

## A Study of a Christ Figure in *Pylon*, William Faulkner's Waste Land\*

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Concerning *Pylon* which was published in March 1935, Faulkner said in 1957, "I wrote that book because I'd got in trouble with *Absalom, Absalom!* I had to get away from it for a while so I thought a good way to get away from it was to write another book, so I wrote *Pylon*."<sup>1</sup> Thus it is generally considered that *Pylon* is one of Faulkner's least successful works and it seems hard to elicit any positive meaning from the work. Olga W. Vickery in her critical interpretation of the novels of William Faulkner writes, "Reality and symbol are so intermingled that each pulls against the other. At the same time, the Reporter, himself involved in the action, is forced to assume two contradictory roles, that of the reporter and the myth-maker."<sup>2</sup> However, Faulkner was always attached to the life of a pilot,<sup>3</sup> and when we find some religious connotation in Roger Shumann's death, we find a positive role for the Reporter as a growing character like the Runner in *A Fable*. Thus the aim of this paper is to reevaluate *Pylon* by studying the transformation of the Reporter through his contact with Roger Shumann.

Unlike most of Faulkner's major works, *Pylon* takes place in New Valois, a fictitious city corresponding to New Orleans. From the viewpoint of a nameless reporter, the novel describes a group of air circus people, consisting of Roger Shumann, a racing pilot; Jack, a parachutist, Laverne, their mutual wife (though legally married to Roger); and her son by one of the men, little Jack; and Jiggs, a horse—like mechanic who deserted a wife and two children. The novel deals with the risky attempts of a barnstorming crew to stay alive at a million—dollar enterprise of Colonel H. J. Feineman, chairman of the Sewage Board for the dedication of the New Valois airport.

While in *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin is in a struggle to get away from the past, here in *Pylon* are people without a past as Faulkner's own comment explains:

They were ephemeral and phenomena on the face of a contemporary scene. That is, there was really no place for them in the culture, in the economy, yet they were there, at that time, and everyone knew that they wouldn't last very long, which they didn't. That time of those frantic little aeroplanes which dashed around the country and people wanted just enough money to live, to get to the next place to race again. Something frenetic and in a way almost immoral about it. . . . That they had escaped the compulsion of accepting a past and a future . . . they had no past. They were as ephemeral as the butterfly that's born this morning with no stomach and will be gone tomorrow. (*FU* 36)

It is notable that their sourcelessness or "irrevocable homelessness" (78) is described as they are walking the streets of New Valois. They have the same air "which in Jiggs was merely obvious and lightly-worn insolvency but which in them was that irrevocable homelessness of three immigrants walking down the steerage gangplank of a ship" (78). Their ephemeral hand-to-mouth existence is depending entirely on their reckless flight:

Because money aint [sic] that hard to make: it aint up there fourteen and a half feet off the ground in a vertical bank around a steel post at two or three hundred miles an hour in a damn

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gnat built like a Swiss watch that the top speed of it aint a number on a little dial but it's where you burn the engine up or fly out from between the wings and the undercarriage. Around the home pylon on one wingtip and the fabric trembling like a bride and the crate cost four thousand dollars and good for maybe fifty hours if one ever lasted that long and five of them in the race and the top money at least two-hundred-thirtyeight-fiftytwo less fines fees commissions and gratuities. And the rest of them, the wives and children and mechanics, standing on the apron and watching like they might have been stole out of a department store window and dressed in greasy khaki coveralls and not even thinking about the hotel bill over in town or where we are going to eat if we don't win and how we are going to get to the next meet if the engine melts and runs backward out of the exhaust pipe. (44–45)

The prime symbol of their rootlessness is the airplane since it literally lifts man away from the ground. We can say that what the author comments on the motor car is also true of the airplane: “a machine expensive, complex, delicate and intrinsically useless, created for some obscure psychic need of the species if not the race, from the virgin resources of a continent, to be the individual muscles bones and flesh of a new and legless kind” (86). Also the telephone is described as “the metal stalk sweatclutched, the guttapercha bloom cupping his breathing back at him” (63), and electric lights were “bloodless grapes” (36). What is being criticized is the dehumanizing aspect of modern machine civilization where man is alienated from his true being.

The flyers and their crews are victims of the technology-oriented modern world since what gives some sense of life to the people, who seemed threatened to lose their humanity by becoming servants of the machines, is a violence unrelated to meaningful ritual. The world of the pilots is portrayed as a world symbolized by the microphone and the amplifier:

the voice of the steel-and-chromium mausoleum itself, talking of creatures imbued with motion though not with life and incomprehensible to the puny crawling painwebbed globe, incapable of suffering, wombed and born complete and instantaneous, cunning intricate and deadly, from out some iron batcave of the earth's prime foundation. (25)

In such a world, the only thing that can testify to their existence is the newspaper with its “fragile web of ink and paper, assertive, proclamative; profound and irrevocable if only in the sense of being profoundly and irrevocably unimportant—the dead instant's fruits of forty tons of machinery and an entire nation's antic delusion” (110–111). Though it is a serious fact that the dedication races take the lives of Lt. Frank Burnham by fire and Roger Shumann by water, their deaths end up merely in the records in the ink of the daily newspaper:

The door opened and clashed behind him [the Reporter]; already his hand was reaching into his pocket while with the other he lifted the top paper . . . black harsh and restrained:

FIRST FATALITY OF AIR  
MEET: PILOT BURNED ALIVE  
Lieut. Frank Burnham in  
Crash of Rocket Plane (49–50)

And

. . . as they entered a newsboy screamed at them, flapping the paper, the headline:  
PILOT KILLED. SHUMANN Crashes Into Lake. SECOND FATALITY OF AIRMEET. (245)

It is true in such a world of *Pylon*, time is nullified by becoming “breathless void” (37). The incident in the third chapter, “Night in the Vieux Carré” gives a characteristic example. There is always “a stack of

newspapers” in the elevator in the newspaper building, on top of which the operator keeps his watch. Hagood, the editor “lifted the facedown watch from the stack of papers” looks at the watch and then puts it back on the top of newspaper, “placing it without apparent pause or calculation in the finicking exact center of the line of caps, so that now, in the shape of a cheap metal disc, the cryptic stripe was parted neatly in the exact center by the blank backside of the greatest and most inescapable enigma of all” (84). Here the two symbols, the clock and the newspaper, represent man’s fruitless attempt to control time and reality selfishly. The people in *Pylon* are described to be living “between nothing and nowhere” (77). Their time is “now dead,” “though only the moment, the instant: the substance itself not only not dead, not complete, but in its very insoluble enigma of human folly and blundering possessing a futile and tragic immortality” (84).

We can say all these of their predicaments of non-being are caused by their complete rejection of Jesus out of their world. Time is a fundamental substance which gives order to our existence. According to the Bible, time is a teleological concept whose essence is Christ, since God: “has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” [Eph. 1:9–10]. Thus Faulkner identifies time with Lord Jesus by stating “all time all A. D. of Our Lord one thousand and nine hundred and thirty and forty and fifty.”<sup>4</sup> And Mr. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* who Faulkner describes as one who sees things very clearly proclaims time is Jesus walking “down the long and lonely light-rays.”<sup>5</sup> In the world of *Pylon* where Christ is rejected, it is natural that infinity is void itself:

... he [the editor] listened now to the profound sound of infinity, of void itself filled with the cold unceasing murmur of aeonweary and unflagging stars. Into the round target of light a hand slid the first tomorrow’s galley: the stilldamp neat row of boxes which in the paper’s natural order had no scarehead, containing, since there was nothing new in them since time began, likewise no alarm:—that crosssection out of timespace as though of lightray caught by a speed lens for a second’s fraction between infinity and furious and trivial dust. (74)

It is true that *Pylon* pictures an American wasteland where the redeeming power of the Redeemer seems completely nullified. It is evident in setting the events of the dedication during the Mardi Gras period, which is the merrymaking and festivity that takes place in the last days and hours of the pre-Lenten season for the commemoration of Christ’s suffering.<sup>6</sup> There the people are noisy and dissolute and corrupt, without any consideration of Christ’s sacrifice. Faulkner seems to convey the idea that there is no religious meaning in the ritual any more and there remain no deep human values or meaningful interpersonal relationships.

We know from the recognition of the Reporter in the lobby of the hotel headquarters that the insignificant ritual of the air-circus has taken the place of the significant event:

... the reporter for the instant marooned beside the same easelplat with which the town-bloomed—the photographs of man and machine each above its neat legend:

Matt Ord, New Valois. Holder, World’s Land  
Plane Speed Record  
Al Myers. Calexco  
Jimmy Ott. Calexco  
R. Q. Bullitt. Winner Graves Trophy, Miami, Fla  
Lieut. Frank Burnham

And here also the cryptic shieldcaught (i n r i) loops of bunting giving an appearance temporary and tentlike to interminable long corridors of machine plush and gilded synthetic plaster running

between anonymous and rentable spaces or alcoves from sunrise to sunset across America. . . . (57–58)

INRI is the abbreviation of the Latin version of the inscription Pilate had affixed to Jesus' cross, *Jesus Nazareus. Rex Iudaeorum*. The Inscription, written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, read "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (John 19:19–20).<sup>7</sup> Here the initials of a specific name of the record is contrasted with those of Christ. It seems that the significance of Christ's sacrifice is blasphemed by man's absolute belief in the efficacy of technology.

Moreover, the characters use religious profanity so frequently in the novel—especially the name of Jesus and the expression "for Christ's sake:"

"Jesus," Jiggs said (12). "Yair. Jesus, . . ." (13).

"For Christ's sake," the driver said (13). "Jesus Christ," Jiggs thought (16).

"Jesus, he better had come . . ." (30). "Jesus, if I was him . . ." (30).

"Jesus," he thought . . . (79). "Jesus, is that what he was trying to tell us?" (81).

"Jesus, gimme," he said (82).

According to the concordance of *Pylon*, there are eighty-one references to "Jesus," six to "Jesus Christ" and ten to "Christ's sake."<sup>9</sup> It seems that Faulkner makes a rhetorical use of the profanity to show that in their technology-oriented society, any religious ritual is meaningless. The name of Jesus no longer evokes a sense of awe about God to the people, but only serves as a profane epithet.

