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ENDURING AND PREVAILING: AMBIGUITY IN FAULKNER'S NOBEL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

David Rampton

William Faulkner is justly famous for his extraordinary body of work, but many know him first and foremost for his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in particular the passage in which he claims that “man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” Faulkner goes on to explain: “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.” By way of conclusion, Faulkner invokes the role of the writer, suggesting that this “spirit” must be the writer’s subject, which he defines as “courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice.” Hortatory, grandiloquent, and inspirational, this speech is also enigmatic, contradictory, and loosely phrased. Are the nouns linked by all those co-ordinating conjunctions typical elements in a quasi-endless series or rough equivalents? If mere endurance is a lesser thing, how can a “spirit” of “endurance” make immortality possible? What about some of the other truths of the human heart that Faulkner knew well, egoism and fear and jealousy and vengeance? Why are they not mentioned here? If the process described is mainly inward looking, a revelation of our individual capacity for prevailing, how does this work as a group project, especially if other prospective members of the group disagree on the essentials laid out here? By what authority does this writer tell his readers what to do? Is the end-of-the-career Faulkner more didactic and less cogent on such subjects, when speaking of his own fiction and others? How contingent on contemporary history – the threat of nuclear war and mass destruction – are Faulkner’s claims? Given all the questions in this brief summary and the unasked ones they imply, teasing out the implications of these ideas is crucial for our understanding of Faulkner’s lifework, which often features extended analyses of the affective qualities mentioned above, and a similarly idiosyncratic blend of high-minded injunction and elusive generalization.

In what follows I want to look at some of his novels with these formulations in mind, watching the idea of enduring, compassionating (as Whitman would say), and prevailing develop as Faulkner discovers his abilities and interests as a writer. Even though everybody knows the famous speech, interestingly enough not a lot has been written about how its specific recommendations actually function. My survey begins in the early stages of Faulkner’s career, the 1920s, and culminates in a brief commentary on his 1954 novel, *A Fable*, in which he actually gives some of the lines from the Nobel speech to one of his characters, presenting readers with a fascinating example of complex self-reflexive mimicry of the kind that Faulkner excelled at. The totalizing power of his vision is clear, yet such stratagems suggest that the “last word” on this subject is destined never to be spoken.

We begin with *Mosquitoes*, one of Faulkner’s novels of apprenticeship, published in 1927 and written at a point when his career was still all potential. Nevertheless, the idea of prevailing by rising above the mundanity of the humdrum world is already central to Faulkner’s vision, and art is the means by which such a movement can be enacted. In *Mosquitoes* there is an artist figure, a sculptor, who makes objects “in marble temporarily caught and hushed yet passionate still for escape, passionate and simple and eternal in the equivocal derisive darkness of the world” (263). This sculpture is an evocative form of ekphrasis, one of Faulkner’s favourite devices. It involves a writer using a non-verbal work of art – a painting, an urn, a statue – to illustrate how art is both infinite and finite, eloquent and mute, yearning to be free of the

experiential world but grounded in it, and capable of radiating a silence so rich that it seems to speak. The fact that the world looks “eternal in the equivocal derisive darkness” is bad news for those hoping the darkness will reveal its secrets or improve our capacity for transcendence. That said, it is a good description of where Faulkner gets his best material and how aware we should be of its equivocations.

In *Mosquitoes* the struggle to develop such ideas is mostly fought in wordy exchanges and comes to no tidy conclusion. At the end of the novel, a writer figure named Fairchild pauses and tries to define genius, something he calls “that passive state of the heart with which the mind, the brain, has nothing to do at all, in which the hackneyed accidents which make up this world – love and life and death and sex and sorrow – brought together by chance in perfect proportions, take on a kind of splendid and timeless beauty” (533). We see how early Faulkner liked these formulations: a vaguely anti-intellectual slant, large conceptual categories in a sonorous list, stitched together by the word “and,” and the easy dream of an amorphous perfection. Here he insists that art is transformative and best understood as a specialized way of knowing, one that is capable of tidying up the messy business of existence in order to make its significance clearer. Yet Fairchild says it, not Faulkner, and Fairchild is drunk when he makes his pronouncement. His interlocutors are more like teenagers at a bar than thought adventurers in the world of aesthetics. In any event, most of Faulkner’s work, early and late, moves towards such ambiguous endings, in which a set of ideas is debated by two men who have separated themselves from the group, ideas couched in a language that is designed to sound provisionally conclusive. The dangers of estheticism, in which death and sorrow casually morph into “splendid and timeless beauty,” are clear enough in such passages. The simplistic nature of such jumbo definitions will give way to Faulkner’s more mature meditations on such subjects.

