

## Not Marble nor the Gilded Monuments

Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago da Compostella, Canterbury—those are the historic places, which moved westward with the course of civilization, from the eastern Mediterranean to the English Channel, long venerated as sacred to the memory of saints and martyrs. Pilgrims in the Middle Ages would make arduous journeys, often on foot, to worship at these shrines, believing them to be earthly pathways to heaven, where prayers could best be offered for the salvation of their souls. Modern pilgrims continue to seek these hallowed grounds, in spite of the gradual and unmistakable waning of religious devotion in the Western world. But in our more skeptical age, the graves of saints, or splinters of the True Cross, or fragments of the Crown of Thorns, have become largely curiosities, no longer irresistible attractions for multitudes of worshippers. The need however remains for earthly reminders that we are more than flesh and blood, which these historic places served to satisfy.

They are still the best known names, but they were not the first religious shrines. Before there was Christianity, there were oracles that drew believers to places where the gods of ancient Greece and Rome were thought to dwell. Delphi, nestled in a dark valley at the foot of Mount Parnassus, the home, it was believed, of Apollo and the Muses, has retained some of the aura of mystery which led worshippers like Socrates, the wisest man in ancient Athens, to consult the oracle of Apollo, believing as he did that the sibyl who guarded the oracle had the gift of prophecy and was therefore wiser than he. Rome, before it was converted to Christianity by the Emperor Constantine, inherited the Greek religion, and many Roman pilgrims were drawn to the cave of the Sybil of Cumae, near the Bay of Naples, where Virgil imagined that Aeneas, the mythical founder of Rome, had once gone in search of the pathway to the world of the dead,

where the souls of the wicked were sent down to the darker regions to be punished, while the blessed spirits were transported to the eternal bliss of the Elysian Fields.

We are more mobile today than our ancestors were. We do not have to make long journeys on foot to the ends of the earth in search of marvels. We can sit comfortably in an airplane that will take us anywhere we want to go, and get there in hours rather than days or weeks. And yet, we can't help being drawn to our destinations, just as they were, by possibilities of enchantment beyond the beauty of natural spectacles. We go freely to any place on earth we please, but when we get there, we hope to see more than meets the eye. We have spiritual as well as physical appetites, and we seek places most likely to satisfy them.

I find them, most often, where favorite writers have lived and died. Their words draw me instinctively to places from which their words have come. I am not searching for some lingering ghost of a writer; but trying to understand a little better the meaning of his words. Writers live more by their words than by their deeds, and most writers are far from being saints. Too many, in fact, led scandalous lives. That is not why I admire them. Their words had a perfection often lacking in their lives. If what they wrote was memorable enough, it became an integral part of the language they spoke. As long as their language lasts, their words will last, sometimes for centuries, even in rare cases for millennia. A truly great writer can immortalize a language long after it ceases to be spoken. That's why we continue to study Classical Greek and Latin, which are dead languages, and even Anglo-Saxon, which is no longer spoken, but is the language from which our language came. Our English is much different from the original Old English, but we have the good fortune to inherit a language enriched by them and enriched again and again by great writers of the past and present. English is a global language today, spoken by civilized people all over the world. For how much longer, we have no way of knowing. What we do

know, though, is that every paper we write for the Literary Club, no matter how personal it may be, owes something to the heritage of English literature. That heritage will endure, even if our words do not, and even if English should some day become as dead as Greek or Latin, or as foreign to our ears as Anglo-Saxon.

At least for now, English is the international language, and in certain places it has a local identity as well, which draws literary pilgrims from all over the world to honor it. First among them has to be Stratford upon Avon, where William Shakespeare once lived, and became the most honored of English writers, but there are places almost as illustrious. One such place comes immediately to my mind. You may well have gone there yourself, and if so, you can picture it in your mind: a grey stone edifice on the shore of a bay on the northwest coast of Ireland, where Drumcliff churchyard lies. Imagine four pointed spires dominating an alleyway of grey stone walls, through which you pass, seeing as you do a high cross, weathered for many centuries, twice as tall as a man, the crossbar encircled by stone. If you look closely at the shaft, you can make out curious carvings, so worn down by the elements that they are scarcely legible. You can just make out the hunched shape of a cat, and traces of a Biblical scene, probably of Adam and Eve, and what may be the head of St. Columba, a 7<sup>th</sup> century Irish saint to whom the whole cemetery is dedicated. This is the Cross of Columkille, Irish scholar and saint, who was born not far away in a town named for him. The high cross is a relic of the Middle Ages, when Christianity, which St. Patrick brought to heathen Ireland from slightly less heathen England more than a century earlier, was flourishing, and it is now the oldest monument left from the original churchyard. Going past this centuries old Celtic cross, you reach the front of Drumcliff Church, built of the same grey stone, which flashes a bright yellow wooden door emblazoned with a metal swan. The church is not as old as the cross, but it has for centuries been a place of

