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**“A Sight-Draft Dated Yesterday”: Faulkner’s
Uninsured Immortality**

PHILIP M. WEINSTEIN

“Breathing is a sight-draft dated yesterday,” says Will Varner in *The Hamlet*.¹ Webster defines a “sight draft” as a “draft payable upon presentation”; Varner is talking about the unpredictable moment of one’s own death. He figures our uninsured breathing as a check already signed, a resource the gods have issued and can recall at any moment as of “yesterday.” Mere “presentation”—or being in the present—threatens us utterly. I choose this passage in order to focus on *temporality* in three ways: as a central issue of this conference (Faulkner at 100), as a driving concern of modernism itself and of Faulkner’s modernist practice, and finally as a core dimension of his appeal thirty-five years after his death.

Faulkner’s uninsured immortality: the energy and anxiety that beset this year’s conference stem from our awareness that his immortality is in fact mortal—that he lives in his posthumeity only so long as we continue to breathe life into him, that his currency itself is a check long since dated and always open to recall, liquidation. The man died in 1962, the writer has continued since then to flourish. He still flourishes, but there is no one in this room who does not know that he too can die. This year’s conference, more than the earlier ones, is about the ratio between what is dead in his work, what still lives, and what has yet to live.

Why Faulkner? That is the topic of our panel, and I think it sets us apart from the other panels which—however critical they will be—begin by assuming his importance. Their business is more to analyze and reconceive that importance. Ours is to ask—or answer—why attend to him at all. To be sure, we are likely to read our topic less as a question (why Faulkner?) and more as an answer (why Faulkner). Don Kartiganer and his cohorts won’t have been tempted to invite others among our colleagues—and their name is legion—for whom the answer to the question of “why Faulkner?” is: why indeed?

If that question is serious and not merely rhetorical, it could mean several things: Why Faulkner instead of other writers? Why Faulkner

when his work has ceased to speak to a readership suspicious of canonical narratives of white male travail? Why Faulkner when his texts—no longer sheltered by a modernist commitment to formal innovation—seem to many readers to be willfully, perversely unreadable? Or, perhaps most insidious, why Faulkner in a postmodern climate in which reading itself has lost much of its prestige as a truth-discerning activity? This last meaning of “why Faulkner” could be reduced to: “what is the point of reading anything that difficult when, regardless of its contortions, it can never escape its ideological frame, can never represent the real?” Thanks to the past twenty years’ success of poststructuralism and its sequel, cultural studies, we have reached something like a massive distrust of language itself as a vehicle reliably connecting writer and world. Why Faulkner indeed?²

Here is contemporary critic Jane Flax characterizing the poststructuralist stance toward the text: “The text is not the product of the consciousness of a singular author making present some aspect of experience, history, or thought. . . . The subject of writing is a ‘system of relations between strata . . . the psyche, society, the world.’ ”³ What professional Faulknerian here has not read such words—if not written them—in countless papers by students and colleagues? Yet who writes a line of poetry or prose in assent to these claims? Who would go to the trouble to write responsibly if this activity involved neither self nor experience nor thought, but instead the gassy vagueness of a “system of relations between strata”? Can there be writerly responsibility—not to mention other sorts of responsibility—without a concept of the minimally viable subject? This suspicion calls into question not only Faulkner’s importance, but his very coherence.

I am impatient with the brittle insistence that, since you do not master your utterance entirely, you do not master it at all—and more, there is no “you” there in the first place. At a recent lecture on the revisionary moves of a medieval artist, I heard the speaker say that the artist’s “intentions” were not only inscrutable but—citing a master critic—that “intention” was a term we should never use for human creativity. And I thought, if we can’t speak of human creativity in terms of “intention,” what realm—other than the pedestrian one of messages—does the term exist for? It seems to me a term we simply cannot do without, even though we cannot use it cleanly, just as subject and author are terms we cannot do without, even though we cannot use them cleanly. If we remove all trust from both the author who intends and the word that conveys, it is difficult to maintain that reading matters. If what Faulkner “means” lodges only minimally in what we may construe him to have intended his words to say, and maximally in larger cultural paradigms

that predetermine him (the key to which, of course, the informed critic possesses, often in advance of reading him), how could the labor he spent to get his writing right matter?⁴ Who in this hypersuspicious postmodern climate is willing to *credit*—to move *with*—the intricate twists and turns, the gorgeous arabesques, of Faulkner's prose?

