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From Ivory to Foolscap: Faulkner's Romance of Writing Materials

IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVEL *THE MANSION* (1959), LINDA SNOPEs Kohl returns to her hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi, as a wounded veteran of the Spanish Civil War. Fighting for the loyalists alongside her husband, the Jewish sculptor-turned-pilot Barton Kohl, Linda loses her hearing from the explosion that fells Kohl's plane and kills him. When she first returns to Jefferson, Linda brings with her a notepad and pencil so that others can write to communicate with her. Her friend Gavin Stevens, however, gives her as a present the more elegant writing device of an ivory tablet, which Gavin's nephew Chick describes as "a little pad of thin ivory leaves just about big enough to hold three words at a time, with gold corners, on little gold rings to turn the pages, with a little gold stylus thing to match" (872). Sometimes called "table[s], tablet[s], writing-tablet[s] or writing tables," these devices "were fairly common objects" from the sixteenth to the early-twentieth century when they were largely replaced by "paper notebook[s]," H. R. Woudhuysen explains (5), noting that "Perhaps the essential feature of these writing-tables [is] that they could be wiped clean and reused" (7). Thomas Jefferson employed an ivory notebook in which he "inscribed notes, expenditures, and other quotidian details" (Hayes 99). Benjamin Franklin owned one, as did Jane Austen (Stallybrass 1350). In his comedic poem "Verses Written in a Lady's Ivory Table-Book," Jonathan Swift describes a woman who makes notes to herself regarding such items as a "*receipt for paint*" and "*a safe way to use perfume*." Her "coxcomb[]" lovers, however, "blot . . . out" these practicalities of eighteenth-century feminine life and replace them with romantic conceits so clichéd they do nothing to move her—"lovely nymph, pronounce my doom" and "*Madam, I die without your grace*" (68). The poem concludes by depicting these "wealthy" but "fool[ish]" suitors as "gold pencil[s] tipp'd with lead" (69).

This description of an inept courtier is not far removed from many critics' estimation of Gavin Stevens, whose relationship with Linda was decidedly non-sexual. "For reasons that two readings of the novel do not yield to me," Irving Howe lamented in his review of *The Mansion* for

The New Republic, Gavin and Linda “fail to marry or do anything else that might reasonably be expected from a man and a woman in love” (506). In his 1963 study, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, Cleanth Brooks describes Gavin as a “romantic idealist,” who “establish[es]” with Linda a “Platonic relationship” (203). More recent critics have tended to agree with this assessment, albeit with a wide degree of variance as to what this kind of relationship entails. For Linda Westervelt, “Gavin is unable to respond to [Linda] with more than platonic friendship,” her reluctant acceptance of which “emphasizes her generosity and courage” (80). For Hee Kang, though, Gavin’s offer of “Platonic love” represents an attempt to ensnare Linda within “men’s ideological and linguistic dominance” that she must resist (26, 39). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *Platonic* in the sense of interpersonal relations as “spiritual rather than physical . . . love, affection, or friendship” (*OED*). I argue, however, that understanding Linda and Gavin’s relationship in this manner obscures the way in which their romance indeed becomes physically embodied. In what is perhaps the emotional climax of the novel, Gavin journeys to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to visit Linda where she works during the Second World War as a shipyard riveter. Linda arranges two rooms for them at a hotel and has the beds arranged “with just the wall between” them so that “any time during the night I can knock on the wall and you can hear it and if I hold my hand against the wall I can feel you answer” (902). Before they go to bed, Linda tells Gavin she loves him; Gavin says he loves her. Linda tells him she can lip-read those words but asks him to “write it on the [ivory] tablet anyway [so] I can have that for a—what do you call it?—eye opener in the morning” (905). W. H. Auden has remarked on the “extraordinary platonic love scenes between [Linda] and Gavin” (144). Yet to understand these scenes, we must attend to the particular kind of physical intimacy they share where the body of their relationship becomes the materials of writing.