worship for parishioners of the Church of Ireland, a branch of the Protestant Church of England, planted here after the Reformation. The legendary St. Patrick came to the island by boat from England, and long ago succeeded in converting the Celtic tribes so thoroughly that he became the founder of Irish Christianity, first of many Irish saints. In his day, all Christians were Catholics, in communion with Rome, but later, after a series of English conquests, the Church of Ireland was established in communion with Canterbury. Most of the Irish people stayed loyal to St. Patrick and Roman Catholicism, but in the seventeenth century, Oliver Cromwell crossed the Irish Sea with an army of English Protestants to conquer Ireland once again, and he built what are now the historic churches of the island, all staunchly Anglo-Irish and Protestant. If you go inside Drumcliff Church, you see a brass plaque beside a wooden pulpit bearing the name of the Rev. John Butler Yeats, Rector of Drumcliff in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the great-grandfather of the poet William Butler Yeats, whose grave is in the churchyard, just outside the door. That is why you have come here, and so have people from all over the world, not to worship in the church, but to gaze at the simple grey tombstone in front of it, which has only the name of William Butler Yeats, the dates of his life, 1865-1939,, and the words:

Cast a cold eye,  
On life, on death,  
Horseman, pass by.

Here is where Yeats is buried with his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, whose small grey stone is at the foot of her husband's grave. Yeats in his lifetime earned fame as the greatest Irish poet, and became known to the world after he won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. Yeats did not die in the nearby town of Sligo.. He died far away in Roquebrune, on the French Riviera, the Mediterranean coast of France, where he had gone in failing health just as Europe was entering the Second World War. He died in 1939 and had to be buried in France because of the war, but he left instructions in his will that he wanted to be buried in his native land, in the spot on the

northwest coast he loved best, and in 1947, when the war was over, his casket was unearthed and brought to Ireland by ship, to be buried ceremonially near Sligo in a funeral procession led by Eamon De Valera, the Prime Minister of Ireland. Shortly before his death, Yeats had written the epitaph that marks his grave, at the conclusion of a long poem he called “Under Ben Bulben”:

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head  
In Drumcliff churchyard, Yeats is laid.  
An ancestor was rector there,  
Long years ago, a church stands near,  
By the road, an ancient Cross,  
No marble, no conventional phrase,  
On limestone quarried near the spot,  
By his command, these words are cut:  
Cast a cold eye,  
On life, on death,  
Horseman, pass by!

Looking up from the grave, you can see the long breadloaf-shape of Ben Bulben, the highest mountain in the region, towering above the trees. The name Ben Bulben is familiar to any reader of Yeats’s poems, as are names of many nearby places, such as Glencar, with its waterfall tumbling down from the side of Ben Bulben, and Lough Gill, with its leafy islet, memorialized by Yeats in one of his best known poems, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” As a boy, Yeats spent many happy summers in the area, because his mother, Susan Pollexfen, was born in Sligo, and her family still lived there. Yeats himself was born in the Irish capital of Dublin, and lived much of his life abroad, in London and elsewhere, but his father, who was a namesake of the Rev. John Butler Yeats and a gifted portrait painter himself, said that by marrying into the Pollexfen family, “I have given a tongue to the seacliffs.” Yeats as a boy had climbed Ben Bulben and rowed a

boat out to the isle of Innisfree, and he made use of all the familiar neighborhood names in his poems, the mountain Knocknarea opposite Sligo, on top of which the legendary Queen Maeve lay buried, and Dooney Rock on Lough Gill, where he heard the Fiddler of Dooney play, and farther away, down the coast near Galway, Lady Gregory's mansion at Coole Park near his symbolic tower, Thoor Ballylee. Yeats made poetry out of the Irish place names familiar to him, and Drumcliff, where he is buried, is one of the best known of them.

