

## Faulkner's Critical Success and Narrative Influence in Japanese Literature

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*I like to think of the world I created as being a kind of keystone in the Universe;  
that, as small as that keystone is, if it were ever taken away,  
the universe itself would collapse.*

William Faulkner

Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎, a contemporary Japanese author, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1994, thus opened his acceptance speech in Stockholm: “During the last catastrophic World War I was a little boy and lived in a remote, wooded valley on Shikoku Island in the Japanese Archipelago, thousands of miles away from here” (“Japan” n. pag.).

In a conversation with Ōe, the Anglo-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro echoed the position of Ōe's critics, namely, the marginality of his themes and ideas:

‘In my book *The Silent Cry*, I wrote about Shikoku. I was born and grew up in a mountain village on that island. When I was eighteen, I went to the University of Tōkyō to study French literature. As a result, I found myself completely cut off from my village, both culturally and geographically. Around that time my grandmother died, and my mother was getting older. The legends and traditions and folklore of my village were being lost. Meanwhile, here I was in Tōkyō, imagining and trying to remember those things. The act of trying to remember and the act of creating began to overlap. And this is the reason why I began to write novels.’ (Ōe “The Novelist”, 54)

Ōe's village is the “keystone of the universe”, the birthplace of his artistic creation. It parallels the small world of Faulkner's fictional county. Sherwood Anderson had suggested to Faulkner that he should write about his personal small town life “that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from” (Faulkner “A Note” 3), a recommendation that he adhered to all his life.

On that same occasion, Ōe affirmed that his literature is far from Tōkyō and urban culture: “I come from a more peripheral tradition, that of a very provincial corner of the island of Shikoku. It's an extremely strange place, with a long history of maltreatment—

out there beyond the reach of culture. I think my humour is the humour of the people who live in that place” (“The Novelist”, 55-56). Two Japanese writers coming from two very different cultural contexts—one writing in English and addressing a wider audience, the other writing in his native language—, pose an interesting question: how can a writer who writes about a narrow section of Japanese life and culture enjoy such a wide international recognition if, in fact, his themes are marginal? The same question can be asked about Faulkner’s popularity in Japan: how can an American writer, with a totally different set of cultural norms, who writes about a tiny hamlet in a southern state (Mississippi), be so popular among Japanese readers?

It is a fact that two very different Nobel Prize winners both create a kind of literature that has a deep sense of place. As he himself recognized in his own writings, Ōe has been explicitly influenced by Faulkner. In addition to Faulkner, it is possible to detect the influence of other Western writers upon his work. These would include writers as different as Sartre and Vargas Llosa, Rabelais and Yeats. In his essay, “Yō ni aru chikara ga aru” 用にある力がある (The act of quoting is powerful), Ōe speaks about the power of quotation as a means of establishing a strong relationship between cultural reality and literature.

Ōe’s universe is the faraway hamlet of Shikoku island, a powerful metaphor in itself because in the Japanese culture, the village embodies a place of immense strength, a point of reference even for those who have left the village, but still maintain a deep bond with it. The village evokes culturally inflected images that are unforgettable and an immutable way of life, which has been represented in literature throughout the ages.

The single and most obvious tie between Faulkner’s storyworld and Ōe’s is the use of a narrowly defined geographic area which gives birth to the twin sagas of Yonapatawpha County and the village of which Ōe writes. In the many novels of each writer, we find:

- a fictionalized place based upon a real native village representing the geographical coordinates of each;
- the theme of the sins of the fathers visited upon the following generations;
- a heavy handling of issues of temporality and ordering and the continuous interplay between the past and the present, the present and the past.

This kind of interplay is typical of the novels *The Silent Cry* (original title: *Man'en gannen no huttoboru* 万延元年のフットボール) and of *The Football Game of the First Year of Man'en*—a metaphorical football game in which the ball is passed back and forth from one side to the other in the playing field (Kimura 4).

Numerous Japanese writers have recognized a direct influence of Faulkner's books on their work, but Ōe is the author who actually seems to embody what Faulkner himself expressed in the speech he gave to the youth of Nagano in 1955 during a visit to Japan:

'I believe it is war and disaster which remind man most that he needs a record of his endurance and toughness. I think that that is why after our own disaster there rose in my country, the South, a resurgence of good writing, writing of a good enough quality that people in other lands began to talk of a 'regional' Southern literature even until I, a country-man, have become one of the first names in our literature which the Japanese people want to talk to and listen to. I believe that something very like that will happen here in Japan within the next few years—that out of our disaster and despair will come a group of Japanese writers whom all the world will want to listen to, who will speak not a Japanese truth but a universal truth.' ("Youth" 187)