Gavin and Linda’s relationship in *The Mansion* thematizes this connection between the physical body and the materiality of communication. The ivory tablet Gavin buys for Linda is said to be “in return for [a] gold cigarette lighter engraved G L S . . . that she gave him” (872). When Gavin protests that he has only two initials, “G S,” Linda tells him that “a monogram should have three so I loaned you one of mine” (835). At the level of language, Linda inserts herself into Gavin. Her initial penetrates his and reverses symbolically the normative

penetration of a woman by a man. Such a reading is further suggested by the semi-phallic shape of an upper-case L. Linda is also tall, “too tall to have a shape,” Chick says, which again connects her initial to her body (856). These metaphoric bodies are brought closer to physical bodies because Linda has them engraved on the sturdy surface of metal. The metal has been stamped by a machine press into the shape of a cigarette lighter, and so the inscribed surface can be stood upright. In the course of operating the lighter, the letters are turned in multiple directions, illustrating various positions of sexual coupling. Gavin, however, rejects not only the romantic advance represented by the lighter but even the gift itself “because nobody could unconvince him he could taste the fluid through his cob pipe” (872). Gavin’s view on the matter evinces a certain fussiness, which extends to his relationship to the body. Linda puts letters over liquid, which can combust with the fire of an adult relationship, but Gavin refuses the advance, complaining of the bad taste it leaves in his mouth.

Rather than move toward physical intimacy, Gavin provides a gift in the form of the ivory writing tablet and matching gold pencil. Unlike the present of a writing instrument (e.g., a pen) or writing surface (e.g., stationery), this gift is a self-contained unit. Because “each sheet,” Gavin says, is only “about the size of a playing card,” the surface of the tablet cannot “contain more than about three words at a time.” The verb *contain* signals the way in which the tablet has more physical depth than paper or other, relatively thin, writing materials. Gavin uses a simile to describe the play of words on the tablet as “like an anagram, [or] an acrostic.” An anagram rearranges the letters of a word to make a new one; an acrostic forms a word from the first letter of a list of words or lines of poetry. Both puzzles deal with the arrangement of letters. But in trying to transpose their relationship onto the surface of the ivory tablet, Gavin himself is irritated by its small size, calling it “a bijou, a gewgaw, a bangle, feminine; really almost useless” (891). The fact that he buys the tablet for Linda suggests a good deal of projection on his part as to what constitutes femininity, but the specific terms he uses may signal something more than male chauvinism. Bijous, gewgaws, and bangles refer to showy kinds of jewelry, which suggest that he sees the tablet as a kind of unnecessary accoutrement. Yet there is a wrapping quality connoted by the term *bangle*, which suggests a bracelet, and *bijou*, which likely derives from the Breton *besou*, “ring with a stone” (*OED*). Moreover, the ivory leaves of the pad are held together by “little gold rings” (872). The

ivory tablet may thus represent a kind of inscribed wedding band. Instead of gold surrounding Linda's skin, the tablet is framed by "gold rings" and "gold corners"; instead of a marker of physical coupling, the "little gold stylus thing" remains an instrument of writing (872).