The sense of Yeats's presence—I won't say his ghost—is immediately palpable in Drumcliff churchyard. Visitors from around the world are drawn to his grave out of respect and admiration for his words, and they linger a while in front of it, perhaps remembering lines of his poetry, as they look at his headstone and puzzle over his epitaph. It may be the most famous epitaph in English. He seems to be saying that he will never rest in peace, but will go on actively defying death forever. In his imagination his soul has become a ghostly horseman, riding past his own grave, and casting down on it a glance of cold disdain. It was how he imagined death at the end of his life, though he had written a different account in an earlier poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," which ends with the bold assertion

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
To keep a drowsy emperor awake,  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium,  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Yeats imagined himself being transformed into a golden nightingale in that poem, singing on in death as he had in life.. And in a companion poem called “Byzantium” he added, “I hail the superhuman/ I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.” Yeats did strongly believe in life after death, but though he had been raised a Christian, he turned away from both the Protestant and Catholic faiths, preferring in his early poems the heroes and heroines of Irish mythology, like Cuchullain and Queen Maeve, and in his later poems paying homage to the gods of Greece and Rome. What transcended all faiths in Yeats’s mind was the immortality of the soul, which lives on in his defiant epitaph. No one would call Yeats a saint; he had many human flaws, but he was a great poet in spite of them, and what we remember are his words, which sanctify his life as great poetry has the power to do.

Now follow me to a very different setting, high in the mountains of Switzerland, where a modern German poet is buried who compares in greatness with Yeats. We make our way through the towering Alpine landscape to the village of Raron, located near the headwaters of the River Rhone, one of the principal rivers of Europe, flowing westward through Switzerland into France and southward to the Mediterranean. There we have come to pay our respects, at a small church at the foot of the mountains, to the words engraved on a simple tombstone standing against a wall of the church. The words, in German, are as brief and as enigmatic as those of Yeats.:

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust,  
Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel Lidern.

Rose, O pure contradiction of desire

No one asleep under so many eyelids.

He too defied death in his epitaph. We are at the grave of Rainer Maria Rilke, who was born in 1875 in the German colony of Prague, to a mother who was a devout Catholic and a father who was a German military officer. He had as a young aspiring poet visited Czarist Russia, which he called “a land bordering on God,” and had lived in many other parts of Europe, in particular Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War, where he was educated, and in Paris, where at the beginning of the twentieth century he chose to apprentice himself as secretary to a very different artist, the great sculptor Auguste Rodin, and he later lived in Duino Castle on the Adriatic Coast, near Trieste, the palatial home of one of his patrons, the Countess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe. His last home had been the Castle Muzot, near Raron, where he had been invited by another patron to stay, and it was there that he died., in 1926, at the age of 51, of leukemia, to be buried in the churchyard not far from the castle..

Rilke, like Yeats, was raised as a Christian by his Roman Catholic mother, and his early poetry reflects that influence, but like Yeats his poetry was religious but never doctrinal. His early prose work was called *Geschichte vom Lieben Gott, Stories of the Loving God*, and much later he wrote a series of poems about angels, who in his imagination moved between the living and the dead, described in a series of ten long *Duino Elegies*, one of his major poetic sequences. His final masterpiece was called *Sonnets to Orpheus*, a sequence of short lyrics dedicated to the Greek god of song, who was for Rilke the patron saint of poetry. Some of his most memorable poems are to be found in *The Book of Images* and the *New Poems*, written in Paris under the influence of Rodin, in whose studio he spent many hours, absorbing himself in the work of the sculptor, and writing a monograph on Rodin that is an eloquent poetic tribute to a sister art. Rilke’s poetry made the German language as lyrical as Yeats’s poetry made the English language, full of natural as well as

supernatural imagery. Rilke is most movingly a poet of autumn, his favorite season, when nature is beautifully dying, but is promising to be born again in the spring. One of them is called simply

#### AUTUMN

The leaves are falling, falling now like high  
flower-petals floating from the sky,  
serenely, resolutely falling down.

And in the night the heavy earth is thrown  
down from the stars, through endless space, alone.

We all are falling. As this hand must fall.  
Look: all the universe is falling, all.

Yet there is One, in whom all fallings cease,  
who holds us softly in his hand's great peace.