#### *From the Thirties to the Present*

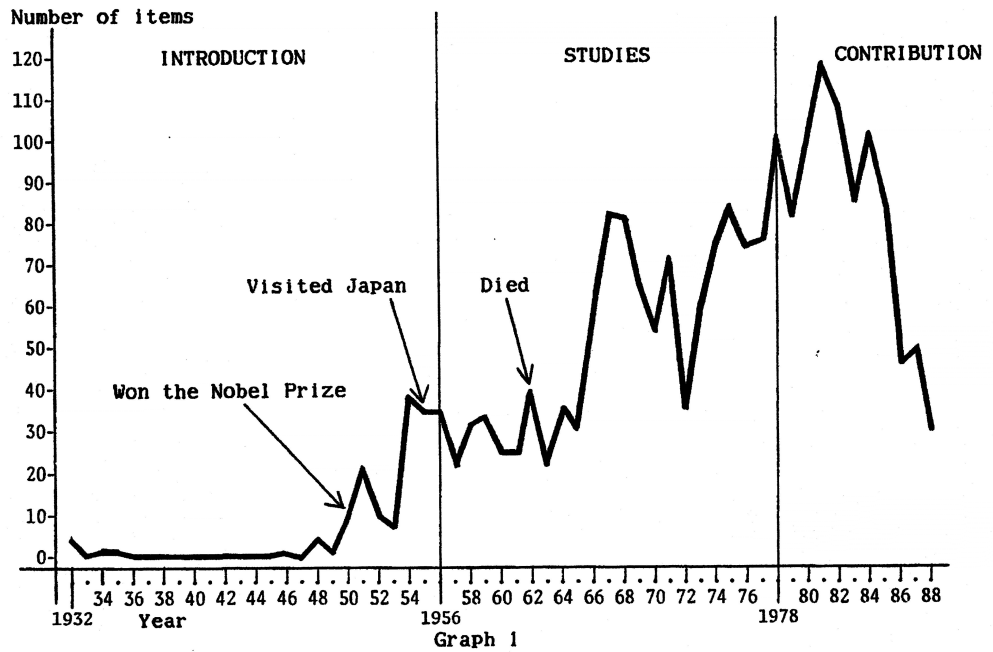
To understand the profound effect of Faulkner's work upon the narratives of Japanese writers, I would like to rehearse the sequence in which Japanese, readers, critics and writers came to know his work and to appreciate the Mississippian's narrative qualities.

The history of criticism about Faulkner falls into three periods (Yoshizaki 10):

- the period of introduction (1932-56);
- the period of studies (1957-77);
- the period of original contribution (1978 to the present).

The following diagram represents this subdivision graphically.

PUBLICATIONS CONCERNING WILLIAM FAULKNER IN JAPAN, 1932-1988



The first mention of Faulkner in Japan goes back to 1932 (more or less the same period as in Europe). In the first years of the Thirties, Faulkner’s name came to be known in Japan indirectly through the first references Tatsunokuchi Naotarō made in *Shin eibei bungaku* and second-hand from an article by Gorham Munson, “Our Postwar Novels”, published in *The Bookman* in October 1931. In the same year in April, a review of *Sanctuary* was published.

Munson’s article presented the most important American writers of the literary landscape of that period. He commented: “At the moment it looks as if Mr. Hemingway’s vogue is just commencing to wane, and a new star is arising among the younger generation of American novelists. He is Mr. William Faulkner” (142).

He continued using Arnold Bennett’s own words maintaining that Faulker writes “like an angel”. Moreover, he believed that Faulkner’s prose was superior to Hemingway’s and the atmosphere that he created surpassed that created by Fitzgerald (142).

In January of 1932, *The Bookman* published another article, “The Cult of Cruelty” by Alan Reynolds Thompson in which he wrote about the shocking aspects of the lives portrayed in Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (479).

The first mention of Faulkner by Tatsunokuchi Naotarō referred to the three aforementioned articles: in the brief paragraph on Faulkner he expressed the views presented in the article in *The Bookman* of October, 1931 repeating the very words used by the critics. He would be the first one to translate Faulkner's work, namely, the short story, "A Rose for Emily", published in September, 1932.

The second mention of Faulkner, again in 1932, was in the well-known literary magazine, *Bungaku*.<sup>1</sup> The poet, Haruyama Yukio (writing under the pen name of Kazuhata Tatsuo) provided a brief introduction to Faulkner's work, noting that his knowledge came from the French translations of the writer's work. This is worth stressing as it demonstrates that during the Twenties and Thirties, the Japanese intellectuals were well-versed in the French literary world. Faulkner's success in France and the success of French literature in Japan directly determined the Mississippian's success in Japan. At first Japanese intellectuals were not interested in American literature per se, but they did have a specific interest in Faulkner.

