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Becoming Faulkner: The Art And Life Of William Faulkner

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PROLOGUE

"CANT MATTER"

Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs . . . like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better.

—*Absalom, Absalom!*

What would a life look like if its inner sense conformed to this passage? How might someone else try to tell such a life? We assume that a life worth the telling involves a shaping force and weight, eventually cohering into something more than “so little impression.” But this passage insists on messiness and waste, on fruitless labor. It focuses on the failure of personal coherence to emerge in time. Others are there, alongside you from the beginning, and they get in your way. They desire as urgently as you do; their desire interferes with yours. The scene is mystifying. Each individual struggles to make something, but the larger cultural loom on which the individual “patterns” are plotted and pursued is defective, in ways that those striving below might guess at but cannot alter.¹ All the actors become entangled like stringed puppets helplessly careening into each other’s space. The more they strive, the more inextricable the entanglement.

Becoming Faulkner: my title seems to invite us to consider the notion of “becoming”—of making something out of a life—in a more positive light. It promises the story of Faulkner’s becoming a writer and eventually a world-renowned artist. One anticipates a narrative of obstacles encountered

and eventually dealt with. One expects Faulkner to achieve his becoming—to get his arms and legs (and mind and feelings and imagination and typewriter) into the clear. “Becoming” implies a gathered coherence, an achieved project not unlike Judith’s sought-after weaving, something gaining in sense and wholeness as it progresses. William Faulkner did become a great novelist (who would deny it?), I have become a writer about his achievement (my book is in your hands), and you may become a reader of my book. *May*—there’s the rub. Inasmuch as you are now where he and I once were—in the uncertainty of the present moment—you are in a position to recognize the concealed time-trick on which all claims of *becoming* are premised. You might *not* become my reader. In the present moment, this is something that has started but not yet concluded. You could put the book down. Move back a bit further in time, when this book was still to be written, and I might not have become its author. Move back further yet, to the present time of Faulkner, and Faulkner might not have become Faulkner. We know what any becoming looks like only because, *after* it has taken place, its force and weight are recognizable. Retrospection magically transforms the messy scene of ongoing present time into the congealed order it (later) appears always to have been headed for. But in the turbulent present moment—prior to an achieved becoming—there is . . . what?

In the vortex of the present moment there is frustration and confusion. Confined to that moment (which is where all human beings are confined, the time frame in which life itself is lived), one experiences—whenever the unanticipated arrives—bafflement rather than recognition. And one’s ability to cope with the unexpected is inseparable from the resources culturally bequeathed for coping. In Faulkner’s desiccated early-twentieth-century South—a place stubbornly facing backward—these resources were especially tenuous. Buffeted by events, one’s strenuous moves entangled with the countermoves of others, the Faulkner protagonist—like Judith Sutpen in that passage from *Absalom!*—feels certain of one thing: *I cant matter*. Judith experiences her life not as a project in the process of becoming but as an inexplicable derailment. Whatever undivulged purpose “the Ones that set up the loom” had in mind, it was hardly her own prospering. Judith goes to her grave not enlightened by the calm that follows a storm but marked by the storm that precedes any calm. Likewise, the trajectory of Faulkner “becoming Faulkner” took shape as a risk-filled project in ongoing time. Indeed, once his incapacity for progress ceased to torment him, his work began to lose its capacity to startle, awaken, disturb. The outrage of unpreparedness is the traumatic experience he learned to

narrate—an outrage that, could he have avoided it in his own life, he might well have done so. And been freed perhaps from writing masterpieces.