However, the more emphasis is put on the hollowness of a barren society, the more need for salvation is implied. It seems that each character is in search of a Christ figure. Jiggs asks questions of Shumann, "How? Does the race committee think he [the Reporter] is Jesus too, the same as the rest of you do?" (191). His words are quite symbolic. Is there a Christ figure in their ephemeral and rootless world? As there appears a Christ figure in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, can we not find the presence of a Christ in the world of *Pylon*? We may answer in the affirmative if we see the love and sacrifice of Roger Shumann who risks his life and dies to support his family.

Considering the role of Shumann, we can say Shumann "shepherds the group." As a shepherd he cares for each member of the group, saying, for instance, "You had some breakfast?" (131). And he proceeds without looking back (124) to do what he believes he should do. To the question of Jiggs, "How are you going to get it [the airplane] qualified in time to race tomorrow?" Shumann answers with resolve to do his best for the group:

"I dont [sic] know. . . . If we cant get it qualified, that's all there is to it. But if we can. . . . There's [sic] two things I could do. . . . It will qualify under five hundred and seventy-five cubic inches. I could enter it in that and loaf back on half throttle and take third without having to make a vertical turn, and the purse tomorrow is eight-ninety. Or I could enter the other, the Trophy. It will be the only thing out there that will even stay in sight of Ord. And Ord is just in it so his home folks can see him fly; I dont believe he would beat that Ninety-Two do death just to win two thousand dollars. Not on a five mile course. Because it must be fast. We would be fixed then." (191–192)

After wrecking his own airplane, he managed to get a plane to use for the race though it was known to be defective. And in spite of Laverne's words, ". . . the ship is all right except you wont know until you are in the air whether or not you can take it off and you wont know until you are back on the ground and standing up against whether or not you can land it" (195), he courageously risks his life to win a large purse for his family, and as a result, when the plane comes apart over a lake and plunges into the water, he loses his life. It is notable that he dives the plane into the lake rather than into the crowd:

... they said later about the apron that he [Shumann] used the last of his control before the fuselage broke to zoom out of the path of the two aeroplanes behind while he looked down at the closepeopled land and the empty lake, and made a choice before the tailgroup came completely free. (239)

His last plunge is nothing less than a sacrifice.

Here we have to reconsider the religious connotation of sacrifice. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, sacrifice is fundamentally the offering to the Deity of a gift, esp. a living creature:

It is a widespread feature of religion, incl. that of the Hebrews. Early in the OT there is the record of the sacrifice of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4. 3–5), while the demand for the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) underlines the need for the offering to be a costly one and may be taken to suggest that human sacrifice was not excluded (cf. Jephthah's daughter, Jgs. 11. 32–40; also Ex. 22. 29 and Mic. 6. 7).<sup>9</sup>

In the Old Testament, the chief annual sacrifice was that of the Paschal Lamb sacrificed for each household at the Passover, which commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (Ex.12. 1–28). However, in the New Testament Christ appears to have tolerated the current practice of sacrifice (cf. Matt. 5. 23 f., 8. 4):

He [Jesus] quoted with approval the teaching of Hosea subordinating 'sacrifice' to 'mercy' (Matt. 9. 13, 12. 7: cf. Hos. 6. 6). . . . He pointed to the sacrificial quality of His death (cf. Mk. 10. 45), speaking of the shedding of His blood in a New Covenant. Both St. John the Baptist (Jn. 1. 29) and the Evangelist (Jn. 19. 14 and 36) appear to imply that Christ, as the 'Lamb of God', is Himself a Sacrificial Victim, a doctrine endorsed by St. Paul in 1 Cor. 5. 7, and made more explicit in Eph. 5. 2 (cf. also 1 Pet. 1. 19), while Rev. 13. 8 emphasizes the eternal nature of the Lord's Sacrifice. The author of Hebrews stresses the High Priesthood of Christ, who by His perfect obedience in the voluntary offering of Himself (9. 26, cf. 10. 5 ff.) made 'one sacrifice for sins for ever' (10. 12), in contrast to the deficiencies of the OT sacrifices, and he compares the Lord's Passion to the sin—offering (13. 11 f.).<sup>10</sup>

The implications of these Biblical ideas are developed by the Fathers, who stressed the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice in that "He was (1) a voluntary victim, (2) a victim of infinite value, and (3) also Himself the Priest."<sup>11</sup> Truly the ultimate type of human being who has accomplished voluntary act of sacrifice was Christ.