The works, read in French, quoted by Haruyama, are "Dry September" and "A Rose for Emily". He traces the development of Faulkner's work, with a less than positive assessment of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* ("an unfamiliar work popular readers ignored"). This take reflected the late recognition of the book's greatness in the American literary world; on the other hand, Haruyama considered *As I Lay Dying* and *Sanctuary* more positively. The latter title seems to Japanese readers and critics the most interesting work; quite unexpectedly, the critics emphasize that it sounds like a well-known story. While the plot has sensational elements, readers are drawn to the narrative itself: "the plot"—Haruyama writes—"is not different from the *detective stories*. However, in Faulkner's novel a theme is only the first step to the free interweaving of his completed techniques" (222). Faulkner is defined as a "master of advanced and rare techniques". According to Japanese critics, narrative techniques (though mediated through French translations) are the most interesting aspects of Faulkner's prose in the Thirties.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Bungaku* 2 (1932): 220 (trans. in McHaney 177). Haruyama read Faulkner's works on French literary journals: in Jan. 1932 published the translation of "Dry September" and on *Commerce* the translation of "A Rose for Emily".

It should be noted that Haruyama is also the first translator of Faulkner's poetry in Japan<sup>2</sup>. It has also been observed that this is the period in which Japan experiments with modernist literary techniques, especially in poetry.

In the same period Takagaki Matsuo wrote “America shōsetsukai no shinjin” アメリカ小説界の新人 (“The new man of the American literary world”), an article published in *Eigo kenkyū* 英語研究, a literary journal of English language and literature; there followed an article in two parts “William Faulkner ni tsuite” (Jō-Ge) William Faulkner に就いて, 上, 下 (On William Faulkner, I-II) that appeared in *Eigo seinen* 英語青年, the most important journal of English language studies in Japan.<sup>3</sup> According to Ono Kiyoyuki, “William Faulkner ni tsuite” was the first scholarly comment on Faulkner and the author of the article, Takagaki, pioneered Faulkner's studies in Japan. He was described “as one of the most excellent critics contemporaneous with Faulkner, [who] can be ranked with the American Joseph Warren Beach for his early penetrating insight” (qtd in McHaney 2-3).

It is worth stressing that Takagaki quotes many works of American criticism,<sup>4</sup> showing for the first time a first-hand specialized knowledge of his subject; he goes well beyond the earlier commentary of the first contributions and expresses a critical judgement on *Soldier's Pay*, recognizing in this novel a powerful strength, not for the tragedy narrated, but for the unexplainable charm of the tropical nature of Georgia and on *The Sound and the Fury*— an experimental novel focused on the mental analysis of the characters, in which the story seems to be not existing, but emerging here and there “as from the fog”. He put great value on the extraordinary effect the novel creates analyzing the mental state of an idiot. Moreover, Takagaki stresses the point that Faulkner's work reflects the social disillusionment and despair under the influence of World War I and prophesied that Faulkner would undoubtedly rise to the highest ranks in American literature ([Jō] 327).

The first critical judgments in the Thirties reveal a deep interest for Faulkner's themes and an admiration for his literary techniques and his “stream of consciousness” method.

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<sup>2</sup> *Fōkunā sho* 1933 *Selected Poems* (“The Race's Splendor”; “Over the World's Rim”; “Gray the Day”; “Night Piece”).

<sup>3</sup> See Takagaki [So] 1932: 149; Takagaki 1934: 327-328; 365-366.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Bennet, Edward O'Brien, Joseph Warren Beach, Edgar Pelham etc.

These acclamations are paralleled by the first traces of Faulkner's actual influence on a Japanese writer, Fukunaga Takehiko who was able to translate in his works Faulkner's imagination. Later, after the Second World War, he recognized this legacy and wrote many times on the relationship between Faulkner and his literature (1946; 1950). In his essay "Faulkner to watakushi" フォークナーと私 (Faulkner and myself) he expressed his fascination for the themes and the techniques of the American writer and the desire to incorporate several stylistic features making them his own: time, point of view, italics as a writing technique, and the setting, i.e., Yoknapatawpha. According to Fukunaga, in the twentieth century the literary concept of time is the greatest contribution the novelists have made to literature: "I have learned from Faulkner not a little about how to manipulate time in long novels" (qtd in McHaney 184).

The use of italics and point of view are very interesting topics because Japanese narrative—since classical age and due to the peculiarities of the language—utilizes narrated monologue without the need of quotations marks or italics to distinguish sentences within the narrative. Fukunaga tried to imitate Faulkner using *katakana* (the syllabic alphabet Japanese use for foreign words) instead of italics (not used in Japanese), but this technique creates an unfamiliar effect, totally different from the effect of Faulkner's italics (qtd in McHaney 184-5).

In the Thirties and Forties, the period of nationalism in Japan, of the Second World War and of the American Occupation of the country, interest in Faulkner came to a halt, due to the banning of foreign books. In 1945, for the first time in its history Japan is defeated by United States and occupied till 1952. Even if Postwar Japan was not a propitious time for the spread of American literature, Faulkner encountered great success in that period: he won the Nobel Prize in 1949 and he visited Japan in 1955.