Faulkner's life registered—and his art explored—the priority of storm over calm, priority in both senses: before, and more (mis)shaping. Calm is a function of retrospective clarification—a seductive ordering after the fact. On completing *Requiem for a Nun* (a novel of failed recognitions), Faulkner wrote his friend Else Jonsson: "I am really tired of writing, the agony and sweat of it... I feel like nothing would be as peaceful as to break the pencil, throw it away, admit I dont know why, the answers either" (SL 315). We expect lives to make sense over time (we certainly want our own to do so), and we insist that narratives show us such becoming. Perhaps our deepest anticipation when reading fiction is to experience, once again, that precious sense of complex lives coming into focus and revealing their depth over time. By contrast, Faulkner's great work all but heroically refuses the premise—hardwired into narrative itself—that time brings illumination. Time hardly did so for him. If that is true, then—to return to the question raised above—how should one narrate a life whose underlying sense of itself was "I dont know why": it *cant matter*?

Biographers typically refuse this question. And no wonder. We go to biography in order to see a human life composed from the later vantage point of the biographer—the life made sense of as a completed passage through time, even if (for the subject of the biography) it didn't make much sense while it was happening. Faulkner's authorized biographer, Joseph Blotner, labored for some twelve years following Faulkner's death in 1962 (and many years prior to it) to complete his massive eighteen-hundred-page biography. Blotner drew on the passage of time for all his chapter titles: periods as long as "Summer, 1897—September, 1902" (chapter 9, the first on Faulkner's own life) and as short as "Autumn 1921" (chapter 20, a tumultuous few months). More openly than in most biographies, Blotner's chapter titles signal his employment of linear time as a structural principle for plotting his subject's life. Between the opening time-title and the closing one ("May–July 1962"), Blotner was able to order a life span of sixty-five years, to shape its becoming. Looking back at the celebrated achievements of the men and women who are their subjects, what can biographers do but narrate their subjects' lives coming into focus over time? Biographies go from birth and insignificance to death and the loss of someone who, finally, mattered so much. But what if, to himself, the subject of the biography remained persuaded that life did not add up, that life was "the same frantic steeplechase toward nothing everywhere and

man stinks the same stink”—himself included—and that his own experience *cant matter* (FCF 15)?

Faulkner was convinced that his own life was not worth the telling. The more Malcolm Cowley attempted (in 1946) to wrest from him a biographical narrative (as part of Cowley's introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*), the more Faulkner resisted. A few years later, when Cowley sought approval for a larger biographical essay, Faulkner eloquently rebuked the entire enterprise: “this [the biographical essay] is not for me. I will protest to the last: no photographs, no recorded documents. It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books. . . . It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died” (FCF 126). This memorable statement (one finds variations of it throughout Faulkner's pronouncements) deserves consideration. And not just because Faulkner's insistence is motivated in part by his determination to stop lying about his role in World War I. More deeply, the rebuke intimates an insight into the pitfall of biography itself. It is as though Faulkner glimpsed that biography is incapable of doing justice to the inconsistency and waywardness of its subject's actual life in time. The life itself loses its messy authenticity when it enters the monumentalizing mangle of biography: it emerges straightened out, time-ordered, false.

From Blotner in 1974 through Jay Parini (2004) and André Bleikasten (2007), Faulkner's biographers rehearse not *cant matter* but their various constructions of why the life of Faulkner does matter. This is what biographers do. And yet they all run into trouble. Grateful as one is for their detailed account of the events that make up Faulkner's life—and my debt to the authorized biographer, Joseph Blotner, is enormous—one comes away with the sense of something crucial missing: something that might compellingly connect the disturbed life with the disturbing work that arose from it. Too often the two are treated as parallel tracks that do not meet. We get Faulkner's story but not, as Henry James would put it, the story of that story, the yeasty possibilities of its troubled inner structure. Or, to use Faulkner's own metaphor in *Absalom*, the biographers scrupulously provide a multitude of sticks—the innumerable twigs and branches of the life and the work—but not their incandescence when brought together, not the bonfire. We do not get the composite *gesture* that an imaginative placing of the life against the work—the work against the life—might let us glimpse.