Jeremy Taylor by whom Faulkner was greatly influenced,<sup>12</sup> repeatedly praises Jesus for his voluntary and affectionate suffering of the horrid and sad tortures:

O holy Jesus, who for our sakes didst suffer incomparable anguish and pains, commensurate to Thy love, and our miseries, which were infinite; that Thou mightest purchase for us blessings upon earth, and in inheritance in heaven: dispose us by love, thankfulness, humility, and obedience, to receive all the benefit of Thy passion. . . .<sup>13</sup>

O dearest Savior, I adore Thy mercies and Thy incomparable love expressed in Thy so voluntary susception and affectionate suffering such horrid and sad tortures, which cannot be remembered without a sad compassion; the waters of bitterness entered into Thy soul, and the storms of death, and Thy Father's anger, broke Thee all in pieces: and what shall I do, who by my sins have so tormented my dearest Lord?<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore Taylor recommends us to follow Christ in our voluntary sacrifice:

Now what Christ does in heaven, He hath commanded us to do on earth, that is, to represent His death, to commemorate this sacrifice, by humble prayer and thankful record; and by faithful manifestation and joyful eucharist to lay it before the eyes of our heavenly Father, so ministering in His priesthood, and doing according to His commandment and His example; the church being the image of heaven, the priest the minister of Christ; the holy table being a copy of the celestial altar, and the eternal sacrifice of the lamb slain from the beginning of the world being always the same; it bleeds no more after the finishing of it in the cross; but it is wonderfully represented in heaven, and graciously represented here. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Faulkner who describes so many sacrificial characters such as Nancy Mannigoe in *Requiem for a Nun* and the corporal in *A Fable* also stresses the voluntariness of their sacrifices since he values most the freedom of will. Faulkner strives for “the principle that man shall be free.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore he repeatedly emphasizes the importance that we should use it: “we don’t need anything else, since that idea—that simple belief of man that he can be free—is the strongest force on earth; all we need to do is, use it.”<sup>17</sup> And he proclaims further, “We must be free not because we claim freedom, but because we practice it.”<sup>18</sup>

We can say Shumann’s voluntary act of sacrifice is deliberately compared to that of Christ. Unlike his father who demands from Laverne some sign of Roger’s paternity of the child Jackie, Shumann does not ask for any signs. Moreover, Shumann does not claim the yet unborn child for himself. There is no question in Shumann’s mind as to whom the second child belongs. Acting for the others at the risk of his life, Shumann re-enacts Christ’s crucifixion. In such a precarious situation where human values are neglected, Shumann courageously shows human dignity by taking responsibility for his people.

And it is the Reporter who witnesses Roger’s sacrificial death. Faulkner emphasizes his cadaverous, even skeletal appearance: “The skeleton? [referring to the reporter] the man said” (20); “the reporter leaned above the desk like a dissolute and eager skeleton” (46). Like his characteristic body, he used to lead a hollow life without any purpose but staring at his own shadow:

He walked, not fast exactly but with a kind of loose and purposeless celerity, as though it were not exactly faces that he sought but solitude that he was escaping, or even as if he actually were going home. . . . As he passed from light to light his shadow in midstride resolved, pacing him, on pavement and wall. In a dark plate window, sidelooking, he walked beside himself; stopping and turning so that for the moment shadow and reflection superposed he stared full at himself. . . . (51)

Then he was assigned by Hagood to cover the New Valois airport. He admires the flyers for their qualities he himself lacks. They have the courage to accept their rootless existence. We can say that he was attracted by the flyers’ “solid weight of their patient and homeless passivity” (79) “with that air of worn and dreamy fury which Don Quixote must have had” (46).

We suppose that at times the nameless Reporter comes to being treated as a Christ figure for his generous act to the crew members. He surrenders his home to the flyers and borrows money for their needs. The reporter is described in quasi-religious terms as a “patron (if no guardian) saint of all waifs, all the homeless the desolated and the starved” (186). The crew members think him a Jesus. The parachute jumper asks, “Does the race committee think he [the Reporter] is Jesus too, the same as the rest of you do?” (191).

Regarding the fact that the family name of the Reporter is never revealed, Faulkner doesn’t give a specific reason. His only reply about the symbolic meaning is that the reporter did not tell him who he was:

No, my characters, luckily for me, name themselves. I never have to hunt for their names. Sud-

denly they tell me who they are. In the conception, quite often, but never very long after I have conceived the character, does he name himself. When he doesn't name himself, I never do. I have written about characters whose names I never did know. Because they didn't tell me. There was one in *Pylon*, for instance, he was the central character in the book, he never did tell me who he was, I didn't know until now what his name was. That was the reporter, he was a protagonist. (FN 78–79)

Is the Reporter a Christ figure? We answer in the affirmative by saying that he is a Christ transformed through his contact with Shumann. Just as the Runner whose name is not revealed to the last, transforms through his connection with the corporal in *A Fable*, so does the Reporter undergo a transformation by his personal involvement in the relationship with Roger Shumann. As the Reporter becomes increasingly aware of the wasteland he inhabits, he finds himself attached to Shumann who seems to point a way out of his void and meaningless world. Here we will scrutinize why he is so much attached to Roger Shumann and what his utmost predicament is.