We have gone from Ireland to Switzerland in search of sacred places, and from there we go to Italy, to Venice, a city built in the sea, where the American poet Ezra Pound spent the last decade of his long, controversial life. The grave of Ezra Pound is much simpler than those of either Yeats or Rilke. There, level with the ground, is an ivy-encircled white marble stone bearing nothing but the poet's name. Pound's grave is located in the Evangelista (that is, Protestant) section of a Catholic cemetery, on a small island in the lagoon of the Adriatic Sea which surrounds the city of Venice. That is where the Venetians have chosen to bury their dead, many in elaborate tombs. The island is called San Michele, or Cimitero. You get there, as you get everywhere in Venice, by boat, and when you disembark from the local vaporetto, you are confronted by a sign which says "Ezra Pound" and points in the direction of a path, leading through the larger Catholic section to the

smaller Protestant section of the cemetery. Small though it is, the Evangelista section contains, in addition to the grave of Pound, the more imposing graves of Sergei Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky, side by side in death as they often were in life, the Russian impresario of the Ballet Russe and his chief Russian composer, both of whom chose to live in Venice at the end of their lives. Pound's grave is not far from theirs, but is marked only with his name engraved on the white marble stone in capital letters "EZRA POUND." Pound had lived in Venice for the last decade of his life, and died there in 1972, though he had lived much longer in Rapallo, on the opposite coast of Italy, a seaside resort on the Gulf of Tigullio that he chose as his home for twenty years. Pound had migrated there from Philadelphia, where he grew up, to London and Paris, making his fateful move to what was then Mussolini's Italy in 1924, and staying there until he made his notorious broadcasts over Rome Radio in the 1940s, during the Second World War, when Mussolini's Fascist Italy was allied against us with Hitler's Fascist Germany. When the war ended Pound was still living in Rapallo, but he was arrested and indicted for treason by his native country, and was extradited to Washington to be tried in 1945. The trial never occurred, because Pound was examined by court psychiatrists and determined to be incapable of understanding the charges against him. He insisted on claiming that his broadcasts, though over Rome radio, were not Fascist propaganda, but were an exercise of his American right of free speech, and so he was incarcerated in St. Elizabeths Hospital for thirteen years, until the charges against him were finally dropped in 1958, and he was able to return once more to Italy. Then he gravitated to Venice, but while Pound had been a prisoner at St. Elizabeths he was awarded the prestigious Bollingen Prize for Poetry. That was in 1948, and it outraged many American poets and critics, but was vindicated by many others, who made him a cause celebre. When he was finally released from St. Elizabeths in 1958, with the help of his old friend Robert Frost, he returned to Italy, still carrying an American passport but honored by Italian readers as a

great poet, for though he wrote in English, he had preferred to live half his life in their country. The esteem of Italians for Pound is evident as soon as you enter the cemetery in Venice where he is buried, because the sign with his name on it is the first thing you see. Pound did not write an epitaph for his tomb, but he wrote many epitaphs in the course of his long and distinguished career. One of them is for a fictional poet named Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, much like himself, which begins with a mock-epitaph in English, but with a title and a quotation in French and a line in Classical Greek. The multilingual style is typical of this American poet, a leader in Anglo-American Modernism, which became the mainstream of twentieth century literature.

E.P. Ode pour l'Election de son Sepulchre

For three years, out of key with his time,  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry, to restore "the sublime"  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born  
In a half-savage country, out of date;  
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;  
Capaneus; trout for factitious bait;

Ἰδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ', ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ  
Caught in the unstopped ear;  
Giving the rocks small lee-way  
The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

His true Penelope was Flaubert,  
He fished by obstinate isles;  
Observed the elegance of Circe's hair  
Rather than the mottoes on sundials.

Unaffected by "the march of events,"  
He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentuniesme*  
*De son eage*—the case presents  
No adjunct to the Muses' diadem.