The biographers' admiration for the work—which certainly *does matter*—motivates their desire to find in Faulkner's life a kindred story of achieved

becoming. But one ends up discovering, as Jonathan Yardley put it in his review of Parini's *One Matchless Time*, "there isn't all that much of a story to tell. Apart from his writing—which in Faulkner's mind seems to have taken place in its own separate universe . . . he really didn't do much." Faced with this imbalance between the unforgettable events in the fiction and the forgettable ones (often sodden as well) in his life, biographers have employed a number of strategies. Blotner (who knew Faulkner and admired him greatly) tends to whitewash the life, making it more unblemished than it was. Frederic Karl tends to estrange the life into oppositions, juxtaposing it against the Southern frame in which it had its tangled roots. Parini, for his part, tends to reveal that Faulkner's life was . . . just a life. Nothing "matchless" about it. In each of these biographies, we encounter grandeur in the art contrasted with messiness in the life, but a reader seeking to understand how this particular man was able to write this particular body of work keeps wanting more.

How might we reconceive the two realms so that parallel lines begin to meet? The answer to this question requires treating what is failed in the life not as the opposite of what is achieved in the work—and therefore in need of whitewash or massaging—but rather as the work's secret sharer, its painfully enabling ground. What tends to be missing from the biographies is a dialectical sense for how the life and the art come together as—so Faulkner put it in *Absalom*—"strophe and antistrophe." On this model, the life is the negative of the work, the earthbound quarry for its splendid flights. Dialectical: the life's relation to the work does not involve a recycling of personal experiences. Rather, Faulkner's fiction revisits the dark, arresting stresses of his life, illuminating and transforming them unpredictably, diagnostically. The life and the work share a kindred turbulence. This is the turbulence of experience in ongoing time, suffered at first by the human being, then retrospectively grappled into verbal form by the writer. Grappled, not tamed. As Sam Fathers says of the wild dog Lion in Faulkner's great story "The Bear," "we don't want him tame." The work to be done requires wildness under harness—the wildness under harness that readers recognize as Faulkner's signature.

I do not delude myself that Faulkner would have welcomed this book. But his reasons might have differed from his repugnance toward biographical investigations that began with Cowley in the 1940s and continued unabated. The biographical portrait proposed here has no interest in straightening his life out by way of retrospective fiction-making. It tries not to offer—he might have recognized—a monumentalizing of a life often gone badly wrong during its actual unfolding. More, this portrait attaches no blame to its subject's missteps. My attempt is guided by one of the

stunning dimensions of Faulkner's great work: its refusal to judge, even as it does not sentimentally excuse. The causes for stumbling, his work lets us extensively see, are too inextricable and incorrigible to warrant the fatuousness of judgment. Finally, I see the messiness of Faulkner's life as the fertilizing loam for his novelistic soaring. Although he would have resisted this intrusion into his privacy, I fondly hope he might nevertheless have recognized himself in the mirror of my pages. And, more fondly yet, that he might have conceded my premise: that his extraordinarily troubling work was rooted—where else?—in his ordinarily troubled life.

Faulkner's life revealed micro and macro causes for experiencing time as unmanageable turbulence. At the micro level, he suffered a number of traumatic events. A primary one involved his ill-timed and mismanaged erotic life, launched by his early failure (1918) to marry Estelle Oldham, his childhood sweetheart. Instead of eloping with him, she married Cornell Franklin and departed from Oxford, Mississippi, to live in Hawaii and, later, the Far East. During the next decade she returned often to Oxford, bringing with her not only the burden of a failed marriage but the two children who embodied the change it had wrought. Seemingly against his own better judgment, as well as against his underlying sense of this returned Estelle as "damaged goods"—no longer his "still unravished" Keatsean bride—Faulkner could not resist renewing relations with her. She finalized her divorce from Cornell Franklin in 1927, and they married in 1929, sealing a (re)union as foredoomed as it would prove to be inextricable. Theirs was a marriage Faulkner would spend the rest of his life committed to, suffering from, betraying, but never severing.

