Faulkner's Last Words and "The American Dilemma"

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THE SUMMER of 1971 we Americans were removed by only half a decade from our country's bicentennial of separate existence.[1] As a whole people we approach therefore a season requiring the ritual of reflection and reassessment.[2] Mere accidents of calendar time do not, however, provide the principal impetus for the forthcoming exercises in cooperative introspection. For at no previous instance in our (for a modern society) long history have the tensions built into our institutional beginnings been so close to the surface of the common life. Internecine conflict, greater than any we have known since the War Between the States, threatens our continuance as a genuine polity. Moreover, as is most ominous, on this occasion the conflict cuts across all the boundaries which have historically distinguished one American from another: this time the struggle touches *all* our self-definitions, in the process embodying serious doubts as to the viability of our past as precedent and of the forms for reasonable interaction, which are our richest inheritance from that depository.

There are, of course, many methods for formulating a diagnosis of what has brought the Republic to this hard pass: many explanatory strategies, most of them topical and pragmatic in both source and implication. This bill, that custom, or the other court decision is made villain. But among the better professors of political philosophy and intellectual history a preliminary consensus appears to be emerging.[3] Their opinion is, in brief, that our teetering imbalance is the result of antipodal commitments to "liberty" and "equality." Tilted very far toward either pole, we cease to be, in any recognizable sense, the *United States*. There remain, in my view, strong objections against the liberty-or-equality simplification. In some respects it diverts the student of American politics from more important considerations: considerations fundamental in their purchase upon our record as rebellious colonies, confederated free commonwealths, or federated and still sovereign states.[4] Furthermore, the history of this theory is random and beguiling. Nonetheless, *be-*

cause of what has been made of the formulation, it is an appropriate place for beginning our meditations on 1976. On the Left and to the Right there is agreement on at least this procedural point. Agreement, but as I have already suggested, no understanding of the dialectical necessity behind the choice. In his later years the Southern novelist William Faulkner came to perceive not only the accepted "what" but also the mysterious "why" of said point of departure.

It was probably exposure to the public life, brought on by fame, an inherited sense of duty, and the peculiar problems of his native region that led Faulkner to be more and more perturbed about the new fashions in resolving our two absolute terms of honor *cum* political objectives. Or again, World War II may have drawn him to the subject. But whatever the cause, after fifty years of jealously guarded privacy, Faulkner time after time seized upon opportunities to address himself to what may be the real "American Dilemma." To these *moments* he brought all his talents for persuasion. From the evidence in print we may infer that his engagement was not at all by the way. Indeed, it is clear that once he perceived in the abuse of language a major source of our ideological confusion, he soon thereafter acknowledged that language must provide the remedy, so acknowledged in what he made.[5]

This praise applies particularly to Faulkner's last public appearance, his May 24, 1962 "Address to the American Academy of Arts and Letters upon Acceptance of the Gold Medal for Fiction."[6] The speech supplies the lack of which it objects, dispels the now received misapprehension concerning equality through liberty. In rhetoric even more than in argument it is a masterpiece of composition. A close analysis of its formal excellence, of both *what* and *how* it means, should therefore provide a useful prologue to the deliberations upon older political documents which must soon begin, a check upon casual and selective misreading of the sort that mistakes part for whole, or end for inception.

Faulkner's "Gold Medal" speech commences by converting ceremonial gesture into an opportunity for gracious elegiac injunction.[7] Almost immediately the novelist declares that these rites which now require his response are, in his eyes, paradigmatic. The mode of his address will be (at least in general character) *forensic*—concerning what is just and what is not. His peers among the men and women of the American literary establishment have honored him for a life's work with his pen. In so doing, they have granted the Mississippian a premise: giving prizes for conscientious use of a specific gift *is* justice, especially when the prize is awarded by those who are, from their own performance, suited to judge of that use and are further designated to represent (within their competence) society at large. Minus salutation, this first paragraph reads as follows:

> This award has, to me, a double value. It is not only a comforting recognition of some considerable years of reasonably hard and arduous, anyway consistently dedicated, work. It also recognizes and affirms, and so preserves, a quantity in our American legend and dream well worth preserving.

By making something illustrative of the moment, Faulkner in this exordium appears to be performing his manners, practicing the "affected modesty" enjoined by the ancients.[8] His next words confirm this interpretation, the analogy of his medal to the antique tributes recorded on the musty labels of familiar brand items. All of this is ingratiation by persona. But by turning to memory and comparison, Faulkner is obviously preparing to extend his situation beyond the confines of the expected grace-

ful nod of thanks. Then comes the leap, the word "past" following hard after "well worth preserving." As we might recall, the self-effacement of traditional rhetoric was either for the acknowledgment of honors or by way of introduction to ideas novel and unpopular.[9] Prize giving is now out of keeping with the standard American practice. Hence Faulkner's fellows in the Academy are doing well only in conflict with the atmosphere in which they perform. It should by now be clear why I say elegiac. For all loving remembrance is, by indirection (and in a manner most difficult to resist), an appeal for restoration. To dragoon an audience simply by stimulating their memory is well called an "elegiac action."[10] Faulkner's use thereof is masterful:

> I mean a quantity in *our past*: that past which was a happier time in the sense that we were innocent of many of the strains and anguishes and fears which these atomic days have compelled on us. This award evokes that vanished splendor still inherent in the names of Saint Louis and Leipzig, the quantity which they celebrated and signified recorded still today in the labels of wine bottles and ointment jars.