When Gavin visits Linda in Pascagoula during her time working in the shipyard, the tablet plays a central role in their interaction. "She came out with the shift she belonged in," Gavin says, "already handing me the tablet and stylus before she kissed me" (899). In one sense, the medium of writing takes precedence over their physical intimacy because she gives the tablet to Gavin prior to kissing him. Yet the inverse is just as plausible. After giving him the tablet, Linda "cling[s] to [Gavin], hard, saying, 'Tell me everything,'" such that he has to "free [himself] to write" (899). If she had kissed him and then given him the tablet, this could be a social cue to write. Instead, she cancels this cue by interrupting it with a kiss. Gavin describes the short notations he makes as "three- or-four-word bursts and gaggles" (899). Linda and Gavin's intimacy here would seem to warrant the interpretation that *bursts* has a sexual double meaning. Gavin transfers Linda's affection back onto the page, writing these bursts with the stylus. What to make, though, of the other term he uses to describe the marks of inscription—*gaggles*? The *OED* indicates that *gaggle* is "Probably an onomatopoeic formation . . . used to imitate the cry of the goose." Gavin describes Linda's voice after she loses her hearing as that of a "quacking duck[]" (892). Gavin's reference to his notations on the tablet as *gaggles* indicates both an in-kind written response to Linda's verbal request that he "Tell [her] everything" and a sexual, guttural cry simultaneous with the bursts (899). At the hotel in Pascagoula where Linda rents for them two adjoining rooms, they meet in Gavin's room before going back to their respective beds to sleep. When Linda asks Gavin to write "I love you" on the tablet to serve as an "eye opener in the morning," she adds an emotional dimension to their exchange (905). In this sense, love is presented as a kind of intoxication concretized on the tablet.

Both during this episode and later when she returns to Jefferson after the Second World War, Linda keeps the tablet close to her body: according to Chick, "She had pockets in all her clothes into which the little ivory tablet with its clipped stylus exactly fitted" (1056). Linda and Gavin go to the beach after they meet at the shipyard. Once they have "parked the car," Linda "take[s] the tablet and stylus from [Gavin] and thrust[s] them into her pocket" (899-900). Linda assumes a commanding

role in this interaction, putting the phallic stylus in her own pocket. It must be noted, however, that she puts both items into her pocket. Rather than simply a coital filling or penetration, the symbolism indicates that Linda brings not only the instrument of marking but also the surface of inscription close to her. Eventually, Chick says, Gavin “knew all” of the pockets, “reach[ing] [in] his hand and [taking] . . . out” the tablet and stylus (1056). While this bespeaks physical intimacy, Gavin removes the instruments of inscription, reversing the way in which Linda puts them in and again refiguring the normative sexuality of a man as the subject of penetration. Sexuality has a strong component of social construction. What might be left behind in this analysis, though, is how the writing materials can mediate between cultural construction and lived experience.

The tablet as a kind of bodily attachment is suggested even before Linda deplanes in Memphis on her first trip home. Gavin and Chick pick her up from the airport, and, not knowing that Linda has brought with her a notepad and pencil, Gavin brings with him a slate so that he and Linda can communicate. In response, Chick suggests that “maybe she’ll already have one built in on her cuff, or maybe strapped to her leg like aviators carry maps” (856). In the early twentieth century, pilots made use of “strip maps, mounted on mechanical scrolling devices strapped to their legs to prevent loss from gusts of wind in open cockpits”; “by the end of the [1920s] the United States’ airways were linked by a series of strip charts and sectional maps” (Ehrenberg 194). Faulkner trained as an aviator with the Canadian RAF during the First World War, though the Armistice was signed before he could deploy to Europe. Having something strapped to her leg speaks to a joining of text and body. Chick’s erotic imagination is thus displaced onto writing materials, as the map would be attached to her thigh. Still, Linda is hardly a passive recipient of marking. Agency would seem to lie with her as the pilot. Chick’s other formulation—that perhaps Linda has a cuff built into her clothing as a way of communicating—plays on the phrase *off the cuff*, “on the spur of the moment, unrehearsed,” “as if from notes made on the shirt-cuff” (*OED*). The cuff here is a place of inscription, which again puts Linda in an agentive position to follow her own notes. While the aviator’s map is more overtly sexual because of its location, both of these devices imagined by Chick put the materials of writing close to Linda’s body.