When I was a teenager, my father warned me of the dangers of driving. You have to be totally alert, he said; otherwise you'll kill yourself and others. I believed this advice until I took my first long trip in the car. After about three hours of driving (with six more to follow), I realized that total alertness was not only impossible, it was bad advice. You must, at a certain point, submit to the vehicle if you want it to take you anywhere. We must revalidate the experience of submitting to the literary vehicle, learning all we can about the tricky and far from obvious moves it can make, yet granting it the power to take us somewhere. To know in advance, always and negatively, where it is going to take us is to foreclose the pleasure—let alone knowledge—such travel may afford. We former New Critics paid a huge price in not knowing the liabilities intrinsic to the vehicle—we were unforgivably innocent readers—but we did take trips. Let me return, now, to that “sight-draft dated yesterday.”

Modernism itself may be generalized as a variously inflected understanding that “breathing is a sight-draft dated yesterday.”⁵ That is to say, an understanding that human life, because it is in time and destined for death, is radically groundless. Radically groundless: rootedly unrootable, the Latin root in “radical” suggests. How hard it is to make language give up its soothing message of groundedness, as Nietzsche knew when he said, “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”⁶ Lawful grammar suggests a lawful world being represented by that grammar. One of the most salient aspects of modernist practice is its insistence on innovative linguistic structures that shatter these inertial conventions, revealing that only our fictions—for better and for worse—sustain our sense of grounding. Our being-in-time is our central intolerable reality in need of fiction. Perhaps culture's dearest function is to provide credible fictions for humanizing time. The clichés we use to characterize different periods of history—the Medieval world view, the Enlightenment, Romanticism—could be seen as so many expressions of time made humanly meaningful: as medieval preparation for the afterlife, as enlightenment acquisition of humane reason, as romantic rebellion of the spirit against the slavishness of convention. All of these models provide “ends” to stave off our otherwise unbearable sense of the “end.”

When modernism repudiates its culture's various models for domesticating temporality, it declares it alienation. “This abstract structure of temporality,” writes Fredric Jameson, “clearly cannot emerge until the

older traditional activities, projects, rituals through which time was experienced, and from which it was indistinguishable, have broken down.”⁷ In the unalienated realism of Balzac and Dickens and Tolstoy, time is the medium in which human projects at first falter, then refine themselves, and finally succeed—or if they fail, they fail reasonably. But time ceases in modernism to be a familiar modality and becomes instead a cunning and indecipherable puzzle, as in Joyce and Eliot, or a monster of oblivion and redemption, as in Proust, or the perpetrator of a nightmarish bad joke, as one wakes up to discover in Kafka. In Faulkner time rears its head in a fashion that is humbler but no less terrifying: “*Something is going to happen to me.*”

“Something is going to happen to me”: this signature Faulknerian phrase emerges inside the heightened consciousness of Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*, Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, and Harry Wilbourne in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*. All of these characters think this thought at the moment of collapse of whatever protective codes of grounding they have drawn on to sustain their sanity. They cease to be an “I” who acts and become a “me” who is acted upon. Hurlled into an encounter which disables their culturally trained defenses—their habitual ways of saying “I” and thinking it means something—they discover their body going awry, its rhythms of breathing (its “sight-draft dated yesterday”) being called in and liquidated. A moment of intolerable present time has decapitated all preceding domesticated time; this decapitation registers on and through the body.⁸

Faulkner had this insight as early as *Soldiers' Pay*; the speechlessly wounded Donald Mahon is undone by encounters he can suffer without ever subjectifying. Incapacity beyond the reach of therapy calls to Faulkner, shaping powerfully the incurable plights of Bayard and Horace and Temple. But it is Benjy Compson in whom Faulkner first fully releases the poetry of irreparable deracination. For Benjy is simultaneously so many things: the literal defective offspring of a once-noble family whom neither parent knows how to caretaker, the symbolic fruit of an incestuous twentieth-century South that has not yet learned to desire the other, the uselessly poetic vessel of perception and feeling beyond the reach of normative culture's contaminating codes, a wild child whose class reverberations Faulkner will later explore in Ike Snopes, whose race repercussions he will touch on in Jim Bond. Whatever figure Benjy transmutes into, the plasma at his core remains the same: nonadaptation, the rebuke of all schemas of maturation and empowerment.

