

Persephone and the Pigs in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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Twice in the second section of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) Quentin thinks of pigs rushing, "running the beast with two backs and she blurred in the winking oars running the swine of Euboeleus running coupled within how many Caddy," and "I could hear whispers secret surges smell the beating of hot blood under wild unsecret flesh watching against red eyelids the swine untethered in pairs rushing coupled into the sea."¹ Faulkner compresses two important allusions, one classical, one biblical, into these passages. The combined associations focus Quentin's ambivalence toward sexuality and his longing for death. While several critics have mentioned the classical allusion to Euboeleus, they have ignored the New Testament source.² And they have further missed the comfort which Quentin derives from his vision of pigs.

With the name Euboeleus, Faulkner evokes the story of Persephone. According to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, people may originally have worshipped Persephone in the form of a pig; but when she became solely anthropomorphic, her worshippers had to invent some new reason why they threw pigs into sacred caverns in her honor. So, Frazer conjectures, an enterprising storyteller declared that at the moment when Hades abducted Persephone, some pigs belonging to the swineherd "Eubuleus" happened to be browsing nearby; and when a chasm opened up in the earth to let Hades and his victim into the underworld, the pigs fell down too and disappeared. The baffled and now pigless Euboeleus could at least give Demeter some clue about Persephone's whereabouts.³ Faulkner is known to have consulted Frazer's *The Golden Bough* early in his career.⁴

Faulkner also alludes to the New Testament story of the devils who enter a herd of pigs (Matthew 8:28-34 and Mark 5:1-20). Matthew describes "two possessed with devils coming out of the tombs," and Mark says that there came "out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit." In both New Testament accounts, when Jesus orders the devils out of the humans, the disgruntled spirits beg for a nearby herd of swine as an alternate abode. After Jesus gives the devils leave to possess the pigs, "behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters" (Matthew 8:32). The visual image of a swine herd running down a steep place to perish parallels Euboeleus's herd falling down a chasm into the underworld and justifies Quentin's conflation of the two allusions.

¹William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage-Random, 1954), 184, 219. Further page numbers from this edition will be noted in parentheses.

²See, for example, Richard P. Adams, "The Apprenticeship of William Faulkner," *Tulane Studies in English*, 12 (1962), 151; Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968), 236; and Barbara M. Cross, "The Sound and the Fury: The Pattern of Sacrifice," *Arizona Quarterly*, 16 (Spring 1960), 14.

³James G. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: New American Library, 1959), 526.

⁴See Thomas L. McHaney, "Sanctuary and Frazer's Slain Kings," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 24 (Summer 1971), 224; and Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, (New York: Random, 1984), 138.

Quentin evidently remembers Euboeus because he thinks of Caddy as Persephone. Just as Persephone's first experience of sexuality coincides with her death, so does Caddy's sexuality, Quentin thinks, lead her into a kind of death. But the several references to Caddy's "dying" are ambiguous, depending on whether Caddy or Quentin uses the word, and on whether she "dies" with Dalton Ames and other youths or with Herbert Head. For instance, Caddy herself says, "When they touched me I died" (p. 185), or "yes I hate him I would die for him I've already died for him I die for him over and over again every time this [heart] goes" (p. 188). Here Caddy relies on a basically positive use of "die," suggesting both pleasure—the traditional euphemism of "little death" for orgasm—and a willing self-sacrifice and intensity of emotion. At this point when she says, "I hate him," I believe she is lying, to placate Quentin. When, however, Caddy says, "I died last year I told you I had but I didn't know then what I meant . . . But now I know I'm dead" (p. 153), she begins a negative association of sex and death, evoking the painful time when she discovered her pregnancy and compromised her future by accepting Herbert Head.

Benjy also connects Caddy's sexuality with dying, since he persistently mixes his memories of Caddy's wedding with those of Damuddy's funeral. For both Benjy and Quentin, Caddy has died after her wedding because she is no longer close by for them. Less selfishly, they also lament—Quentin consciously and Benjy intuitively—that Herbert's vulgarity and shallowness are likely to stifle their sister. Caddy, agreeing for the sake of respectability to marry Herbert, faces a future about as bright as Persephone's when Hades sets her up in the underworld as his bride.

Faulkner clearly does not endorse Quentin's view that Caddy's discovery of sexuality diminishes her. Instead, the author deplores the narrow-mindedness of society in general and of Mrs. Compson in particular, who would force Caddy into a hellish mismatch with Herbert rather than accept an illegitimate child. Faulkner, unlike Mrs. Compson, judges Persephone less "bad" than "wronged"—and he judges Caddy less wronged by her young men than by society's preference for propriety over emotion. Even in *Sanctuary*, where references to Eleusis abound and where the rape victim, Temple Drake, decides she likes sex, Faulkner condemns Temple's eventual apathy, not her temporary passion.⁵ Similarly in *The Hamlet*, where "Ratliff's tensely comic vision of Flem's conquest of Hell is read by many commentators as the story of Persephone's abduction by Hades," Faulkner sides with a passionate Eula-Persephone against a coldly calculating Flem.⁶

Though Quentin generally wants to protect Caddy in his musings about pigs, he also disapproves of her—and of himself. Frazer identifies Persephone outright with the pig, and Quentin too sees her and her lover as animals, "the beast with two backs" (p. 184), "swine untethered in pairs rushing coupled" (p. 219). The vision of her as beast is "blurred," implying that the couple merge, since their silhouettes as they kiss or copulate have "blurred not with dark [but] within the other forever more." This line also subtly suggests that Quentin's eyes blur with tears as he thinks of the scene. The vision of "oar blades winking him along" (p. 184) serves an ambiguity exactly parallel to this dualism of "blurred." "Winking" means that oars glint, as men like Gerald wink in a leer, as men like Quentin blink back tears.

