notes that "Roger Shumann got the Last Checkered Flag" and "a simple wreath" marks "his Last Pylon" (the phallus), the second opens by saying that "last night the search for the *body* of Roger Shumann, racing pilot who plunged into the lake Saturday p.m. was finally abandoned" and "a wreath of flowers" was dropped "into the water approximately three quarters of a mile away from where Shumann's *body* is generally supposed to be" (990, emphasis mine). Thus, plotted on the differing coordinates of literature and journalism, Shumann transforms from a person with a metaphoric last pylon—a last potent bodily-inflected metaphor—to a body who is not one of us but one of the Other one of the flyers, deprived of his last pylon and thus himself feminized, which Garland Thomson sees as part of the Othering matrix in which the body is disabled. It is this transformation of body in perspective of space that characterizes so much of the corporeal focus in *Pylon* and establishes its importance as an exploration of space and the body.