The Nobel prize gave a new impulse to publications and translations of Faulkner's works. At the beginning of the Fifties, before Faulkner's travel to Japan, *The Wild Palm* (*Yasei no shuro* 野生の棕櫚, 1950), *Intruder in the Dust* (*Bochi he no shin'nyūsha* 墓地への侵入者, 1948), *Knight's Gambit* (*Komasabaki* 駒さばき, 1951) and *Sanctuary* (*Sankuchuari* サンクチュアリ, 1950) were translated; later, in 1954, *The Sound and the Fury* (*Hibiki to ikari* 響きと怒り).

In the same period many critical studies were published, in particular on Faulkner's style and techniques.

The 1955 visit to Japan by the Mississippian author travelling on behalf of the U.S. State Department was a turning point. The publication in 1956 of *Faulkner at Nagano*—a precious acknowledgement of the positive meeting between Faulkner and Japan—concludes the first phase which sees the American writer raising to the highest rank in Japanese literary world.

The so called “period of studies” from 1957 to 1977 expanded the research and the knowledge of Faulkner's production (see Graphic above). This is the result of the introduction of Faulkner into Japan in the Thirties and of the enthusiasm following his Nobel Prize and his visit to Japan. After 1956, many of Faulkner's novels were published and during the Sixties and Seventies new translations of the works already published in the first phase appeared. The new translations of his works—in spite of the difficulties Faulkner's language and writing techniques posed—reflected a more thorough understanding of Faulkner's art as well as a mature critical expertise. In this period dozens of critical monographs and about 800 articles were published in academic journals.

The third period opens in 1978 with the publication of the journal *Wiriamu Fōkunā shiryō kenkyū hihyō* ウィリアム・フォークナー 資料研究批評 (*William Faulkner: Materials, Studies, and Criticism*) edited by Ōhashi Kenzaburō.

Ōhashi Kenzaburō, translator, critic, editor, and Japanese voice at international meetings, such as the Annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, is Faulkner's most important critic and promoter in Japan. His most important study is the three volume series, *Fōkunā kenkyū* フォークナー研究, published from 1977 to 1982. Ōhashi devotes himself to this seminal work in order to comprehend Faulkner—as he writes in the preface—both in the context of American and world literature and to analyze the Mississippian's influences on his country's fiction. I'd like to draw attention to the subtitles of the volumes—“From Poetic Imagination to the Structure of the Novel”,



“Deconstruction and Re-construction of the Novel” and “The Rehabilitation of Narration”<sup>5</sup>—, because they reveal a prominent interest in Faulkner’s narrative techniques.

The journal, *William Faulkner: Materials, Studies, and Criticism*, contains interesting contributions divided into three sections: “Critical Studies”, “Reviews” and “Faulkner’s Sources”. In the second number of the journal, we find a new section titled “Fōkunā to Nihon” フォークナーと日本 (Faulkner in Japan). Each number contains a brief and valuable essay by Japanese writers, a ‘small flower’—as Ono Kiyoyuki defined it (11). A selection of these essays has later become *Faulkner Studies in Japan*, the first volume in English on the Japanese reception of Faulkner’s work.

The third number of the journal has been published completely in English because the editor wished “to make it an international journal”. In the subsequent numbers, reviews and commentaries in Japanese alternate with articles in English by Western critics.

Another interesting series of seven articles on Faulkner and Japan was published by Ōhashi Kenzaburō in *Eigo seinen* in 1981. The title “Faulkner to Nihon no shōsetsu” フォークナーと日本の小説 (Faulkner and the Japanese novel) elucidates the comparative perspective of the analysis of Faulkner’s influence on Japanese novelists. The first article emphasizes the importance of the project of *Fōkunā zenshū* フォークナー全集 (*Complete Works of William Faulkner*, published between 1990 and 1995) and the great support given to this project by many critics and novelists with their contributions.

Ōhashi connects this wide interest and enthusiasm to the Japanese writers’ own reaction to World War II. He presumes they have recognized in Faulkner a kindred artist interested in themes resonating with their own imaginative needs. According to Ōhashi, the connection must depend on the deep and dark chaos that had manifested itself in European and American literature since the end of the last century—and which Faulkner fully took upon himself—and had close similarities with the chaos of postwar Japanese literature. “They were confronted with the disorder and confusion of the world to be depicted in their fiction, just as Faulkner, in those rapidly changing decades of the 1920s

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<sup>5</sup> 詩的幻想から小説的創造へ *shiteki gensō kara shōsetsuteki sōzō e*, 「物語」の解体と構築 *monogatari no kaitai to kōchiku* and 「語り」の復権 *katari no fukken* respectively.

and the 1930s, was caught between the traditional or conventional society of the South” (“Native Soil” 262).

The Japanese writers that Ōhashi analyses are Fukunaga Takehiko 福永武彦, Inoue Mitsuharu 井上光晴, Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎, Ogawa Kunio 小川国夫 and Nakagami Kenji 中上健次. At the end of his analysis he concludes that two facts are unmistakably clear: on the one hand, at the root of these writers’ works there lies an unexpectedly close kinship with Faulkner. Ōhashi does not recognize a mere imitation of Faulkner’s themes, but an original re-elaboration of Faulkner’s materials transposed in a totally different context; on the other hand, in the first period, the influence of Faulkner’s work was in the realm of technique and the treatment of time, but later his influence concerned the realm of space, in particular the fictional Yoknapatawpha.