Sartoris was his third novel, and the first in which he explores the idea of how a specific family approaches the challenge of enduring, even though its male progeny do not endure, but rather die violent deaths in World War I and its aftermath. The action of *Sartoris* is located in the American South, and the relations between its families and their engagement with history are on Faulkner’s mind. Much is made for example, of the aristocratic past, a family mansion and rooms that are “a fitting place for dead Sartorises to gather and speak among themselves of glamorous and old disastrous days” (613). Having outlived the flesh, they are now looking for the meaning of those experiences, at a loss to know where “spirit” might be found. These ghostly characters move about in an ekphrastic house filled with more ekphrastic objects, a family bible, duelling pistols, a sword. None of these are used now for their original purposes, but the silent speaking that they still are able to perform forces us to think of a passion and spontaneity that once obtained in this house, even as we contemplate such objects in all their eerie decay. If this family is to endure, someone must tell their story. Fading names in family bibles are not enough. The novel offers a tentative conclusion to this dilemma. We must begin, suggests Faulkner, by remembering that genuine knowledge of others is difficult if not impossible. As one of the Sartoris patriarchs puts it, humanity aspires to escape this life by aiming for another, a false paradise “filled with every man’s illusion of himself and with the conflicting illusions of him that parade through the minds of other illusions” (616). In a peroration, Faulkner evokes the mythic grandeur of western culture and its links with national violence, when he talks about an off-duty God who oversees our “glamorous fatality, like silver pennons downrushing at sunset, or a dying fall of horns along the road to Roncevaux” (875). In other words, one way to understand the history of the South is to see it as a tableau for Romance literature. If absurdity is the human condition, which another character in *Sartoris* suggests, then the “Chanson de Roland,” the epic

poem that memorializes the battle fought at Roncevaux, can be seen as a precursor to the novel itself. This is what makes *Sartoris* a study in heroic endurance, albeit a somewhat inconclusive one. It also suggests that the violence, tempestuous love affairs, and legends these things engender make them a significant part of what ennoble humankind's quest for meaning and its yearning for mythic status.

Faulkner's first unequivocal masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), gives us three views of the endurance/prevaling subject, as described in the chapters devoted to the three Compson brothers. Benjy's monologue, despite all its fragmentation and confusion, is also a hymn to a particularly moving kind of endurance. Tempted to think of him as Lear's "poor, forked animal" we are also struck by just how admirable his capacity for endurance is, and how those around him must be judged by their capacity for compassion, their ability to register and respect the intense emotional phantasmagoria that is Benjy's life. The richly reciprocal relation he has with his sister Candace, the woman so poorly treated by all the neurotic, insecure men in her family, is a case in point. With Benjy, the reader is invited to find a story of human survival among the fragments.

Quentin's monologue is a different sort of collection of fragments, one that undermines the notion of endurance by attacking those who fall back on it as delusional. Here is a typical passage:

I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of gray half light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who.

This way lies madness. Quentin cannot see the patterns, as the terse, monosyllabic statements and questions at the end make clear. The relative pronoun "who," the verb "to be" – these announce the conditions of enduring but are empty formulations in and of themselves. The only defence Quentin has against his own gloomy conclusions is his father's gloomier ones, and they are not much help. Quentin's concerns about his sister's lost virginity, his wild reverie about killing first her and then himself, his arguments with his father about time and change, his inability to discern meaning in something as real yet evanescent as a powerful emotion – all these make him more or less defenceless. His father insists on the triumph of nihilism: "there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was" (1014). This is the contradiction that is too hard for Quentin to deal with. He is forced to conclude the past is not past when it is present in the mind, and the present with its indivisible moments that immediately flee into the past is not present either.