Gavin and Linda use the tablet not only as a material space of intimacy but as part of their discussion of the level of closeness achieved in their relationship. Gavin writes to Linda on the tablet, “*We have had everything*,” but Linda says, “No.” She speaks as he writes. Gavin writes, “*Yes*” on the tablet. She again says, “No.” Gavin then writes, “*YES* this time in letters large enough to cover . . . the face of the tablet” (1056). In a sense, Gavin covers the face of their interaction with writing; instead of kisses, he writes, *Yes*. While Linda never learned to lip-read well, Gavin says that “she could read single words if they were slow” (891). So why does Gavin write and not move his lips? One explanation is that he, as is so often the case, turns to writing as a substitute for physicality. The large *YES* goes beyond an affirmation and crowds out everything else. Rather than a verbal, more traditionally imagined Platonic relationship, they have had their shared affections at least in part on the tablet. After this yes-no exchange, Gavin “erase[s]” the tablet “clean with the heel of his palm and wr[ites] *Take someone with You to hear you Will be killed*” (1056). Gavin refers here to Linda’s impending car trip leaving Jefferson and the idea that she cannot drive alone with her lack of hearing. In order to write this, Gavin wipes out his affirmation of the fullness of their relationship. Rather than heed (or even discuss) Gavin’s advice, Linda changes the topic back to their romance: “I have never loved anybody but you,” she says (1056). This time it is Gavin who writes, “*No*”; she says, “*Yes*”; “He wrote *No* again and even while she said ‘*Yes*’ again he wrote *No No No No* until he had completely filled the tablet” (1056). Rather than his earlier, almost cosmic *YES*, Gavin’s *No* is presented in a staccato manner. There is a breakage to his language, and the use of *No* resists the impulse for grand statements. Gavin could articulate this simply with a gesture or a single word for her to lip-read. But he uses the tablet, keeping matters there so that more writing comes into play. Finally, Gavin “erase[s]” this series of *No*’s and instead writes, “*Deed*” (1056), referring to the deed of title that Linda signs in order to turn over the mansion to the de Spain family before she leaves Jefferson. Even as Gavin tries to change the subject to property, the double meaning of the word *deed* returns their conversation to the body. Perhaps paradoxically, though, *deed* in the sexual sense is somewhat less physical than the invocation of property here since so much of this deed takes place for them within the confines of the ivory tablet.

The role of the ivory tablet as a medium through which to discuss relationships extends to the way Margaret, Gavin’s sister, uses it at the

dinner she holds to celebrate Chick's return to Jefferson. Chick says his mother "used the pad like the rest of us" in order to communicate with Linda but that "it was just coincidental, like any other gesture of the hands while talking" (872). The mere fact of using the tablet is described as more important than signification through written words. The tablet takes on the status of something added not as part of the communication but as a kind of ornament. Linda talks to the other dinner guests about the writers and artists she knew while fighting in Spain. There was "a poet," she says, "that was going to be better than Pushkin only he got himself killed" (873). Margaret replies that it is "tragic, to be cut off so young, the work unfinished," but Linda disagrees with her: "What line or paragraph or even page can you compose and write to match giving your life to say No to people like Hitler and Mussolini?" (873). Life is the important thing for Linda, which makes giving up one's life to oppose a dictator all the more sublime for her. Gavin agrees with Linda insofar as the work of human endeavor as lived enterprise goes beyond art. "She's right. She's absolutely right," Gavin says, "and thank God for it" (873).

Over and against his sister's view about the tragedy of losing potential literature, Gavin affirms Linda's embrace of the body, at least theoretically. "Nothing is ever lost," Gavin maintains (873). Artwork cannot match the intensity and importance of lived experience. And yet for no particular linguistic reason, "Gavin tak[es] the pad away from" his sister as he speaks (873). In one sense, this is ironic because he insists on the higher value of action over writing. The act of taking the device of inscription is important in that it has a performative element and has become a marker of who is talking. In seizing the conversation, Gavin comes to emphasize how words by themselves have no life without connection to physicality. Gavin praises Linda's former husband as "virile, alive" and adds that Linda's "emotional and physical life" with him trumps even his art (873, 874). Kohl's energy distinguishes him from "a hunk of beef," so it is not just bodies for Gavin that are important but lives lived in a passionate manner (873). When Gavin says that "Nothing is ever lost," Chick thinks, "Except Linda" for his uncle (873). Here Gavin's logic with regard to his relationship with Linda perhaps faces the most pressure. In order for Linda not to be lost to him, he must compete with Kohl's virility. Enacting this competition on the tablet is a difficult proposition, which may, however, be the point. Much of the beauty of the novel lies in the delicacy of intimacy without sex. If the tablet can hold Gavin and Linda's romance when pushed to the limit, it makes their

relationship on textual materials all the more moving, situated in a fragile manner at the very threshold of text and body.