Inseparable from Faulkner's mismanaged, ill-timed love life was his mismanaged, ill-timed war experience. Wounded by Estelle's marriage to another man, he was determined to enter the Great War. This was easier said than done, since Faulkner—mindful of his ancestor, Colonel William C. Falkner of Civil War fame—was not eager to enter *his* war as a foot soldier. But he was too short, by half an inch—too light as well—to be accepted into the aviation section of the U.S. army. Undaunted, he made his way to Toronto, and—masquerading as the scion of an aristocratic British family—joined a flight training program with the Canadian air force. Although he did not earn his wings until late December 1918 (over a month after Armistice), Faulkner returned to Oxford in the role and uniform of a war veteran, full of stories of European flights—with self-declared wounds in his head and his knee to bear out his claims. Parading through Oxford's streets, he came to be referred to as "Count No 'Count."

Later, there was his brother Dean's fatal crash (in 1935) in a plane that Faulkner (who had taken up flying for real after years of pretended wartime flight) had sold to him at a much-reduced price. Amateur aviation was all the rage in the early 1930s, and Dean's disastrous love affair with the plane might have occurred without input from his older brother. Yet there is no way Faulkner could have viewed it with detachment, free of blame. In these instances, we can see how Faulkner mismanaged the event and came to be haunted by possibilities passed rather than seized, menaces signed on to before they later blew up in his face. His moves in time seemed out of joint, careening at a pace he did not master. Belated, untimely, he emerged more as the shaped creature in his own life drama than (as he would be) its lordly, shaping creator.

Macro time for Faulkner was no less disorienting. Born in 1897 into a once illustrious Mississippi family now down on its luck, Faulkner grew up as a son of the New South ambivalently enthralled to an Old South, impotent since 1865. His mind was stocked with the manners, extravagances, and racial norms of an earlier time. Faulkner thus experienced repercussions set loose by ancestors long dead, troubles more broadly regional, if not national, yet for all that troubles he could not disown. He was war-wounded not just by the Great War he tried to participate in, but by the Civil War of his great-grandfather's romantic exploits—the defining war of Southern manhood, that other war he missed. So micro time exploded upon him—as sudden assault, a moment's invasion—before he could get his bearings and read its promise/menace, while macro time affected him no less damagingly, because of its long-accumulated burden of implication. Inasmuch as nothing passed (once and for all) in Faulkner's time-arrested South, the dead of 1865 lost none of their deforming power. Under the impress of the old ways of doing things, he bought (in 1930) his own "big house," Rowan Oak. There his traditional model of largess and noblesse oblige prompted him to support a retinue of black servants. He took financial responsibility for parents and siblings and their orphaned offspring as well. Finally, imbued with a residual sense of the charm of older ways, Faulkner remained throughout his life a hunter and a horseman. Such behavior led to his getting thrown repeatedly and further damaging an already badly damaged back. Much of this lifestyle was belated—consisting of insistent (and, often, once-aristocratic) roles summoned into play by the call of a past that refused to pass.

What was missing in Faulknerian time was manageability: time as neither micro (shard-like, invasive) nor macro (accumulated over decades,

overwhelming), but in-between and negotiable. Manageable time fuels the Western liberal narrative of progress—the story of individual struggle and resolution. But neither Faulkner's life nor his art featured progress. In his life he experienced, and in his art he explored, the unwanted “other” of progress. Both the life and the work reveal an individual incoherently aggregated in time. Social space in Faulkner's life and work appears, likewise, as aggregated rather than ordered. Ostensibly segregated spaces fail to quarantine difference; leakage occurs everywhere. Genealogies of scandalously mixed blood haunt his novels, perhaps his life as well. In so doing, they complicate the tidier narrative of American exceptionalism, revealing the underweave of the American success story.