Which leaves us with Jason. His diatribe against the spirit of compassion, against the idea that the human species has achieved something, against the very notion of a bond like spirit that holds the community together - this locates him very clearly in the nether regions of Faulkner's world. However, Jason has a demonic energy that is very seductive, and his iniquity is so compellingly conveyed that it can leave the reader's moral sense overwhelmed by her aesthetic one. Does Jason's sense of humour mitigate the effects of his vile cruelty? Does he speak for his author in any way? Jason firmly endorses the negation in the title of Faulkner's novel, but what does *The Sound and the Fury* itself contribute to this question of the capacity to endure and, ultimately, prevail? The allusion to Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* draws our attention, not to a universal truth but to one character's tentative assessment. After all, this is Macbeth's reaction to the death of his wife and the predicament in which his murderous course has left him. But the

forces of good prevail and the victims of his treachery – Banquo, Duncan, Malcolm – become symbols of a positive movement, the triumph of justice revealed by history for those willing to take the long view.

As I Lay Dying (1930) followed soon after *The Sound and the Fury*, and it takes up in strikingly similar language the idea we have been tracking. Darl, the most thoughtful and articulate member of the Bundren household, asks his version of what is essentially Mr. Compson's question: "How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures wearily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls." The doll is the resident ekphrastic object here, and it speaks of vanished childhoods and lost emotions, but also of a paralysis that looks fatal. Judging by the mix of goofy hopefulness and studied despair that characterizes the Bundrens on their burial quest, this description of human life is definitely to be filed on the negative side. Making fun of the body often involves turning it into a machine or, as here, a puppet pushed and pulled by a machine. So at first it might well seem that instead of endurance or prevailing in Darl's world, there is just twitching and stillness. As one of Faulkner's most eminent critics comments: "From the depths of his own madness, Darl discovers – and makes us discover – the madness of the world" (Bleikasten 194).

Yet Darl is differentiated from the rest of his family by his interest in aesthetic issues generally, of the kind that Faulkner referred to early and late in his Nobel speech. He likes to put frames around things to see how they affect our perception, and there are passages that seem to undermine the pessimistic conclusion he comes to: Addie's engaging summary of her plotted vengeance, Vardaman's intense communing with animals, Darl's own vivid depiction of the artistic features that he sees in the landscape and in the structures humanity builds, the entire crazy mosaic that characterizes the life of this family.

Darl concludes the novel laughing hysterically and repeating the word "yes". This acceptance is tricky to deal with because it can mean so many things. Faulkner could be saying that this hissing sound, this sibilant frenzy marks the end of language's ability to communicate. But it could also mean that Darl accepts the absurdity of life that endures nonetheless, that he says yes to death and incipient madness precisely because they are part of the whole range of experiences which his family has had on its journey. It could even be a powerful endorsement of the centrality of desire à la Joyce's Molly Bloom, who finishes her monologue with a similar repetition of affirmatives. Or it may resist such unpacking altogether. Perhaps it is presumptuous for humankind to imagine that it could accept or reject, understand or comment insightfully on anything as complex and amorphous as life itself.

If we turn to a novel like *Sanctuary*, we recognize very quickly that this is a new departure for Faulkner. Because it is a *roman noir*, with Gothic overtones, a sleazy subject that appeals to our prurient interests, it would seem to be exempt from the large questions that have guided us this far in focussing on Faulkner's central concerns. True, its principal female character, Temple Drake, is a survivor, but she is presumably not what Faulkner had in mind when he talked about endurance, our capacity for spiritual uplift – or is she? Here is Temple Drake, sequestered by a would-be rapist, looking at a clock dial:

She watched the final light condense into the clock face, and the dial change from a round orifice in the darkness to a disc suspended in nothingness, the original chaos, and change in turn to a crystal ball holding in its still and cryptic depths the ordered chaos of the intricate and shadowy world upon whose scarred flanks the

old wounds whirl onward at dizzy speed into darkness lurking with new disasters.
(283)

The speaking silence of this particular object has a lot to say about time and time passing, primal eras and the beginning of history, but not only that. The cosmic perspective suggested by words like “nothingness” and “original chaos” suggests a conflation of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic that gives a new dimension to such a description. Round clocks become cognate with round worlds. Such is the grandeur of humanity that human time and its geological counterpart are indivisible after all. Those defending the “prevailing” view have something to be encouraged about here.