As Faulkner proceeds through his career, the ramifications of nonadaptation widen. Early on, such scandalous encounter between self and circumstance seems metaphysical: “As though the clotting which is you,”

Darl puts it in *As I Lay Dying*, “had dissolved into the original myriad motion.”⁹ Bundren projects, however stubbornly held, become subjected to forces that either fracture them or render them absurd. The most profound unselfing force in that novel—and therefore the one most powerfully resisted by each character’s system of defenses—is death itself, Addie Bundren’s becoming, in time, not-Addie Bundren. In later novels the unraveling of subjectivity—the hallmark of Faulknerian plot—becomes less metaphysical and more cultural. Joe Christmas, Thomas Sutpen, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon: when these figures shatter, they reveal—in the disarray that radiates into and out of them—an incoherence in the scheme of things that is manmade, not natural or metaphysical, indeed normative, not aberrant. At his diagnostic best, Faulkner shows the madness of the normative—shows, patiently and dizzingly, how long-sustained cultural structures of recognition and empowerment for some folks are simultaneously—for other folks—structures of nonacknowledgment and abuse. In Thomas Sutpen—he who is first the child abused, he who is later the adult abusing—it comes together as one: we end by seeing *Absalom, Absalom!* as an unbearable mapping of differential cultural positions (where you are on that map determines your fate)—a map that only a Southerner both outsider and insider could delineate in all its absurd and poignant contradictoriness.

No one has explored more movingly than Faulkner the cultural logic of such undoings. Kafka’s parables of collapse and Joyce’s immersion of the subject in his culture’s constraints both come to mind, but it takes Faulkner to wed Kafka’s sense of the uncanny with Joyce’s familiarity with norms, with—if you will—the reasonableness of norms. Hugh Kenner once claimed that, for Faulknerian narrative to work, a region and a history and a multigenerational family all had to be in place. (“He needed inarticulate blood ties,” Kenner wrote.¹⁰) In realism these familiar contours would produce the Balzacian canvas of moves and countermoves keyed to a set of recognizable cultural norms shared even when resisted, all of this unfolding within a domesticated temporality in which night follows day, maturity and old age follow childhood and youth. Perhaps this is what Faulkner desired with his Yoknapatawpha chronicles, but it is not what he achieved. A modernist sense of incapacitation holds him in its grip: time does not behave, the same event “abrupts” anew and “repercusses” again, people and things become uncanny, go awry.

The grip I speak of is trauma itself, and it registers insistently upon the Faulknerian body. “Breathing” is of the body, yet its being figured as a “sight-draft dated yesterday” places it in the social. Faulkner’s drama is of breathing gone wrong because of social arrangements gone wrong. His achievement is less to summarize this disaster than to dramatize its

“abruption” within the body and from body to body. He knew early on that his culture’s most intractable contradictions operated within or beneath language, that language was a tool provided by culture, coopted by the psyche’s defenses, and eloquent mainly for its evasions. Faulkner’s greatness lodges in his decision not to judge but to *cite* this language in all its variety, pathos, and offensiveness. He thus gives us, in an unparalleled manner, an entire social text. Rather than attempt to master his culture’s contradictions and indict them through his own voice or that of a delegated narrator, he arranges his memorable fictions architectonically, letting voice play against voice, no voice reliably his own. The benefit of this move is a capacity to say even the most outrageous things fearlessly, freshly, so long as they remain true to character. “I listen to the voices,” Faulkner told Malcolm Cowley, “and when I put down what the voices say, it’s right.”¹¹ As Keats’s Shakespeare “has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen,” so Faulkner is as drawn to Jason Compson as to Gavin Stevens.¹²