The other medium used by Gavin and Linda to communicate is a foolscap pad. Originally an early-modern watermark depicting a jester in his distinctive hat, *foolscap* began to be used in the eighteenth century as a name for paper of somewhat varying sizes, similar in proportion but roughly fifty percent larger than today's letter-size paper in the United States (*OED*). Because of the ivory tablet's small size, communication here is more limited in terms of sustaining an extended inscription of words, so when Gavin and Linda "had something to discuss that there must be no mistake about," they used this "foolscap pad." In order for them to use the foolscap pad in a comfortable manner, Linda installs a "mantel" in her sitting room "at the exact right height and width to support" it. Though Linda often tries to move beyond writing to connect with the body, she provides a literal space for written communication to take place. The space has a certain coziness to it, as the mantel is designed to fit the shape of the pad. Moreover, Gavin writes in such a way "that she could read the words as [his] hand formed them." Linda and Gavin must stand close together for this communication to take place. There is virtually no delay between signification and reception, which would seem to be why Gavin says that this interaction is "like speech, almost like hearing" (891). For Gavin and Linda, though, this writing may be more like speech than verbal communication as traditionally conceived. Because of the tone of Linda's voice, both Gavin and Linda find this form of communication awkward. "When you say I'm whispering," she tells Gavin, "it feels like thunder inside my head"; when she speaks louder, Linda says that she "cant even feel" any sensations of speech at all (892). Writing, then, is the closest Gavin and Linda come to speech, raising the question of which has greater intimacy, the ivory tablet or the foolscap pad. Perhaps this is best understood in terms of different kinds of closeness. The pad used at the mantel offers a less mediated form of communication, but the tablet provides a thicker, more elegant mediation that enhances Linda and Gavin's affective bond.

Over a pad of foolscap at the mantel Linda and Gavin have their most unambiguous discussion of the role sexual intercourse should play in their relationship. Shortly after returning to Jefferson from abroad, Linda comes to Gavin lonely and despondent, saying she has no friends. Gavin writes and Linda speaks in the "duck's voice." In the midst of the

conversation, Linda says, “you can me,” the space in the text left open: “That’s right,” Gavin says, narrating this section of the novel, “She used the explicit word.” Gavin blushes, writing to Linda on the foolscap paper that “*what shocks is that all that magic passion excitement be summed up & dismissed in that one bald unlovely sound*” (892). For Gavin, the combination of the vulgar term and its intonation removes the romantic element of sex. Gavin’s views on sex are largely conjectural due to his “virginity” or at least “celibacy” (851). Foolscap thus turns out to be a multiply inflected metaphor: Gavin is both a fool about sex and not fool enough to fool around. Moreover, foolscap suggests the combination of *fool* with *scamp*, a term that might be considered ironic when applied to Gavin—he’s certainly no rascal—but only partly so because he indeed scampers away from physical contact.