At first the ghostlike Reporter, the “etherized patient in a charity ward, escaped into the living world,” (20) denies life to the pilots:

Because they aint human like us; they couldn't turn those pylons like they do if they had human blood and senses and they would't want to or dare to if they just had human brains. Burn them like this one tonight and they dont 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. (42)

And he continues:

They aint human, you see. 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 of two. (43–44)

Furthermore:

... how he had not expected to see her [Laverne] again because tomorrow and tomorrow do not count because that will be at the field, with air and earth full of snarling and they not even alive out there because they are not human. (60–61)

He elaborately creates his story of the rootless men sharing the same woman whose child was “dropped already running like a colt or a calf from the fuselage of an airplane” (45). However, Hagood, frankly criticized the Reporter, saying that his account was far from being true. (47–48)

Significantly, his attitude changes as he comes in contact with Shumann's crew. The Reporter witnesses that away from the airport, the crew are ordinary people in need of food and rest among ruthlessly indifferent Mardi Gras merrymakers and he eventually makes a drastic re-evaluation of them as well as himself. The Reporter gradually develops emotional identification with the group of fliers because he himself recognizes his rootless, “irrevocable homelessness” (78). With increasing conviction, the Reporter sees the world of the pilots as the only remaining sanctuary of human life in the finance-oriented dehumanizing world. In explaining his love for Laverne to Roger, he completely reverses his former position, emphasizing that it is he, himself and New Valois that are dead and mechanical. He confesses the similarity between them:

“Yair, . . . all right. I'd be the one. Yair. Because listen. I dont want anything. Maybe it's because I just want what I am going to get, only I dont think it's just that. Yair, I'd just be the name, my name,

you see: the house and the beds and what we would need to eat. Because, Jesus, I'd just be walking: it would still be the same: you and him, and I'd just be walking, on the ground; I would maybe keep up with Jiggs and that's all. Because it's thinking about the day after tomorrow and the day after that and after that and me smelling the same burnt coffee and dead shrimp and oysters and waiting for the same light to change like me and the red light worked on the same clock so I could cross and get home and go to bed so I could get up and start smelling the coffee and fish and waiting for the light to change again; yair, smelling the paper and the ink too where it says how among those who beat or got beat at Omaha or Miami or Cleveland or Los Angeles was Roger Shumann and family. Yes. I would be the name. . . ." (178–179)

He thinks himself "whole and intact objective and already vanishing slowly like the damp print of a lifted glass on a bar in inexplicable and fading fury" because of his hollow sense of time:

It was now about nine-thirty. The reporter thought for a moment of walking on over to Grandlieu Street and its celluloid and confettirained uproar and down it to Saint Jules and so back to the paper that way, but he did not. When he moved it was to turn back into the dark cross street out of which the cab had emerged a half hour before. There was no reason for him to do this anymore than there would have been any reason to return by Grandlieu Street: it was as though the grim Spectator himself had so ordained and arranged that when the reporter entered the twin glass doors and the elevator cage clashed behind him this time, stooping to lift the facedown watch alone and look at it he would contemplate unwitting and unawares peace's ultimate moratorium in the exact second of the cycle's completion—*the inexplicable and fading fury of the past twenty—four hours circled back to itself and become whole and intact and objective and already vanishing slowly like the damp print of a lifted glass on a bar. Because he was not thinking about time, about any postulated angle of clock-hands on a dial; he had even less reason to do that than he had to choose either of the two directions, since the one moment out of all the future which he could see where his body would need to coincide with time or dial would not occur for almost twelve hours yet; he was not even to recognise at once the cycle's neat completion toward which he walked steadily, not fast, from block to block of the narrow cross street notched out of the blunt and now slumbering backends of commerce while at each intersection where he waited during the traffic-dammed moment or while there reached him, as in the cab previously, the faint rumor, the sound felt rather than heard, of Grandlieu Street: the tonight's Nilebarga clatterfalque—the furious faint butterfly-spawn, substanceless oblivious and doomed, against the choraldrop of the dawn's bidding white wings—and at last Saint Jules Avenue itself running broad and suave between the austere palms springing full immobile and monstrous like burlesqued bunches of country broomsedge set on scabby posts. . . . [emphases added]* (204–206)

He is full aware of his voidness with nothing but inertia to sustain him:

There was no light now in the corridor, but there would be one in the washroom; he returned to his desk and took the folded paper from his coat and went out again; and now, leaning against the carbolised wall he opened the paper upon the same boxheadings, the identical from day to day—the bankers the farmers the strikers, the foolish the unlucky and the merely criminal—distinguishable from one day to another not by what they did but by the single brief typeline beneath the paper's registered name. He could stand easily so, without apparent need to shift his weight in rotation among the members which bore it; now with mere inertia and not gravity to contend with he had even less of bulk and mass to support than he had carried running up the stairs at eight o'clock, so that he moved only when he said to himself, "It must be after three now." (212–213)



In contrast to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* where women and sex mean death, here in *Pylon* Laverne is the only source of meaning for so many men; the Reporter, Roger and his crew. Hence the Reporter's longing to find a meaningful existence takes the form of a frustrated desire for Laverne, who in his imagination becomes the symbol of fertility and renewal. It is as if the Reporter recognizes that Laverne offers his only chance to escape New Valois and the death-like routine of his own life. However, he hesitates to establish direct contact with her.

It is because of his hesitation and inwardness and his "attenuation of weariness, sleeplessness, confusing both the living and the dead without concern" (268), that the Reporter is identified with T. S. Eliot's Prufrock.