The stand-in in this novel for the writer is Horace Benbow. Shocked by the equanimity evinced by the participants in the sordid drama he has witnessed, he listens to insects buzzing a “a low monotonous pitch,” a sound that is compared to “the chemical agony of a world left stark and dying above the tide-edge of the fluid in which it lived and breathed.” Horace sees the blight on the American pastoral landscape and evokes “the friction of the earth on its axis, approaching that moment when it must decide to turn on or to remain forever still” (332), an apocalyptic moment, if there ever was one. Other elements of the Nobel speech, the “dying evening,” the fear of nuclear destruction, the bells ringing out doom, find their roots in passages like this, where Faulkner’s inquisitorial characters try to figure out their place in a world that seems so much larger than they are, so much more impenetrable than the daily mysteries with which they have to deal, so sordid (Horace is lusting after a young girl) and so inexplicably inimical.

Light in August (1932) fits the pattern quite neatly as well. Once again, descriptions of art and nature are enlisted to serve as the backdrop to the violent interactions in three interwoven plots. The principal character is Joe Christmas, a savage loner who absolutely fascinates Faulkner. His plight, to be of mixed race and to have internalized the hatred that the community feels for him, makes him a victim, one of the most sympathetic in Faulkner’s work, despite the murder that this laconic outsider commits. His prison, like Hamlet’s, is psychosomatic. Faulkner says of him: “he did not then know that, like the eagle, his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage” (517). Joe Christmas may not say much, but this evocation of the elegance and power of America’s national symbol suggests not only the capacity to endure but some form of transcendence, however partial, that might be possible in a cosmos less cruel and barbarous than it seems.

There is a suggestion in the story that Joe’s propensity for violence is caused by his mistrust of women and his own fatidic doom. Some of the white men Faulkner included in the novel are in every way as violent, which would seem to sweep away the blatantly racist, deterministic “black blood” explanation that Faulkner offers us here. Joe has also been mistreated from childhood, by a stepfather against whom he finally rebels, but not before he has been half-killed in a beating. The same ekphrastic emphasis on images – he watches the “slow flowing of time beneath him”; there is a collection of urns that remind us of time standing still and passing – is used by Faulkner to set up an alternative world to the one in which Joe’s murder at the hands of vigilantes takes place. When they stab him to death, we are told that his blood seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age ... It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. (743)

“[P]eaceful valleys”? “[R]eassuring streams”? These details from a bucolic paradise figure oddly in an account of how blood pours out of a man being stabbed to death. Nevertheless, they identify the symbolic character of this encounter, the way time smooths out violent eruptions, and memory’s capacity to confirm us in our pastoral isolation. Faulkner’s interest in depicting squalid circumstances, the horrific thisness of America’s violent past and present, in order to orchestrate his thesis re endurance and prevailing grows more multi-faceted with every novel published.

As an account of the tensions characterized by the race question in American history, *Absalom, Absalom!* is another powerful indictment of cruelty and violence. For our purposes, it is an important new document in the saga of human folly and endurance that Faulkner made his main subject. How compassionate, how sympathetic, how enlightened can we manage to be in the face of other people’s stories constitutes the novel’s central question. It too features a house inhabited by ghosts: Thomas Sutpen, the larger than life-size symbol of ambition and failure, Rosa Coldfield, who has reduced her life to degree zero in the almost half-century since Sutpen refused to marry her, and Quentin Compson, the consciousness through which so much of the story is mediated. Sutpen dies and is forgotten, annihilated by forces that he barely comprehends, but the real loss, the real sacrifice is Rosa’s. She is as insightful as she is obsessed, as erudite as she is isolated, particularly when she explains how difficult it is for the younger generation to realize its own identity. Speaking of parental love, for example, she calls it “that fond dear constant violation of privacy, that stultification of the burgeoning and incorrigible I which is the meed and due of all mammalian meat, because not mistress, not beloved, but more than even love; I became all polymath’s love’s androgynous advocate” (121). Another of the myriad Faulkner characters who exist quasi-permanently in the throes of strong emotions but maintain an astonishing serenity, Rosa makes the case that love can ennoble struggling humanity, but only with great difficulty, as her own life shows. In the end it is one more means by which humanity might prevail that is surveyed and found plausible, despite its strikingly self-destructive effects. Meanwhile Quentin and his friend Shreve are musing about the possibility of identifying and discarding what is false in a relationship “in order to overpass to love” (261), a feat that can only be achieved we are told by non-logical means. Again we note the vaguely anti-intellectual tone here. Rosa has already spoken about how remembering is facilitated by “the muscles with which we see and hear and feel – not mind, not thought” (118). For his part, Quentin acknowledges that his conversations with Shreve are under threat from “unratiocinative djinns and demons” (214). Still, facing up to one’s demons involves working out a fairly clear idea what they are, and in this novel the speculative characters do a lot of reflecting about reflecting. Such musing can make people feel committed or detached, sympathetic or heartless, enlightened or benighted. For Faulkner, love is an important place to pause even as the search for the means by which humanity can prevail goes on.