The markers of Gavin’s desire become inscribed on the foolscap pad in a rougher way than on the ivory tablet. In a scene that parallels the back-and-forth exchanges involving the tablet, Gavin refuses Linda both marriage and sex, writing on the foolscap that “*we are the 2 in all the world who can love each other without having to* the end of it tailing off in a sort of violent rubric” (893). The vehemence of this notation marks a severe self-denial and the difficulty for Gavin of upholding his antiquated sense of propriety concretized in the directive of a rubric. Yet this rubric may also be associated with the new rules of sexual relations that Gavin resists. Either way, this mark signifies a frustration with following instructions and staying within boundaries of prescribed action. Alternatively, an older sense of the term *rubric* denotes emphasis. Often “written or printed in red,” a rubric highlights a portion of text “in a book or a manuscript” (*OED*). As a vehemently inscribed mark, Gavin’s rubric lies at the boundary between text and thing; its metaphoric redness evokes the blood of desire. Finally, rubrics deployed for emphasis are often used in Bibles to mark Jesus’s words. Given the violence of the rubric Gavin makes, he evokes on the page the blood of Christ, which brings his Faulknerian endurance into a religious framework.

The final chapters of *The Mansion* bring to a close not only Gavin and Linda’s romance—she finally leaves Jefferson—but also another, more sinister part of their relationship, namely their conspiracy to kill Linda’s father Flem by using her cousin Mink. Mink plans to kill Flem because Flem was instrumental in sending him to prison. Mink is illiterate and generally receives messages by having them read to him. Gavin arranges

Mink's release from prison so that he has an opportunity to kill Flem, whose murder marks not only the end of this novel but of the Snopes trilogy as a whole, and signals the shift from the Old South's reliance on agricultural mass production to the New South's foundation in finance capitalism. Faulkner associated himself with an old money class of southerners, and Gavin's engineering of Flem's murder enacts a wish fulfillment of recovered glory. Mink is first introduced as a character in *The Hamlet* through a description of his name scrawled on his mailbox. "It seemed to shout," the narrator of this section tells us, "all capitals, MINKSNOPEs, sprawling, without any spacing between the two words, trailing off and uphill and over the curve of the top [of the mailbox] to include the final letters" (72). This lettering follows closely both the derivation of Mink's name from a small, vicious animal and his vicious behavior in carrying out two murders. The letters highlight his character not only semantically through the association with the animal but in their roughly inscribed shape.

While Gavin is far more engaged than Mink with the semantic meaning of words, material inscription plays a crucial role for him not only in his romance with Linda but also in his capacity as a lawyer, for which she retains him. Composing a letter to the prison board in support of Mink's parole, Gavin hides "behind the rational garrulity of the pencil flying along the ruled lines" (1008). According to Plato, the early Greek philosopher Protagoras held that the *nomos* (law or custom) could be understood as analogous to the "lines" "the writing-master . . . draws" on children's "tablet[s]" for them "to follow" (147). Scholars have debated whether Protagoras refers here to "a tracing of the letters" or to the "lines ruled in . . . copy-books" (Guthrie 68n). In either case, the materials provide a physical teaching device to show how "an individual's conduct must not stray outside these lines" (Turner 68). The distinction between *nomos* and *physis* (nature) was central to Greek thought—so much so that Aristotle refers to it as the "widest range of common-place argument" (173a). While the artificiality of this distinction has repeatedly been demonstrated, it continues to resurface, often in the guise of culture versus nature. Faulkner's portrayal of Gavin is so close to this idea that it bears some reflection. He is, we might say, virtually all *nomos* with no *physis*. "You jest wanted to keep your own skirts clean," Gavin's friend V. K. Ratliff says with regard to Gavin's plan to have Mink kill Flem (1005). But Gavin denies this: "'No,' [he] said. 'It was because I not only believe in and am an advocate of fate and destiny, I admire

them; I want to be one of the instruments too, no matter how modest” (1005). Writing rather than direct physical action is the touchstone of Gavin’s character. Faulkner presents writing materials as a space of interplay between text and action, idea and body. Gavin’s relationship with Linda in this sense has a physical aspect, just as their roles in Flem’s murder are not entirely a matter of words. Faulkner presents in *The Mansion* a sustained meditation on just how much words on things can serve to mediate between language and the physical world. Gavin’s efforts to use Mink as an instrument by which to kill Flem shows the way in which the material text can enact a bridging function as a means to an end. The ivory tablet, however, becomes for Gavin and Linda almost an end in itself.

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