Such, in outline, is the gesture of unpreparedness—of belatedness in time and inefficacy of role—constituted by Faulkner's life. In the pages that follow I amplify, enrich, and supply nuance to this gesture. But I have no interest in laying out, extensively, the multitude of known facts about Faulkner's ancestry, his family, his acquaintances, his part-time jobs, his escapades in New Orleans, his interludes in Hollywood, his travels for the State Department (in the 1950s, after he had been awarded the Nobel Prize and become famous), his teaching stints at Princeton and the University of Virginia. I attend to these, but I want to center on the bonfire, not get enmeshed in the innumerable sticks and branches of data that may, at best, have contributed indirectly. Biographies regularly seek to provide an exhaustive anatomy of a life's sticks and logs: too rarely do they reveal the conflagration these made possible.

Like all writers concerned with Faulkner's life, I am embarked on a narrative of why he matters. But in order to keep the priority of *cant matter* in mind, I have sought to minimize the traps of linear time, retrospective clarity, achieved becoming. I pursue his career in time in ways that make room for the role of stumbling—of being in the dark, under assault rather than gaining control—in both the life and the work. Life as a forward-moving and unrehearsable lurching, art as a retrospective and precious ordering: can this opposition—once it is transposed to the scene of writing—even be contested? Can *cant matter* be *put into words* at all? When Faulkner insisted (repeatedly) that his work never escaped failure, however grand or even magnificent, he was being neither coy nor falsely modest. Writing—because it operates otherwise than life—is condemned to failure. It is not the experience of stumbling through time, it can never substitute for that experience. Faulkner became a great writer when he first realized (or wrote as though he realized) that there is something intrinsically mendacious about narrative's treatment of time. Narrative seizes life trajectories condemned

to stumbling and—by the act of *telling* them—binds those trajectories into retrospective order. Dedicated to the fiction of becoming—the calm finally attained, after the storm—rather than attempting (impossibly) to say the real in its present incoherence, narrative seems shaped so as to console. Or at least to domesticate, render tame. Its normal mission is to supply what we surely have too little of in our moment-by-moment lives: grace, cogency, purpose.

How can I bring to life a condition that biography as a genre is designed to transcend? How convey—in what is after all a narrative—the reality of Faulkner's stumbling in time, and of his learning how to write that stumbling? I attempt to do this in several ways, with certain attendant costs and consequences.

I have chosen to thematize Faulkner's life and art as a narrative—in five different keys—of trouble encountered but not overcome. Devoting an extensive chapter to each of these keys, I begin chapter 1 with an exploration of Faulkner's tormented life between November 1927 (when his publisher rejected *Flags in the Dust*) and June 1929 (the month of his marriage, sought yet dreaded, to now-divorced Estelle). That chapter then turns a doubt-darkened eye on Faulkner's earlier writings. It homes in retrospectively, as he might have done, on their greatest weakness: their playing it safe, their refusal to expose and tap their author's vulnerability. Such self-risking would emerge full-blown in the masterpieces soon to appear, *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*.

Chapter 2 opens with an earlier crisis—perhaps the most anguishing experience in Faulkner's life—his failed elopement. That chapter traces his careening life for the next dozen years, ending with a consideration of the masterpieces that emerged between 1929 and 1932: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*. In chapter 3, the biographical and the cultural lenses widen as I probe Faulkner's ways of living and writing his region's racial confusion. I seek to lay out arguably his greatest claim on us—his extraordinary entry into the nightmare of Southern race relations, in *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*.

Chapter 4 illuminates the countermoves—drunken binges and love affairs—Faulkner pursued as bids for peace (or failing that, at least as temporary escape from the insoluble predicaments of his life). This chapter ends by probing the novels of erotic passion—*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* and *The Hamlet*—that he wrote while enthralled with Meta Carpenter. Finally, chapter 5 (“Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow”) attends to the replays and repetitions—as well as the frustrations and the fame—that filled Faulkner's

later years. At the same time it proposes, in summary fashion, a brief account of the later work from *Intruder in the Dust* through *The Reivers*.