I’d like to quote Ōhashi’s considerations on three Japanese writers, widely acclaimed as heirs of Faulkner’s narrative: Fukunaga Takehiko, Ōe Kenzaburō and Nakagami Kenji.

In “Jikan no sō to Fukunaga Takehiko” 「時間」の相と福永武彦 (Aspects of “time” and Fukunaga Takehiko) Ōhashi affirms that Fukunaga Takehiko learned Faulkner’s technique and metaphysics of time, establishing the basis for his own literary world. Fukunaga Takehiko saw a dark abyss in the gap between Japanese and European culture and—like Faulkner—derived his vision of life and death from the disruptions in the culture to which he belonged.

In “Ōe Kenzaburō no ‘mura’ to ‘mori’” 大江健三郎の「村」と「森」 (Ōe Kenzaburō’s ‘village’ and ‘forest’) two important aspects of Ōe’s contribution are highlighted in the title itself: the “village” and the “forest”. Finding “a hint of salvation” in the conviction that Faulkner’s South represents the whole of America, Ōe’s work expresses the deep desire for a similarly rooted identity. In the conflicts of values between the village and the city, the former gradually regains its innate power, and Ōe finds a possible salvation that develops into “a mythical village” and the fertile image of the “forest” (the concepts of Nature and the “village” (*furusato* 故里) in Ōe and Faulkner will be discussed later).

Ōhashi wrote that in “Nakagami Kenji to ‘katari’” 中上健次と「語り」 (Nakagami Kenji and ‘storytelling’) the author regards the place in Kishū he depicts as an organic

entity to which he is strongly bound by ties of blood as Faulkner does. Having learned from the storytelling of the Yoknapatawpha Saga the method of uniting the actual to the mythic, Nakagami creates a legendary storyworld. And as shown in the way he forcibly connects the actual together with the apocryphal, he tries to put the whole destiny of Japan into his treatment of the place, with tremendous rebounding force in his potential connection with the general present day situation.

The last number of the journal *William Faulkner: Materials, Studies, and Criticism* was published in 1984, but Ōhashi's contribution to the success of Faulkner in Japan continued. He was the voice of Japanese critics in the West and we can read his contributions even today in the volumes *Faulkner: International Perspectives* (1982) and in *Faulkner: after the Nobel Prize* (1987), the papers of the Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference held in Japan, at Izu in 1985.

The journal *William Faulkner* provides, furthermore, philological studies of Faulkner's manuscripts by Japanese critics (see for example, the synopsis of "A Rose for Emily" in n. 7, 1984).

The beginning of the Eighties marks the peak of Faulkner's success in this third phase (see Graphic above). The bibliographical study of Yoshizaki Yasuhiro of 1990 (where the graphic is taken from) counts about 2000 contributions from 1932 to 1988.

In 1995 the *Fōkunā zenshū* フォークナー全集 (*Complete Works of William Faulkner*) is completed with the 27th volume.

Presently, the academic studies on Faulkner's novels—both in Japanese and in English—are innumerable. In the catalogue of the National Diet Library one hundred and three entries concerning contributions on scientific journals covering the last three years are listed.

Here follows a list of the most recent journals:

1) *The Faulkner Journal of Japan*, an on-line English journal published from 1999 to 2006 by the William Faulkner Society of Japan.<sup>6</sup>

2) フォークナー, a journal in Japanese that is devoted to a single theme per volume such as: "Faulkner and the Gothic"; "Faulkner and the Representation of Women";

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~thb0559/fjournal.htm>

“Faulkner and Popular Literature”; “Faulkner and Ethnicity”; “Faulkner and Cinema”; “Faulkner and Postmodernism”.

To conclude the overview of Faulkner’s studies in Japan, it is important to highlight that the most recurring critical statement on Faulkner’s success concerns the similarity of the historical backgrounds in the countries of the Mississippian and Japanese writers.

In particular, there is a close affinity between Faulkner and Ōe and this interpretation has to be linked to the comments Faulkner himself made in “To the Youth of Japan”:

‘A hundred years ago, my country, the United States, was not one economy and culture, but two of them, so opposed to each other that ninety-five years ago they went to war against each other to test which one should prevail. My side, the South, lost that war, the battle of which were fought not on neutral ground in the waste of the ocean, but in our own homes, our gardens, our farms, as if Okinawa and Guadalcanal had been not island in the distant Pacific but the precincts of Honshu and Hokkaido. Our land, our homes were invaded by a conqueror who remained after we were defeated; we were not only devastated by the battles which we lost, the conqueror spent the next ten years after our defeat and surrender despoiling us of what little war had left. The victors in our war made no effort to rehabilitate and reestablish us in any community of men or of nations. But all this is past; our country is now one. I believe our country is even stronger because of that old anguish since that very anguish taught us compassion for other peoples whom war has injured. I mention it only to explain and show that Americans from my part of America at least can understand the feeling of the Japanese young people of today that the future offers him nothing but hopelessness, with nothing anymore to hold to or believe in. Because the young people of my country during those ten years must have said in their turn: “What shall we do now? Where shall we look for future? Who can tell us what to do, how to hope and believe?”’ (185-186)