If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem (1939) follows hard upon *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), in that it immediately picks up the matrix of ideas that we have been tracking. The would-be sexual adventurer this time is Harry Wilbourne, another adult virgin, in love with a woman named Charlotte Rittenmeyer. Harry is not so much a passionate lover as someone who has a number of intriguing theories concerning what love might be, what it signifies. Here’s his description of a male orgasm, for example:

One final fluxive Yes out of the terror in which you surrender volition, hope, all – the darkness, the falling, the thunder of solitude, the shock, the death, the movement when, stopped physically by the ponderable clay, you yet feel all your life rush out of you into the pervading immemorial

blind receptive matrix, the hot fluid blind foundation – grave-womb and or womb-grave, it's all one. (589)

This is unratiocinative and demonic (and overwritten) in an intriguing way, one that suggests, yet again, that the discovery of realms of being in which humanity can prevail is bound up with acknowledging unequivocally the power of desire. Hence the conflation, yet again, of the personal and the cosmic. Fears concerning the waning of passion occupy Harry constantly and his take on love becomes more theoretical, less urgent, more hackneyed, less transformative, as his passion for Charlotte cools. When she dies from a botched abortion, the text shifts to consider, not her suffering, but the rhythmic noises surrounding the death-bed scene: Harry's breathing, his heart beating, the "wild dry sound" of the trees near the house. These represent more things that endure, in the sense of just going on. The question left posed but unanswered by the novel is how does their purported indifference to the human tragedy chronicled here affect us. How enduring is a bleak stoicism in the face of suffering and death?

Faulkner's novel is really two novellas juxtaposed, the one just discussed, "The Wild Palms," and "Old Man." The latter tells the story of a convict who ends up helping a pregnant woman, surrounded by a flood that constantly threatens to engulf them. The baby gets delivered safely in horribly dangerous surroundings, primarily because the convict shows a great deal of grace under pressure, Hemingway's definition of courage. That is another powerful story that Faulkner wants to tell but the subtext of this drama is the inarticulate musings of the old man about – what else? – whether humanity can endure in the same way that things can? Seeing an animal skin on the wall of a hut, he thinks:

set in that teeming and myriad desolation, enclosed and lost within the furious embrace of flowing mare earth and stallion sun, divining through pure rapport of kind for kind, hillbilly and bayou-rat, the two one and identical because of the same grudging dispensation and niggard fate of hard and unceasing travail not to gain future security ... but just permission to endure and endure to buy air to feel and sun to drink for each's little while. (668)

Faulkner clearly wants us to admire this man, his satisfaction in solitude, his lack of aggressive ambition, his ability to feel one with natural elements, and his awe-inspiring humility. The complex prose that represents the stoic simplicity of the convict constitutes Faulkner's belief that it is the simplest candidates for transcendence, those most likely to have a profound understanding of the world of the spirit, who deserve to have their complicated feelings represented, their compelling stories told.

Truth to tell, Faulkner did not write all that much about race, something that did not reduce the clamour of the community eager to know his views on this all-important aspect of American history. The next two novels to be discussed, *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), both involve murders allegedly committed by blacks, and highlight the community's response to these crimes. This gives Faulkner the opportunity to make them, *inter alia*, a commentary on race relations in America and more generally meditations concerning our common humanity and our prospects for survival as a species, the topics of the Nobel address organizing this discussion.