Caddy as Persephone-pig becomes a symbol for all sexual beings, and Quentin has to include himself in this category. Whereas Faulkner sanctions the healthy

⁵See McHaney, 232ff., for references to Eleusis.

⁶David Williams, *Faulkner's Women: The Myth and the Muse* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1977), 199; cf. Karl E. Zink, "Faulkner's Garden: Women and the Immemorial Earth," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2 (Autumn 1956), 141.

animal lustiness of the image, Quentin cannot accept any kinship with beasts. When as a child he touches Natalie and feels a surge of mysterious sexual response, he jumps into the hog wallow—clearly identifying himself with the swine (pp. 169-70). He probably feels himself sullied most of all because, with Natalie and Caddy mad at each other at the moment, he must believe he has betrayed one or both of them. But he magnifies his confusion about loyalties into a revulsion against beastly sexuality.

Yet if Quentin becomes a “bad” pig as he grudgingly recognizes his own sexual impulses, he actually consoles himself by means of the Euboeus allusion: at least Euboeus’s pigs got to follow Persephone into the underworld. Again, as with Caddy’s “dying,” Quentin’s “following” is ambiguous. If the underworld equals Caddy’s sexual initiation, Quentin would like to follow her for two possible reasons. He would like to rescue Persephone, snatch Caddy back, as if her discovery of sexuality and especially her “abduction” by Head/Hades had never taken place. On the other hand, Quentin might desire to follow Caddy into the opening earth not so much to bring her back as to experience sexuality himself. As much as he fights his impulses, he is as susceptible to the sensual urgings of honeysuckle as anyone; and when Caddy says, “Poor Quentin you’ve never done that have you” (p. 185), the reader, through Caddy’s perceptivity, senses his longing. Faulkner admires Caddy for accepting the painful beauty of honeysuckle, while he pities Quentin for trying to avoid it.

Because of his inhibitions, Quentin cannot, after all, follow Caddy into sexuality, either to remain close to her or to establish a new closeness with someone else. Yet if he cannot follow her into the underworld in its meaning as sexuality, he will defiantly descend into the underworld in its meaning as death. Both passages about the swine introduce his recurrent talk of hell as the “clean flame” (p. 185), a place “to isolate her out of the loud world” (p. 220). As André Bleikasten points out, Quentin cares not so much about preserving sexual innocence, his own or Caddy’s, as preserving their togetherness.⁷ Quentin now ignores the fact that she has so far “died” only into a worse life, not into his protective “clean flame.” Death for Quentin becomes a way of catching up with Caddy. If Euboeus’s pigs could follow Persephone into the underworld and perhaps eat from her hand there, Quentin would like to go to the underworld too, to maintain his closeness with Caddy.

The New Testament allusion to the pigs reinforces these associations of sexuality and death. When Caddy responds to Quentin’s anguished “how many Caddy” with “I don’t know too many there was something terrible in me terrible in me,” she recalls Jesus’s question to the unclean spirit, “What is thy name? and he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many” (Mark 5:9). While Caddy is possessed by many men, Quentin is a wild man, one of Matthew’s “two possessed with devils.” His sexuality—his urges and doubts—bedevils him; and his grief for the waste of Caddy’s beautiful emotion on Herbert and his successors bedevils Quentin even more.

Benjy also resembles the biblical tomb dwellers, since the ancient world’s “possession” developed into the modern’s illness. Benjy ends up in the state institution, where manic-depressives and schizophrenics and retarded Benjys all abide together. Whereas the biblical “crazy” man in Mark is fierce and Benjy is docile, the fact that the man in Mark is always “crying” and cries out “in a loud voice” (Mark 5:5,7) recalls Benjy’s nearly constant crying and bellowing. In some senses, Benjy also duplicates Persephone carried off in Hades’s chariot. Riding in Luster’s wagon, Benjy

⁷André Bleikasten, “Faulkner’s most splendid Failure,” in *Critical Essays on William Faulkner*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Boston: Hall, 1982), 275.

at first whimpers because he has no flower; then he bellows over the wrong route to the graveyard. As Ovid says in his *Metamorphoses*, Persephone innocently weeps as much for her lost flowers as for her lost virginity.⁸ Benjy parallels Caddy in Quentin's mind as another victim, whose life is a hell of perpetual loss.

Thus Caddy, Quentin, and Benjy form a trio of bedeviled characters who, Quentin believes, would do just as well to hide themselves in a herd of pigs. He has already explicitly wished to segregate the three of them when he plans desperately, before Caddy's wedding, "we can go away you and Benjy and me where nobody knows us" (p. 153). And he implicitly wishes to segregate Caddy, Benjy, and himself even more radically in his image of pigs. The biblical swine rush into the sea, as Quentin, foul from the hog wallow of his unsorted emotions, is seeking the river on its way to the sea: to death and to peace. And if Caddy-Persephone is already in the underworld, perhaps he will meet up with her there.

⁸Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955), 126.