The Japanese writers most influenced by Faulkner belong to the postwar generation (戦後派 *sengoha*). They discuss the role of literature in the new political and social context:

The defeat in this War fifty years ago occasioned an opportunity for Japan and the Japanese as the very agent of the War to attempt a rebirth out of the great misery and sufferings that were depicted by the ‘Post-war School’ of Japanese writers. The moral props for Japanese aspiring to such a rebirth were the idea of democracy and their determination never to wage a war again. (Ōe 1994)

Faulkner, in his Nobel Lecture affirmed:

‘I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.’ (n. pag.)

Ōe—standing at the same lectern in Stockholm in 1994—argued:

‘As someone influenced by Watanabe’s humanism I wish my task as a novelist to enable both those who express themselves with words and their readers to recover from their own sufferings and the sufferings of their time, and to cure their souls of the wounds. I have said I am split between the opposite poles of ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese. I have been making efforts to be cured of and restored from those pains and wounds by means of literature. I have made my efforts also to pray for the cure and recovery of my fellow Japanese. [...] As one with a peripheral, marginal and off-centre existence in the world I would like to seek how—with what I hope is a modest decent and humanist contribution—I can be of some use in a cure and reconciliation of mankind.’ (“Japan” n. pag.)

### *Critical Studies of Faulkner’s Literature and their Influence on Japanese Novelists*

Critical studies have been very important in spreading Faulkner’s work. It is nonetheless worth stressing that interpretations have been informed by the peculiarities of the cultural background and consequently have emphasized some aspects of Faulkner’s work more strongly than others.

For example, Nakagami Kenji and Ōe Kenzaburō wrote essays about Faulkner’s fiction and about their relation to his work as writers. In “Reading Faulkner from the Point of View of a Writer” Ōe concludes:

‘It is my long-cherished wish that the scholars of literature would show us novelists an analysis of literary works based on the methodology of actual writing. I am convinced from my experience that we all can be positive readers of a novel, the art of words, when we come to know through a methodological reading something about a writer’s tools of expression and the mechanism of his way of writing. I believe that a specialist’s methodological reading has an educational and enlightening influence not only on general readers but also on writers and that it will help us writers to take a step forward in our creative work. There are few fields today in which specialists, general consumers, and manufacturers can be happy coworkers, but I think literature can be counted as one among the few.’ (qtd in McHaney 74-75)

Ōe discusses also the role of the translator; as a specialist he has a different critical slant:

‘The translator must decide upon meanings as he goes, while we read the English of Faulkner’s work with our judgement constantly held in suspense. Therefore, when I read Faulkner’s novels, I always put the translations beside the originals [...] I experience Faulkner through a triangular circuit for the transmission of verbal symbol—Faulkner; the translator, who is a specialist; and myself, a reader of the words of the other two.’ (qtd in McHaney 62-63).

This preliminary remark crucially highlights the depth of the thematical interconnection between Faulkner and Japanese sensibility embodied in the centrality of the natural world and of the village (the Japanese *furusato*). These themes are rooted in

the traditional Japanese culture and the exposition to Faulkner's work has been a source of new inspiration and imagery.

### *Nature and the Village in Japanese Culture*

It is commonplace that Japanese love nature. And yet, this essential characteristic of the culture requires a more profound understanding.

In the Japanese religious and philosophical tradition, the relation between man and nature entails the concept of knowledge as passing through nature.

The relationship between man and nature differs in its theological foundation from the Western tradition. In the belief system of monotheist religions, God creates the world and man, calling both into being through words; this results in an ontological distance between God, nature and man.

In contrast, in the Japanese tradition the gods that animate natural elements and humankind are generated through a sexual intercourse between the first gods: this implies an essential sameness between the human and the divine. According to Shinto religion, gods reveal themselves in the natural elements and reside in all things. This concept means that the Absolute lives in the relativity of nature. This fundamental postulate is confirmed by Chinese philosophical thought—in particular by daoism. The Dao is in nature and the very same Dao animates the macrocosm that in turn animates the microcosm of each man. The choice of being in harmony with nature and trying to avoid dominating it derives from these ideas. To understand the laws of nature in depth, amounts to an understanding of oneself. Insofar as the sage forgets himself in the dao of nature, he betters himself, and insofar as he obeys his destiny he finds his most authentic freedom. Nature is—first of all—a way to self-understanding and salvation.