In *Intruder in the Dust*, Gavin Stevens, Faulkner's *alter ego* and self-appointed expert on race relations, indicates that he is optimistic about the survival of humankind and that the two races can help each other in this regard. We are going to prevail, his argument goes, because black people represent Jefferson's ideal of an agrarian America – let us learn from them their organic links with nature. In return, whites can give blacks their civil rights and their economic

privileges as free citizens. Stevens does not seem to realize that blacks' willingness to put up with a subsistence level of existence would instantly change once they had more resources to call upon. Nor does the casual but pernicious racism involved in his characterization of blacks seem to bother him. Stevens advocates a "go slowly" approach and sounds a warning note about any desire on the part of the North to help sort these matters out, insisting that 99.99% of white Southerners would take up arms to repulse an incursion by federal troops. This is a blatant but characteristic falsehood, no doubt included by Faulkner to sketch in southern prejudices more fully. Warming to his subject, Stevens argues that the emancipation that resulted from the Civil War is really a prison, and that John Brown, a heroic abolitionist, actually did irreparable harm in not minding his own business. Whatever we make of such a revisionist claim, locating in the nineteenth century the roots of the twentieth-century debate about race helps Faulkner historicize his argument.

At a certain point Stevens imagines a Northerner vowing to "perish in the name of humanity" and he replies: "*When all is stricken but that nominative pronoun and that verb what price Lucas's humanity then*" (447). Yes, we might answer, America might perish as a nation if it perpetrated such an invasion, but it will surely perish as a nation if it does not, that is, if it ceases to live by the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The very idea that America was to be "a city on a hill," that all the world's nations were watching the great experiment, speaks eloquently to what Faulkner says here. The spiritual part of the American journey is cognate with the one made by freedom-seeking people everywhere. The inclusion of the baleful warnings about nuclear destruction in the first part of the Nobel speech refer to the lack of freedom that characterizes life on the other side of the Iron Curtain at this time. The ending he envisions would involve figuring out how to end the Cold War as well.

Requiem for a Nun takes up the subject of our capacity for self-transcendence by telling the story of Nancy Mannigoe, a black woman guilty of infanticide. It is a play stitched together with some interchapters, another formal innovation by this relentlessly experimental writer. The play is a stiff and somewhat turgid affair, but the sections that provide a historical and cultural context for the action feature some of Faulkner's most profound meditations on the questions raised in his Nobel acceptance speech. Remember "the last dingdong of doom" he mentions there? Well, this novel is one of the places that it came from, in the account of the striking of the town clock:

Garrulous myriad and independent the one, the other uxorious and interminable, at once frantic and tranquil – until the clock strikes again which even after a hundred years, they still seem unable to get used to, bursting in one swirling explosion out of the belfry as though the hour, instead of merely adding one puny infinitesimal more to the long weary increment since Genesis, had shattered the virgin pristine air with the first loud dingdong of time and doom.

We note that, in that section of the speech, "endurance" is not enough, that man must be more than someone left making a faint but unceasing noise, as the light fades. If the birds respond the same way every hour the bells ring out, that would suggest that for them there is no time, no past, no progress, just another random ritual. But the human beings watching that seemingly meaningless world are capable of discerning a pattern, of registering the impression of the passage of time. By referring to this ritual as it has played out over "the last hundred years," Faulkner suggests that those years have indeed marked some progress, that they have meant something to the spectators in these rituals.

In the prologue to Act Two, Faulkner quotes a creation myth, one that conflates human time and the geological sort. Thinking about where the universe comes from he mentions a “mother-womb, “furious tumescence,” and “one vast incubant ejaculation already fissionating in one boiling moil of litter from the celestial Work Bench” (540). We might well recall here Harry Wilbourne’s similarly elaborate description of a cognate explosion. This is Faulkner’s gorgeously excessive way of recognizing that the culture represents an improvement on nature, that the creative energies of the latter constitute precisely those forces that the former must domesticate.