The Faulkner I summon to answer the question “why Faulkner?” is a writer who never pretended to domesticate time. In his great tragic work he writes of wounds that do not heal, encounters that re-percuss rather than resolve. He is our supreme writer of the culturally unworkable. His fiction is not pedagogic: in the presence of can’t matter and must matter he knows that both are true and that they cannot coherently coexist. He is our American witness who knows he is also witnessed—knows he is in history’s gaze—but he does not pretend to know what he looks like witnessed, as on this day in 1997 when we are gazing at him. His work gathers an unparalleled authority in its generating of narrative structures that call authority into question: who better than Faulkner has shown us how men invent and enforce authority in the absence of authority’s grounding? In short, he is the writer of pain radiated by the failure of culture’s defenses rather than of wisdom garnered from the viability of culture’s platitudes. The candor with which he accepts his own not-knowing—a not-knowing he turns into the most intricate fictional structures of delay and revision and reversal rather than temporal mastery—makes me think that the risk figured in a “sight-draft dated yesterday” is exactly how he would want his work’s future to be viewed: “because it is your milk, sour or not,” Tull thinks in *As I Lay Dying*, “because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that wont.”¹³ The milk that matters is milk that can sour, go off in time; the mark on the paper that matters is, as Judith says in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the “mark on something that was once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone can’t be *is* because it never can become *was*.”¹⁴ Faulkner’s immortality is not only uninsured but uninsurable—a mark that “is” and

therefore at perpetual risk of becoming “was”—why would we defend it otherwise?

NOTES

1. William Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, in *Faulkner: Novels, 1936–1940* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 1019.

2. For a fuller meditation on our contemporary discontent with Faulkner’s modernist commitments, see the final chapters of my *Faulkner’s Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and *What Else But Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

3. Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 197–98.

4. Arguments about intention are notoriously difficult, as my evasive wording reveals. To identify authorial intention is, necessarily, to move through readerly construal. It takes the critic’s claim to “access” the writer’s intentions, and such claims are always open to contestation. My point is not that we critics ever get the author’s intentions right but that, rather, we do in fact make claims about them recurrently. We say (we even write) “Faulkner says,” or “Faulkner sees”: we posit the writer’s shaping mind within the web of words. It seems that we cannot (at any rate we do not) characterize the manifold intelligence of works of art without some recourse to the concept of intention (a recourse we often “launder” by speaking, incoherently, about the “intentions of the text”—as though it had intentions of its own). At the least, I would propose that the author is a partner—and not just a dupe—of the structure of intentions we may discern in his or her text. One may of course choose to ignore this structure, but that leaves us, it seems to me, with an impoverished and conventional substitute-text in place of the complex and far-from-innocent one the author wrote. Obviously, this is not to say that writers know exactly what they are doing. It is to say that—in their endless acts of vision and revision—they know a great deal about it. I might close this speculative note by briefly articulating the relation of my argument to André Bleikasten’s kindred argument (in this volume) about a “singular” Faulkner. I share with Bleikasten a commitment to Faulkner’s texts as radically unpredicted by any of the cultural paradigms within which they are nevertheless inextricably immersed. But where Bleikasten tends to chastize current American commentary for ignoring Faulkner in favor of the larger paradigms that condition him, I would urge us to pursue his singularity precisely through his stunning ways of being caught up in his conditions. Creature and creator, complicit and inventive, he is never more compellingly William Faulkner than when he makes his singular way through the generic thickets of race, gender, class, culture, region.

5. For general commentary on literary modernism, see Peter Burger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World* (New York: Knopf, 1975); Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); George Lukacs, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle*, trans. John and Necke Mander (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Kermode explores modernist premises as a creative negotiation between the abstractions of myth and the formlessness of brute fact; Burger and Lukacs develop a general theory of alienation from a capitalist culture which modernist practice enacts; Eysteinnsson lucidly distinguishes between kinds of modernism and the questions posed by each; Kenner and Ryan analyze specific modernist writers under the larger umbrella of shared modernist conventions.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 483.

7. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 261.

8. The fullest studies of Faulknerian outrage are André Bleikasten's *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from "The Sound and the Fury" to "Light in August"* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990) and Warwick Wadlington's *Reading Faulknerian Tragedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). For further probing of the conjunction of modernist norms and Faulknerian practice, see Richard Moreland's *Faulkner and Modernism: Re-reading and Rewriting* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), as well as my *Faulkner's Subject* and the essays by Moreland, Bleikasten, and O'Donnell in my *Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

9. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, in *Faulkner: Novels, 1930-1935* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 156.

10. Kenner, 205-6.

11. Quoted in Stephen Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 1.

12. John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 279.

13. *As I Lay Dying*, 125.

14. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* in *Faulkner: Novels, 1936-1940*, 105.