Though "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is generally considered as a lamentation of hesitation for love, if we pay attention to the epigraph of the poem, we find that Prufrock is troubled by a far more awful thing. Prufrock is troubled by his sense of guilt which is expressed in the image of the "eyes:"

And I have known the eyes already, known them all——  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (ll. 66–61)<sup>19</sup>

The "eyes" that pin him down on the wall and never let him free from them represent his troubled self-consciousness. In the state pinned down by the "eyes," Prufrock repeats, "... would it have been worth it, after all" (l. 87). We can conjecture that Prufrock is suffering from the self-condemnation of his past act, and cannot move away from it. Because of the excessive obsession of some past memory protruding into him, Prufrock thinks himself already dead and is condemned in the hell as we see in the epigraph of the poem:

*S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse  
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
questa fiamma staria senza piùscosse.  
Ma per ciòche giammai di questo fondo  
non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. (CPP 13)*

If I thought my answer were to one who ever  
could return to the world, this flame should shake no more;  
but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I  
hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee.<sup>20</sup>

These words are spoken by Count Guido da Montefeltro, who is being punished in the Eighth Chasm of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, XXVII, 61–66. Like Guido, Prufrock believes that he will never return from his hell. He is utterly condemned by the "eyes" with his obsessive past memory which claims to be a decisive fact. The name of his predicament is sin.

According to *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, originally sin means "revolt" or "transgression" or "missing the mark" and "sin is an ever-present reality that enslaves the human race and has corrupted God's created order."<sup>21</sup> The Reporter's sense of nonbeing which is expressed by the words of "hollowness," "inferiority," "alienation," "emptiness," "apathy," "loneliness," or "the loss of the center of values in life" is deeply related with awe from his sense of sin. *Christian Principle* marvellously explains that the fear of disorder of existence is nothing but the sense of sin:

Can something be said to define more closely the character of the disorder that afflicts our existence? . . . It can be described as “falling,” . . . It suggests failure to attain, falling short of actualization, or falling away from an authentic possibility, without of course implying that one had first arrived there, and then only subsequently fallen away. Another model is that of “alienation,” . . . the description of the various modes of imbalance showed these as a turning away from one or other of the poles of human existence, so that this imbalance becomes an alienation within existence itself. The basic alienation is really from oneself, in the full range of one’s possibility and facticity. This in turn leads to alienation from other existents. . . . Is it not the case, however, that there is still a level of alienation, a deeper level where one feels alienated from the whole scheme of things? Perhaps this could be called “lostness.” It is the sense of being cut off not only from one’s own true being or from the being of others, but from all being, so that one has no “place” in the world. This is surely the deepest despair that can rise out of the disorder of existence.

At this point it is appropriate to introduce the word “sin.” . . . “Sin is a religious term, and it has connotations that differentiate it from notions like “guilt” or “wrongdoing,” though presumably “sin” includes these notions. What is distinctive in sin, however, is the last point to which we came in our discussion of models of human disorder—the notion of “lostness,” of being alienated not only from oneself and from other existents but, at a still deeper level, from all being. . . . That sin can be understood as “separation” or “missing the mark” or “falling away” in respect of one’s relation to oneself or to one’s neighbor would perhaps be universally concerned. That it is understood as alienation at a still deeper level is what is asserted in the distinctively religious connotation of the word. . . .”<sup>22</sup>

When we look at American history at the time around 1930 when *Pylon* was published, it is evident as Richard Gray writes, that people in America, especially in the South at that period, suffered from fear of speed and change:

The conviction of newness and uniqueness mattered to Americans at the time, profoundly affecting their thought and language; and while, as their reaction to Lindbergh showed, part of them was inspired by it, another part was clearly frightened. Compelled toward the horizons of tomorrow, they were also drawn to the golden landscapes of yesterday.<sup>23</sup>

But deeper than the fear of speed and change is the ontological anxiety of being away from God. Faulkner expressed the awe with the sense of guilt in his “Nympholepsy.”<sup>24</sup> Here a farm laborer climbed a hill at sunset. Chasing a girl unsuccessfully, he finally walked in the moonlight toward the lights of the town and the Courthouse clock, thinking “Behind him labor, before him labor; about all the old despairs of time and breath. The stars were like shattered flowers floating on dark water, sucking down the west; and with dust clinging to his yet damp feet, he slowly descended the hill” (*UC* 337). What the protagonist knows in the twilight is fear:

Soon the violent shadow of the hill itself took him. There was no sun here, though the tips of trees were still as gold-dipped brushes and the trunks of trees upon the summit were like a barred grate beyond which the evening burned slowly away. He stopped again, knowing fear. (*UC* 333)

Again in the midst of silence he feels fear:

He thought of the run of muscles beneath a blue shirt wet with sweat, and of someone to listen or talk to. Always someone, some other member of his race, of his kind. Man can counterfeit everything except silence. And in this silence he knew fear. (*UC* 333)

It is in his facing God that he feels fear:

... he thought with terror, watching the spinning gnats above it and the trees calm and uncaring as gods, and the remote sky like a silken pall to hide his unsightly dissolution. (UC 333)

He knows his responsibility for responding to a call from a deity, and at the same time he suffers from his estrangement from Him:

And above all brooded some god to whose compulsions he must answer long after the more comfortable beliefs had become out-worn as a garment used everyday.