In the final prologue, Faulkner again presents his readers with a way of understanding what time and space ultimately mean. He does this without the passionate storms of the other prologues, but by asking us to think about one Cecelia Farmer, a girl whose existence is a matter of historic record only because on April 16, 1861, four days after the start of the Civil War, she scratched her name on a window. Her name says “I was here,” a simple assertion but one that all sorts of Faulkner characters have trouble making, so worried are they about not finding clear answers to questions like “Who am I?” and “Where is here?”. The window on which this girl writes instantly becomes the novel’s most important ekphrastic object, one that says nothing, or almost nothing, simply the name of another ghost. Nevertheless, that name, penned by someone who might have been a spectator at great events, manages to speak volumes. Various scenarios of the romantic kind are suggested for her, narratives that make clear that Cecelia Farmer is in a sense whatever we want her to be. Although her reality is inaccessible to us, she is fluent in what Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, calls “notlanguage,” a lingua franca that enables the past to commune with the present, a means of communication that links us with our ancestors, a mode of silent speaking. Properly understood, this language could even justify some tentative hope for the future, as articulated by Faulkner, the man responsible for shedding so much light on such questions when he signed his name to his own handiwork on December 10, 1950 in Stockholm.

I have argued that Faulkner’s speech that evening, with its ringing, declarative sentences, its congeries of echoes rich in ambiguity, is a complex entity in its own right and an indispensable guide to some of the central concerns of his work. A concluding word about *A Fable*, a novel that Faulkner worked on for ten years before publishing it in 1954, offers what may be the most interesting take on this subject. As I suggested at the outset, the most important question for our purposes is why does Faulkner put the words of his Nobel speech into the mouth of a World War One general desperate to quell a mutiny. He is a character whose eye is always on the main chance, who professes no particular interest in the nobility of sacrifice or the importance of life’s spiritual aspects, and who insists rather that his son, a corporal about to be executed for mutiny, leave to wander the world and let his regiment be destroyed. This particular part of Faulkner’s fable has resonant echoes. Satan infamously tries to tempt Jesus with the pleasures of existence; Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor argues that bread and certainty, rather than spiritual fare and doubt, would have been much better gifts for Jesus to promise his followers; the General repeats the phrase “Choose life” in his attempts to win over his recalcitrant son.

The issues at stake seem scrupulously clear, but they are not. Here, for example, is the father speaking to his son for the last time:

We are two articulations self-elected possibly, anyway elected, anyway postulated, not so much to defend as to test two inimical conditions which, through no fault of ours but through the simple paucity and restrictions of the arena where they meet, must contend and—one of them—perish: I champion of this mundane earth which, whether I like it or not, is ... you champion of an

esoteric realm of man's baseless hopes and his infinite capacity—no: passion—
for unfact. (988)

The general's "no fault of ours" rings false from the outset, since his whole program involves taking responsibility for one's actions. In his chronicle of earthly pleasures he emphasizes the exotic rather than the mundane. His son's determination to become a martyr is surely an earthly matter, with profound consequences for how the troops will be affected and how the war will proceed. The corporal is trying to save lives in this world as opposed to book himself a reservation in the next one. The fact that he is has come to terms with his own imminent death also makes it problematic to characterize him as someone with a passion for "unfact." Once again the links between political power and personal destiny seem important; once again Faulkner forces us to consider temporal and eternal questions together. We want *A Fable* to resolve the sorts of questions it raises. If this is his *magnum opus*, his Pulitzer prize winning last statement, his compendium of debates on politics and desire, what is the basis for these sonorous exhortations with which he concludes? Faulkner took a long time to arrive at the conviction that large and complex novels don't need to say the final word about these things, and his longest novel became one more take on his great themes.

The Nobel prize that Faulkner won in 1949 was not awarded to him until the next year's ceremony. Bertrand Russell, the 1950 winner, also meditated on the future of humanity in his acceptance speech. He argued that the combination of greed, obsessive competitiveness, self-love and residual megalomania that has been our undoing in the past will continue to be unless education can make the citizens of the planet much more intelligent in a hurry. Russell spoke first, Faulkner last. Russell's speech was punctuated by a great deal of good-natured laughter. Faulkner's southern accent and inability to use the "big voice" made most of the speech incomprehensible. Russell spoke to the members of the chattering classes assembled there, in a discourse five times as long, delivered in a tone that demonstrated clearly how much he enjoyed public speaking, especially speaking contemptuous truth to power. Faulkner used the vernacular to speak in sublime vagueness to eternity. In the end, Russell's fascinating analysis of humanity's ills at the outset of the Cold War became a minor footnote in Nobel history, while Faulkner's set the standard by which the rest would be judged. Neither would be much impressed by how we are doing in the race against ignorance and stupidity.

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