This same concept has been revisited by *zen* Buddhist tradition: salvation is not in the escape from an endless cycle of rebirths and from final extinction (*nirvana*), but in the enlightenment here and now, in this present life, in an instant of intuition. In order to achieve the intuition that leads to “emptiness” it is necessary to first achieve a radical change of interior perspective, which goes beyond rationality. Enlightenment is the perfect understanding of the emptiness, of the world and of oneself. The ultimate reality of the

void—the nature of Buddha—is not outside the world, but it is in this world and in one’s own self. According to the famous *zen* master Dōgen, Buddhahood is the reality as it is: the impermanence itself is the absolute. The impermanence of the grass, of the trees, of forests and mountains, is the true nature of Buddha, namely, the perfection of emptiness. The silent meditation of nature is transformed into a fundamental religious experience and at the same time, into an aesthetic experience.

The Japanese artistic tradition influenced by these religious postulates prefers natural elements as themes of artistic creation. In paintings, in the architecture of gardens, in poetry, in the art of flowers (*ikebana*) nature is stylized and reduced to its essence through a process of abstraction and simplification. In this process, the artist is actually operating on himself, searching for the essence of his own nature. The path of self-discipline in the artistic creation is long and difficult and requires the guide of a master. In the Japanese culture, “naturalness” is the final result of a rigorous practice of self-denial and deeper and deeper consciousness.

Given this system of beliefs, it is easy to understand why Japanese critics have emphasized the theme of nature in Faulkner, especially in relation to the transience of life and naturalness of behaviour: “transience of life is so pervasively accepted in Japan that Japanese critics find it in Faulkner more easily, and some of them hold that it is Faulkner’s basic understanding of the world” (Yoshizaki 32).

In an interview, Faulkner asserted: “time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary *avatars* of individual people. There is no such thing as *was*—only *is*. If *was* existed there would be no grief or sorrow. [...] Since man is mortal, the only immortality possible for him is to leave something behind him that is immortal since it will always move” (qtd in Kimura 19).

*Is* is the true concept of time, time through which mortality contains immortality and in which life and death merge in a “fluid condition”. *Grief* is emotion—or movement—of the human heart accompanying such a fluid condition (Kimura 20). In Ōe’s literary world we can find the same conception of time.<sup>7</sup> Akio Kimura observes that Ōe punned with the words of one of his characters who “attended” Faulkner’s lectures at the University of

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<sup>7</sup> In works such as *Dōjidai gemu* 同時代ゲーム 1979, *Natsukashii toshi e no tegami* 懐かしい年への手紙 1987, *M/T to mori no fushigi no monogatari* M/T と森のフシギの物語.

Virginia. The character uses the word *grief* with the Japanese translation *aware* and puts it in capital letters: AWARE (Kimura 14). *Mono no aware* subsumes the most important concept of classical Japanese aesthetics: it means the “pathos of things”, the beauty perceived in the final and unique moment of its impermanence. In this case Ōe utilizes a precise intertextual reference to Faulkner and it is extremely significant that he encodes it with a reference to the core of Japanese sensibility.

“Innocence” is another Faulknerian keyword Ōe singles out. He has repeatedly been fascinated by the naturalness of Faulkner’s American characters. It is an innocence he recognizes as different from the innocence of his own tradition as it occurs without man’s interference—when someone or something is in his/its purist state, before rationality and social norms take over. It may be likened to a plant in its own habitat as opposed to the constrictive form of the bonsai that is unnaturally shaped by another’s will. Ōe writes that his imagination has been strongly influenced by Eula Varner (*The Hamlet*): Eula is the archetype of womanhood, appreciated for her naturalness. Although her behaviour violates social norms, naturalness has a positive value in itself. He is attracted also by the innocence of male characters, most of all Sutpen’s.

In Faulkner’s fictional world spontaneity seems to be easier to learn in a natural context than in a civilized one (Kimura 37).

Idiots, marginal or socially excluded people are at the core of Ōe’s work as well. His fictional world is peopled with idiots, handicapped persons—such as his son Hikari who is a source of inspiration for many of his novels—outcasts, various marginalized people and the so called victims (the *hibakusha* 被爆者, i.e. the victim of the atomic bomb). The contrast between marginality and center, between country people and townspeople is an aspect of Faulkner’s narrative world emphasized by Japanese critics. The reason has to be related to the ideology of the *furusato*, which, as we have seen, means “native village”, also translated in English as “home”, “hometown”, “old homeplace”. Jennifer Robertson affirms she prefers the translation “native place” because it refers more specifically to a genealogical claim and to a specific place. The native place is thus also the place of the life of previous generations.

In the period of Japan’s modernization, a clear opposition arose between the center, the new metropolitan area of Tōkyō and the countryside, the native village. Ever since, the



center has been considered amoral, utilitarian, dominated by technology whereas the countryside has been standing for simplicity, tradition, a community living in harmony.