I won't attempt to footnote Pound's highly complex and literate epitaph, but let me at least try to paraphrase it, because it is one of his most celebrated poems. He wrote it in 1920, as he left London for Paris, fifty years before he died in Venice in 1972, at the age of 87. His alter ego is the fictional poet whose telltale initials are E.P., who is writing a premature epitaph for himself, literally an "Ode for the Choice of his Burial Place." He predicts that his efforts to reform and reinvigorate English poetry will fail, because his kind of poetry will be seen as too refined and disengaged from contemporary events, to qualify as Homeric (his quotation in Classical Greek is from the Song of the Sirens in *The Odyssey*) or even as Villonesque (the quotation in French is from François Villon's autobiographical poem, *Le Grand Testament*, a mock last will and testament in Medieval French). While Ulysses' wife Penelope waits for her husband to return from the Trojan War, the poet, like Ulysses, is listening to the song of the sirens and dallying with the sorceress Circe, concerned only with contemplating beauty and endeavoring to put it into words. The irony is that Pound really started a reform in English poetry that modernized it, and did so in his early years in London. The reform came after he left England, just as he had left America, when the movement Pound invented, which he called Imagism, which stressed concrete imagery in free verse, would

replace the wordy vagueness of late Romantic poetry. Visitors to Pound's grave in Venice, if they come with this mock epitaph of Pound in their heads, know that he became a great poet in spite of himself. His life amounted to a Greek tragedy in three acts—a rise to literary eminence, a reversal of fortune, and a fall from grace—but his poetry and criticism and, so far, fifteen volumes of his letters, have outlasted the humiliation he brought upon himself. Today it can be said that no poet in any language is as influential as Ezra Pound, for modernizing English poetry, and making Modernism the major movement in twentieth century literature.

Now go with me to England, where it is easy to find the grave of Pound's great friend and fellow Modernist, T.S.Eliot. Eliot was buried with great ceremony in 1965 in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, the final resting place of many of the greatest poets in the English language. Travelers go to England from all over the world to see the memorials to Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, not to mention dozens of less famous poets who have had the privilege of joining such high company in death. Eliot's marble slab does not bear his epitaph, but it does bear a carefully chosen line from his late masterpiece, *Four Quartets*: "The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living." The line is from the last of the *Quartets*, "Little Gidding," which is the name of a small chapel in a farm field in Huntingdonshire where King Charles the First of England took refuge from the Protestant rebels under Oliver Cromwell, who were intent on capturing and beheading him. They succeeded, and the result was a brief period of Parliamentary government before the crown was restored to Charles the Second, the son and heir who had taken refuge in France until Cromwell died and the throne was once again secure. The significance for Eliot, an American citizen by birth who became a "subject" of the British king by choice, is that the monarchy was violently overthrown in the seventeenth century but survived and was reinstated in that same century, to continue uninterrupted even by the abdication of King

Edward the Eighth in Eliot's lifetime. Eliot had declared himself a royalist in politics and an Anglican in religion, and Charles the First was both King of England and Defender of the Faith. It is generally conceded that Eliot evolved in his lifetime from an agnostic American poet to a devout English poet, and that there is a definite dividing line in his poetry between the early poems leading up to his first masterpiece, *The Waste Land* in 1922, and those which followed it, culminating in his last masterpiece, *Four Quartets*, in 1942. *The Waste Land* is a nightmare vision of civilization which has lost its belief in God, and with it the meaning and purpose of life, and it remains the most original poem Eliot ever wrote, a Modernist classic, the Anglo-American epic of the twentieth century. *Four Quartets* is a Christian poem, a series of mystical meditations on life and death, centered on four places Eliot had visited that were of great significance to him. The first one is "Burnt Norton," an English country house in Oxfordshire where he was once a guest, with a rose garden that had symbolic religious meaning for him; the second is "East Coker" in Dorset, where Eliot's ancestors had lived before they migrated to New England in the seventeenth century; the third is "Dry Salvages" which are rocks off the Massachusetts coast where Eliot used to sail on excursions from Gloucester, where as a boy he spent summers with relatives, though he had been born in St. Louis; the fourth and last is "Little Gidding," the most mystical of the *Quartets* and a reflection on his own old age and anticipation of death. Eliot's poetry was much concerned with death throughout his life, though death did not come to him until he was 76, more than two decades after *Four Quartets* was published. The whole poem could be called Eliot's epitaph, since there is a memorial plaque to him in the parish church of East Coker, where the Eliot family came from, with the motto "In my end is my beginning" a phrase attributed to Mary, Queen of Scots, which Eliot appropriated for his poem. "East Coker" starts with "In my beginning is my end" and finishes with "In my end is my beginning." "Little Gidding" is the account of a journey to the chapel where King