None of these chapters scrupulously respects chronological order (although my narrative does advance—erratically—in time). Instead each chapter, entering the life at a moment of sudden or cumulative stress, stays with the dynamics and fallout of that stress in ways that no biography committed to progressing responsibly from 1897 to 1962 can afford to do. In this sense, I seek to “compose Faulkner,” rearranging the materials of his life and art so as to seize on latent patterns within a larger troubled weave.

I “compose” him in another sense as well. I pretend now and then to “become Faulkner,” to narrate—as subjective experience not seen past or later diagnosed—some of his moment-by-moment dilemmas. In these vignettes I seek less to recuperate the life into meaning than to articulate it as process, to fashion—and pass on to my reader—something resembling its turbulent texture. Although the biographical data buttressing these simulations are well established, such sequences involve—of course—invention on my part. I am not so naïve as to believe that I could actually “become Faulkner”! My aim is heuristic: to simulate (at crucial instances) the precious life-reality that escapes all biographies—what it might have felt like *to be Faulkner*, in present time and cascading trouble. Invention, then, not for its own sake, but to put flesh on the primary bones of my argument: that unmanageable trouble in time emerges as the fault line joining Faulkner’s discretely disturbed life with his inexhaustibly disturbing novels.

I approach the great novels as the bonfire that it took his stumbling and off-balance life to make possible. After all, the fundamental reason we write (and read) biography is that its subject produced work of great magnitude. We want to know in what generative soil that work was rooted. We want to know about the man’s life—the sticks and branches that make it up—but mainly in the service of a larger desire: how does such magnificent work come out of this particular life?

That question guides my book. Nothing guarantees that I will succeed, but—as Faulkner might have said—this is at least the right way to fail. Exploring the turbulence that marked his life, I seek to do justice to the ways in which the feel and texture of his great novels—their enabling assumptions and tortuous procedures—reprise and unforgettably transform such turbulence.² The measure of my success can only be the extent to which my work inspires you to go to the novels themselves. There, in the temple of his prose, the identity of Faulkner that matters most resides.³

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. As “larger cultural loom” implies, the collapse of one’s dreams is caused by something more than metaphysical malice. Judith Sutpen inhabits an antebellum Southern world of sanctioned aspirations and agreed-on taboos. Her defeat in *Absalom, Absalom!* has everything to do with racial and economic protocols shaping her hopes and shattering them too. But—caught up as an individual merely endowed (like all individuals) with partial perspective—Judith registers this confounding as incomprehensible disaster. Faulkner’s great novels home in on the emotional tenor of such collapse. He centered his work on the subjective vertigo of coming undone, even as that work suggests, all along its periphery, the larger, interwoven, cultural dimensions of collapse. I argue throughout this book that his novelistic signature consists in *respecting*—and inventing ways both to represent and pass on to his reader—the experience of unpreparedness, of shock. Shock goes deeper—is more telling—than retrospective explanations for it. Faulkner’s great work was invested in writing how it felt to stumble, and in suggesting (but only later) what contributed to the stumbling. It had less interest in proposing cultural analyses that might make future stumbling obsolescent.
2. André Bleikasten’s *Faulkner: Une Vie en Romans* (2007) provides an extraordinary account of the novels, along with a scrupulous account of the life. But, as he would have been the first to admit, Bleikasten saw no way meaningfully to interconnect his parallel accounts. This important work has not yet been translated into English.
3. No one has better expressed this point than Madeline Chapsal, a French journalist who observed Faulkner’s cornered moves at a party given for him in Paris, in 1955, by his grateful publishers, Gallimard. Faulkner’s recalcitrance, she noted, “is built of the most exquisite but the most obdurate politeness” (LG 229). She concluded: “There is no use looking at Faulkner. You must read him. To someone who has read him, Faulkner has given all that he has, and he knows it” (230).