And this god neither recognized him nor ignored him: this god seemed to be unconscious of his entity, save as a trespasser where he had no business being. Crouching, he felt the sharp warm earth against his knees and his palms; and kneeling, he awaited abrupt and dreadful annihilation. (UC 334)

We know he was suffering from his sense of sin as he faced God, whom he cannot hold away by any means:

Here was the stream to cross. The delay of looking for a crossing place engendered again his fear. But he suppressed it by his will, thinking of food and of a woman he hoped to find.

That sensation of an imminent displeasure and anger, of a Being whom he had offended, he held away from himself. But it still hung like poised wings about and above him. (UC 334)

You are going to die, he told his body, feeling that imminent Presence again about him, now that his mental concentration had been vanquished by gravity... In his fall was death, and a bleak derisive laughter. He died time and again, but his body refused to die. (UC 334)

Back to *Pylon*, Faulkner said of the life of the barnstormers, "... people wanted just enough money to live, to get the next place to race again." There was "something frantic and in a way almost immoral" about the life, he added, as if the air aces and their companions "were outside the range of God, not only of respectability, of love, but of God too" (FU 36). It is this unseen sense of alienation from God, from the source of life that devastated the Reporter.

Thus we may say the Reporter feels the same kind of anxiety as Prufrock and the farmer in "Nympholepsy" which comes from his estrangement from God. He has come to know "it was himself who was the nebulous and quiet ragtag and bobend of touching and breath and experience without visible scars, the waiting incurious unbreathing and without impatience. . ." (289). And because of the Reporter's unseen awareness of sin, he is so attracted by Roger, a Christ figure. And because of Christ's redeeming power he is now on his way to act to others' needs, though, his contact with the crew ended with the catastrophe of Roger's death. At the end of the story Laverne and Jack are gone, leaving the child with the Shumanns.

Even at his despair of losing his dream of getting out of his routine, the Reporter does not lose his care for the others. He conceals a sum of money in Laverne's son's toy airplane when they are leaving.

Roger's death has made an unforgettable impression on the Reporter. He recognized that Shumann has paid for his people with the price of blood and suffering. Thus he tries desperately to understand the meaning of Roger's death. While the other reporters speculate about the dead Roger and Jack and Laverne, he keeps silent. At last his keen personal involvement has culminated in "sentences and paragraphs which a copyboy believed to be not only news but the beginning of literature" (323):

On Thursday Roger Shumann flew a race against four competitors, and won. On Saturday he flew against but one competitor. But that competitor was Death, and Roger Shumann lost. And so to-

day a lone aeroplane flew out over the lake on the wings of dawn and circled the spot where Roger Shumann got the Last Checkered Flag, and vanished back into the dawn from whence it came.

Thus two friends told him farewell. Two friends, yet two competitors too, whom he had met in fair contest and conquered in the lonely sky from which he fell, dropping a simple wreath to mark his Last Pylon. (323)

At midnight last night the search for the body of Roger Shumann, racing pilot who plunged into the lake Saturday p.m. was finally abandoned by a threeplace biplane of about eighty horsepower which managed to fly out over the water and return without falling to pieces and dropping a wreath of flowers into the water approximately three quarters of a mile away from where Shumann's body is generally supposed to be since they were precision pilots and so did not miss the entire lake. Mrs Shumann departed with her husband and children for Ohio, where it is understood that their six year old son will spend an indefinite time with some of his grandparents and where any and all finders of Roger Shumann are kindly requested to forward any and all of same. (324)

His frustration remains against a society which never comprehends the meaning of sacrifice by Roger Shumann in modern Mardi Gras. However, now that he has recognized his own sense of spiritual predicament and has witnessed the sacrificial factors of Shumann's death, he is out of his death-like world and is on the way to cast himself out for doing "what he can do" (192). At last owing to Christ's redeeming power, the Reporter finds the pylon which directs his way of life.

#### Notes

Text: William Faulkner, *Pylon* (New York: A Division of Random House, 1987). Subsequent page references will be to the book and will be in parentheses in the paper.

1. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conference at the University of Virginia 1957—1958*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 36. All subsequent references to this book will be identified in the text by the abbreviation *FU*, followed by the page number.
2. Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (Louisiana State University Press, 1959), p. 145.
3. Faulkner was immersed in aviation. He was "accepted and enlisted as an applicant for pilot training in the RAF-Canada. It might no longer be the romantic RFC of the earlier years of the war, but it was still an elite combat force. He was ordered to report to the RAF Recruits' Depot in Toronto in three and a half weeks, on Tuesday, July 9, "[in 1918]" (Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* [New York: Random House, 1974], p. 207). His first published prose fiction is a 2,500-word short story entitled "Landing in Luck," published on November 26, 1920 (Blotner, p. 253). And for further reference Richard Gray in his *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) writes that Faulkner was very much a person of his times:  
... broadly based reason why Faulkner was always attracted to the experience of flight, and yet nervous of it, begins to generate contradictions in his ideas of the pilot. The pilot is male, according to this formula, a paradigm of masculine discipline, intelligence and courage, but also a venturer beyond the borders inscribed by the male principle: someone who has crossed over, for a time, into a more amorphous, instinctive and uncontrollable area associated with woman. A second reason why, from the moment he began to dream about flying, he found himself torn between different feelings, defines Faulkner as very much a person of his times: which is to say, an American living in the first half of the twentieth century. (195)
4. William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), p. 32.

5. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Everyman's Library 1992), p. 64.
6. Mardi Gras: In the United States the principal carnival celebration which is the merrymaking and festivity that takes place in the last days and hours of the pre-Lenten season is in New Orleans, where the carnival season opens on Twelfth Night (January 6) and climaxes with the Mardi Gras season commencing 10 days before Shrove Tuesday. The French name *Mardi Gras* means Fat Tuesday, from the custom of using all the fats in the home before Lent. (cf. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* [The University of Chicago, 1974].)
7. *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), p. 454.
8. *The Faulkner Concordances*, 12, ed. Noel Polk and John D. Hart (The Faulkner Concordance Advisory Board, 1989), pp. 262–263 & p. 88.
9. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 1221.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. See "Faulkner's Ultimate Gospel: A Study of a Christ Figure in William Faulkner's *A Fable*," in *Sociology Department Studies* No. 83 (Kwansei Gakuin Daigaku, 1999), pp. 41–57. As I have mentioned in my previous paper, though no one has ever mentioned this, we can say that Faulkner has been greatly influenced by Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth-century Anglican bishop and writer, whose *Holy Living and Dying* is one of Faulkner's favorite books. As Blotner in *The Incarnate Imagination* witnesses, Faulkner kept it at his bedside when he was hospitalized in 1961:

When he knew he was going to enter a hospital, William Faulkner would take with him his standard hospital reading. It consisted of four books. One was The Bible. Two others, Estelle Faulkner said, were *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, by Anglican Bishop Jeremy Taylor. Chaplain to Charles I, apostle of toleration and opponent of Presbyterians, he was called "the Shakespeare and the Spencer of the pulpit, the English Chrysostom and the most eloquent of theologians." A close observer both of man and nature, he has also been praised as "as a prose poet, and as a poet . . . closely a kin to the greatest Elizabethans." (Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, *A History of English Literature* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935], pp. 545–546.) (Once when I [Blotner] went with Estelle Faulkner to help in the process of Faulkner's being discharged from the hospital, sure enough, there they were on his night table. He had once asked me to see if I could get him seventeenth century editions of the two books and I had ordered them from London.) I do not know what parts of Bishop Taylor's books he read. If not the chapter entitled "Christian Sobriety," perhaps the one entitled "Of Christian Justice." If not the chapter entitled "The Practice of Preparation for a Holy and Blessed Death," perhaps the one entitled "The Practice of Those Graces Belonging to the State of Sickness Which a Sick Man May Practice Alone." Actually, I suspect he read these books as he did the other old favorites to which he returned, skipping about and reading in them, rather than systematically reading through them in a devotional exercise. And I suspect that he liked these books for some of the same reasons that he said he liked the Bible. Lest the readers think that this small library excessively pious, the fourth book was Boccaccio's *Decameron*. (*The Incarnate Imagination*, ed. Ingrid H. Shafer [Bowling Green, Oh.: Bowling University, 1988], pp. 185–96, "Faulkner's Religious Sensibility," p. 194.)

I assume that many of Faulkner's theological concepts are derived from the theology of Jeremy Taylor and I have written several papers on Faulkner's references to Taylor. In the following paper I will present Faulkner's affinities with the philosophy of Henri Bergson and scrutinize how the influence of Bergson and that of Jeremy Taylor are united in Faulkner's view of the world.

13. Jeremy Taylor, D. D., *The Great Example of Sanctity and Holy Life according to the Christian Institution; Described in the History of the Life and Death of the Ever-blessed Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World*, Part III. Sect. XV in *Jeremy Taylor: The Whole Works* II (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969), pp. 710.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 711.
15. Jeremy Taylor, D. D., *The Worthy Communicat, or A Discourse of the Nature, Effects, and Blessings Consequent to the Worthy Receiving of The Lord's Supper, and of All the Duties Required in Order to a Worthy Preparation*, Chap. I. Sect. IV in *Jeremy Taylor: The Whole Works* VIII (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970), pp. 37–38.

16. "Address upon Receiving the Silver Medal of the Athens Academy" in *Essays Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 152.
17. "Address to the Southern Historical Association" in *Essays Speeches & Public Letters*, p. 147.
18. *Ibid*, p. 151.
19. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp. 14–15.  
All subsequent references to this book will be identified in the text by the abbreviation *CPF* followed by the page number.
20. *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, trans. J. A. Carlisle (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1962), p. 303.
21. *The Harper Collins Dictionary*, p. 1026.
22. *Principles of Christian Theology*, ed. John Macquarrie (New York: Scribner, 1977), pp. 61–62.
23. Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 197.
24. William Faulkner, "Nympholepsy" in *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1979), pp. 331–337. Subsequent references to *Uncollected Stories* will be identified in the text by the abbreviation *UC*, followed by the page number.

## **ABSTRACT**

*Pylon* is generally assessed as one of Faulkner's least successful works. However, when we consider the meaning of Roger Shumann's death in *Pylon*, we find Faulkner's essential religious concepts of sin and sacrifice there. Thus the aim of this paper is to reevaluate the work by eliciting religious connotations through the transformation of the Reporter in his contact with Roger Shumann, a Christ figure.

**Key Words:** waste land, a Christ figure, sacrifice