Charles the First took temporary refuge, with the intention of praying for his own soul in a private sanctuary with great historic significance. The line which is quoted on his tomb in Westminster Abbey is an affirmation of Eliot's faith that life does not end with death, coming amidst surrounding words which a visitor might recall, as he gazes on the monuments and memorials to the poets who enriched the English language in their lifetimes as Eliot did in his:

You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
Here the intersection of the timeless moment  
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

Eliot's mind is dwelling in "Little Gidding" on the deaths of those who have meant the most to him in life, whom he envisions as if they were the dead spirits in Dante's "Divine Comedy," his own favorite poem, who are encased in the fire of Hell or of Purgatory but are able to speak, and tell the stories of their lives, and ask for sympathy from those who are not yet dead and are capable of praying for God's mercy to come down to them. The tone is one of humility, the cardinal virtue for Christian believers, for as he put it in "East Coker," "The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility. Humility is endless." Eliot himself was anything but humble. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, near the end of his career, an occasion of great pride, and even his first notable poem, "The Love-song of J. Alfred

Prufrock,” was an apology for pride. But Eliot’s conversion to Christianity in mid-career was sincere, and in “Little Gidding” he was praying for forgiveness of all his sins in the face of death, articulating his belief that the language of the dead embodies the hope of immortality. A pilgrim contemplating the tomb of T.S. Eliot in Westminster Abbey is invited to share his prayer for the wisdom of humility, no matter what his faith may be.

William Faulkner was wont to call himself a failed poet, because he first tried unsuccessfully to write poetry before he wrote fiction, and only later would he discover how to make poetry out of prose. His ghost is not to be found haunting the family plot in St. Peter’s Cemetery outside Oxford, Mississippi, where he is buried, as surely as it haunts his home in Bailey’s Woods, on the opposite side of this picturesque college town. He bought it in 1930, after the success of his most sensational novel, *Sanctuary*, had made him solvent enough to purchase it. Faulkner’s home is now a part of the Ole Miss campus, a mecca for visitors, and the ideal setting for the great Southern writer which he became. It is an antebellum home, built in 1840 by an Irish planter named Sheegog, and known for a long time as the Old Sheegog Place, but Faulkner renamed it Rowan Oak, the Scottish name for a lucky tree. He did little in his lifetime to change the house, being satisfied with its old-fashioned look of a white-columned neo-Classical front approached by a brick walk lined with tall cedars. Faulkner took a long time in becoming the most deeply native of American writers, but eventually he did, and he wrote one good poem, “This Earth” to express his feeling of vital kinship with the land he loved:

If there be grief, then let it be but rain,  
And this but silver grief for grieving’s sake,  
If these green woods be dreaming here to wake  
Within my heart, if I should rouse again.

But I shall sleep, for where is any death  
While in these blue hills slumberous overhead  
I'm rooted like a tree? Though I be dead  
This earth that holds me fast will find me breath.

The visitor today to Rowan Oak sees the dwelling he called home, which the university has now refinished and restored in a style Faulkner never could afford, but though its present state is beyond his fondest dreams, it reflects his rootedness in the soil. There are the barns where he kept the horses that he loved to ride, including Stonewall, the horse that threw him and hastened his sudden death, in 1962, at the age of 65. By then, he had published some of the most enduring works of American fiction, the short stories and novels which earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950. His major literary creation was a territory of the mind, but it was planted deep in the earth of rural Mississippi. He called his mythical kingdom Yoknapatawpha County, which he founded solidly on a real place, Lafayette County in northern Mississippi, the place where he lived most of his life. Many outsiders could not understand why Faulkner loved rural Mississippi so much, since they regarded it as no more than a backwater of the most backward part of the country. He gave his own explanation in a short essay on Mississippi, declaring that we love “not because but despite: not because of the virtues but despite the faults.” The Swedish Academy understood what he meant when they cited Faulkner as “the epic writer of the American South.” The rhythm of Faulkner’s prose is so compelling at its best that it carries the reader willingly along, on a current of language that is like a river of words. Whole passages of Faulkner’s prose are as memorable as any poem. As you stroll about the grounds of Rowan Oak, you can almost hear the high soft sound of Faulkner’s voice, intoning words like these:

A small voice, a sound sensitive lady poet of the time of my youth said *the scattered tea goes with the leaves and every day a sunset dies*: a poet's extravagance which as quite often mirrors the truth but upside down and backward since the mirror's unwitting manipulator busy in his preoccupation has forgotten that the back of it is glass too: because if they only did, instead of which yesterday's sunset and yesterday's tea both are inextricable from the scattered indestructible uninfusible grounds blown through the endless corridors of tomorrow, into the shoes we will have to walk in and even the sheets we will have (or try) to sleep between: because you escape nothing, you flee nothing; the pursuer is what is doing the running and tomorrow night is nothing but one long sleepless wrestle with yesterday's omissions and regrets.