In the Thirties the *furusato* was idealized and visualized as nurturing an identity process. “Native place making is the process by which *furusato* is evoked into existence as a political project through which experiences and memories are shaped and socially reproduced” (Robertson 115). The Japanese countered the centrifugal forces of westernization delimiting centripetally a close place corresponding to the traditional village. The *furusato* becomes the place where the true authentic Japanese spirit can be preserved by country people, in an ideal of harmony and solidarity. Only the world of the countryside, unlike the urban world, has preserved harmony because of its strong bond with nature which itself, as we have seen, fosters and nourishes one’s spiritual condition.

The *furusato* is the place through which man discovers his spiritual roots and, for many characters of Ōe’s novels, a place of salvation. The most powerful symbol of nature is the forest, a recurrent element in Ōe’s narrative. The “center” is, for him, also the center of power, namely, the presence of the emperor. In underlining his own marginality, Ōe constructs his mythic cosmology, his Yoknapatawpha: “For Oe, Yoknapatawpha is a means to object to the authoritarian sense of time represented by the immortal presence of the Emperor” (Kimura 135). The *furusato* has political implications and a subversive role in Ōe’s literature.

What Ōe borrowed from Faulkner is not only the idea of a cosmos unified by the Bergsonian sense of time, but also the idea of a space marginalized by a regional sense of time different from the standard, central time. [...] Ōe finds in his own Yoknapatawpha a chance to subvert the authoritarian, central time of Japan and to seek the sense of time which is truly universal. (Kimura 16)

*Man’en gannen no huttoboru* 万延元年のフットボール; *The Football Game of the First Year of Man’en* (1967, translated in English as *The Silent Cry*), the novel in which Faulkner’s influence is most evident, is set in a remote village, which can be identified with his native village in the Shikoku.

A faraway place in a geographical and cultural sense, “foreign” to the Japanese culture itself, and at the same time deeply rooted in it. It has been noted that in this novel Ōe enacts an overturning of traditional aesthetics.

In *Man'en gannen no huttobōru* the narration connects two different historical periods in a dynamic way: these two periods are the most important turning points in the relations between Japan and United States—the first corresponds to 1853, when the black ships of Commodore Perry arrived in Japan and put an end to the *sakoku* (the policy of isolation of the Tokugawa government); the second to the riots and demonstration of the Sixties triggered by the renewal of the pact between Japan and the United States, the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.

In the novel, Ōe interweaves different levels of the text, a stratification blurring together different narratives and narrative voices: this results in the simultaneous presentation of two different historical periods, jumping from one period to the other like a ball in a football game.<sup>8</sup> Ōe utilizes this allusive technique to suggest a comparison with contemporary American culture:

*Man'en* is Ōe's attempt to drive his own imaginative clamp into two different historical periods: the first year of Man'en, 1860, and his own time, 1960. The purpose of this clamp, [...] is to 'reveal the simultaneity that helps two different time periods communicate with each other dynamically. I tried to have the first year of Man'en and 1960 confront each other with the dark void of one hundred years between them. The ball kicked back by the people in 1960 takes flight again back toward the first year of Man'en'. Of course, the ball Ōe is talking about is neither a soccer ball nor a rugby ball, but a football representing one of the important objects of contemporary American culture. (Wilson 49)

The central theme is the individual search of the character's own roots and the collective search of the historical past: "the identity is sought not only within the structure of the quest narrative itself, or by the individual characters, but in the overall form that the novels take. Rare in Japanese literature [...] it's a genuine attempt to create mythic narrative" (Napier 180).

It is difficult to clearly ascertain Faulkner's themes in this work, but the author himself declared that he went on reading intensely Faulkner's novels for four or five years before writing this novel and that the results of his reading has spontaneously flourished in *Man'en gannen no huttobōru*. Akio Kimura comments that "Faulkner can probably be found everywhere in Ōe [...] Faulkner's influence merges in Ōe's novels and short stories with motifs, settings, characters, through style, vocabulary, and even wordplay" (14).

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that this simultaneity between the past and the present is expressed in the original title: Man'en corresponds—according to the traditional Japanese calendar to 1860—and the word football—written in *katakana* to an as yet non existing American word.

Faulkner's legacy is fundamental for Ōe's literature, but it has not to be divorced from the cultural specificity of the Japanese literature. Katō Shūichi—in an essay titled “Kawabata and Ōe: from Exoticism to Universalism”—does not focus on how distant Japan is but on how close it is:

[...] The writer's view of humanity [...] is what makes Ōe's view 'contemporary', reflecting a universality that is in no way 'Japanese' [...] through this linkage, specificity is transformed into universality. More precisely, the individual, concrete, specific world opens out toward a universal horizon. (79)

It has been noted that Ōe's narrative is transcultural and transhistorical (Wilson 3). His valley in the Shikoku is a real landscape and a fictional landscape, on which images and metaphors of his own culture and of western literatures overlap. This “image system” – deeply influenced by Faulkner's narrative—made it possible for him to seek “literary methods of attaining the universal for someone like [him] born and brought up in a peripheral, marginal, off-centre region of the peripheral, marginal, off-centre country, Japan” (Ōe “Japan” n.pag.).

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