Jefferson. That was the name Faulkner gave to the fictional county seat of his mythical Yoknapatawpha County. He did so with a definite purpose in mind, as an American writer and a patriot, like most Americans of his generation. Our pilgrimage ends at Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, a hero to Faulkner, and the first truly great American writer. Jefferson was a Virginian as Faulkner was a Mississippian, and Monticello is the shrine of a writer who was the chief architect of American freedom. He rose to be President of the United States mainly through the force of his words. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams served on the committee appointed to write The Declaration of Independence, but Adams told Jefferson "You can write ten times better than I can," and so he was given the job of writing the famous Declaration, which is, even more than the Constitution, our founding document. It is quoted more often than any American document except the Gettysburg Address, which Lincoln wrote in homage to Jefferson. Jefferson having declared our independence in 1776, "four score and seven years" later, in 1863, Lincoln was the President who saved us from breaking into two separate nations. Jefferson's initial sentence is as literary as it is political: "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes that impel them to the separation." Having started with the

greatest periodic sentence in the English language, he followed it with a sentence that is quoted even more often: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Jefferson's words have been on the lips of every American since they were written, and they were on Lincoln's lips when he spoke on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Jefferson's prose, like Faulkner's, has the sweep and resonance of great poetry, and they make Monticello the ultimate place of literary pilgrimage, worthy of a tribute such as this:

#### JEFFERSON

He was engendered by gentility,  
Being Virginian, and a planter's son,  
Virtue seemed somehow rooted in his soul.  
A friendly climate and a fertile soil  
Made cultivation natural for him;  
The very sun could not help smiling down.  
But something still was lacking: liberty.  
His mother's fortune and his father's strength  
Left him no need to labor with his hands,  
And so he labored with his mind instead.  
"I studied law, to learn the worst in men;  
To learn the best, I studied poetry."  
Williamsburg, an English country seat,  
Afforded every civilized pursuit:  
Hunting foxes, gambling, playing cards,  
Dancing at the Governor's soirées--

But best of all, to educate a man,  
Good conversation and good company:  
"I liked philosophy, however dry,  
But from a ruby lip, it was sublime."  
He knew Tidewater, with its land and slaves,  
But in the Western mountains was his heart.  
He honeymooned there, on a snowy night,  
On land he'd cleared already for a home.  
He named it Monticello, "little mount."  
Greek pillars crowned with a Palladian dome,  
Both Classical and Renaissance  
Are blended in the style that suited him.  
"The land is for the living," he declared.  
His death occurred, exactly fifty years  
After the Declaration had rung out,  
loud and clear, the bell of liberty,  
that brought another nation into birth.

Before he died, Jefferson composed his own epitaph, which is to be seen on a monument at his grave in Monticello: It reads "Author of the Declaration of Independence, the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Founder of the University of Virginia." His claims were modest. He left out some of his major achievements: Governor of Virginia, Ambassador Plenipotentiary to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President, and President of the United States. He had campaigned hard to win the presidency from his old friend John Adams, after a bitter, hotly contested election in 1800, so close it had to be decided by a vote of Congress. When in 1804 he was re-elected, it was by a comfortable majority of the American electorate, which at that time consisted entirely of male landowners over 21 years of age. During the two terms he served as President, he negotiated with

Napoleon for the Louisiana Purchase from France, more than doubling the size of the country, and he sent Lewis and Clark on the expedition to the Far West that would eventually enlarge the continental United States to its historic boundaries, between the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. Jefferson proved himself a man of action as well as of words, who could be remembered for either one, but who is remembered for both. Washington was the Father of his Country; but Jefferson was the Founder whose words we quote, whenever we try to say what the United States of America is all about.

William Pratt