The obvious burden of this prologue is, to repeat, that a good custom, now neglected, deserves reviving. But Faulkner persists in his "low profile," even after he commences with the exhortation he intends. The poet takes over and, once again in accordance with the classical model, allows tropes to do the work. The issue in question is established. Evidence, "narration," or that which is given—assumed by audience and speaker—is identified. And the argument to be drawn from these facts is granted an initial sounding. A byplay between two powerful images carries the address the rest of the way. Aristotle's ethos and pathos come into play; but, as is proper, only after they are anchored in a specific universe of discourse. More of the proper connection between liberty and equality is rendered in this way than would be possible in discursive terms. More, I say, and more forcefully as well.

The first half of Faulkner's argument by image-pairing takes up all of his third paragraph. It is a loving elaboration. From Saint Louis and Leipzig we proceed down and back again into the fundament of "American legend and dream," into matter that at first suggests an even further outreach toward modesty in analogy. But instead, the tableau of the county fair marks a final turn in Faulkner's remarks. On essentially pastoral ground he is ready to confront his antagonist, to speak the word. Here (as a counter for dignity or acknowledged worth in character) equality may be named as good—as just: just I say insofar as that equality comports with prize-giving, with "gold medals" for the *best of all kinds,* and the kinds clearly distinguished. This is the equality of liberty, of a people not broken by fear. Even in texture these sentences are an extraordinary *tour de force.*

> I think that those gold medals, royal and unique above the myriad spawn of their progeny which were the shining ribbons fluttering and flashing among the booths and stalls of forgotten county fairs in recognition and accolade of a piece of tatting or an apple pie, did much more than record a victory. They affirmed the premise that there are no degrees of best; that one man's best is the equal of any other best, no matter how asunder in time or space of comparison, and should be honored as such.

Hidden just beneath the surface here are Faulkner's familiar attitudes on place and stewardship, the old Southern mixture of English Tory (note "royal") and Whig (note "victory") doctrines; a postlude to

or clarification of his numerous but especially qualified insistings upon a greater distribution of opportunities among his less fortunate countrymen. Though often understood otherwise (especially when he touched upon race), in such affirmations Faulkner was uniformly careful to avoid any inference that there was (or would be) a parity of ability or achievement among the generality of the species. That is why the various prizes are necessary to the confederation that is (at one and the same time) justice, competition, and an exchange of civilities. For even if men *cannot* be equal, are providentially intended, with five talents, *or* three, *or* one, to be unequal, they yet must live together in amity and without a sense of deprivation. In saluting an interchange of usefulness in association with their competition to be best at something, the participants in county fairs celebrated a miniature of the American system. Not all roles are the same. But best is best, at least as an index of completed humanity. Nor does tacit ranking cancel this equality which is, by definition, both as just and as mysteriously arbitrary as the talent distribution in the parable: an equality of personhood revealed in making the optimum use of such place or condition as is the *a priori* determinant of every mortal creature's definition. Moreover, what the fairs convert into a sacrament, a series of acts mutually beneficial and designed to serve a common goal (excellence), is further celebrated by the poet in remembering those festivals. The association of liberty with Social Darwinism is thus negated; competition need not produce raw life-struggle, the Hobbesian world of each against all that egalitarians throw up as a straw man target for their rhetoric. Faulkner here thrusts himself against the favorite image of his implied antagonists. He continues in the same enterprise in his final paragraph:

> We should keep that quantity more than ever now, when roads get shorter and easier between aim and gain and goals become less demanding and more easily attained, and there is less and less space between elbows and more and more pressure on the individual to relinquish into one faceless serration like a mouthful of teeth, simply in order to find room to breathe. We should remember those times when the idea of an individuality of excellence compounded of resourcefulness and independence and uniqueness not only deserved a blue ribbon but got one. Let the past abolish the past when—and if—it can substitute something better; not us to abolish the past simply because it was.

Against a backdrop of the fair it is safe to argue that difficulties and struggles are in themselves good. They provide the relish of our existence, the assurance of identity: likeness-difference is the most important distinction, not superior-inferior. To preserve the former, to maintain the variety of creation, we must risk the latter. And the alternative is unthinkable. In this controlled milieu, and with the sanction it provides, Faulkner is finally prepared to finish his image antithesis. The other equality is, as personified, the arrant dehumanization that it attributes to the world of the fairs. After "anonymous," "faceless" is Faulkner's sharpest term of derogation. And the former condition is the result of the latter. Equality of condition, artificially engendered, has its best likeness in one huge and toothy mouth, a row of jagged edges, indistinguishable, with no identity beyond function. Once "relinquished," compounded in a row, we cannot be equal to one another. In a mass there is no *one*. Here is violence through imagery, the equivalence of part for whole which we expect in caricature. The welfare state, socialist or otherwise, is nothing more than a big appetite. Faulkner has, however, so pre-

pared his audience that "serration," an esoteric word and therefore disarming, comes as no surprise. Moreover, he does not belabor. Instead, the peroration is rapid: a restatement of argument, another taste of "past," and thus a terminal reminder that economic systems are judged by their human product, regardless of the "gross" or the "national." An error has been committed. Perhaps it was made for the sake of change and change alone. And change is not automatically just.

Despite its probable (and by Faulkner presupposed) hostility to his line of thought, the American Academy (and through it the Nation) is left with little choice but assent.[11] No untoward insistence has occurred in this management. Audience-reader cannot respond in anger. Without a sign of aggression Faulkner has offered his thanks. And with tact he has said pious things about the custom honored through his tribute. Lastly, he has slipped into the bargain, as a parting grace, an old fashioned rhetorical choice. The *progression d'effet* is thus rounded, and consequently the argument is "earned." To the logic there might be objections. To images, however, there is no answer. All of this because what was said is inseparable from its place, its time, and its saying.

The lesson of Faulkner's "Gold Medal" speech is, for the era of 1971-1976, both in the teaching it offers and in the method we must employ to grasp that meaning *within* and *through* the form of the address. It concerns, I say again, the appropriate procedure in reading fully, section-by-section, various sanctified productions of the political imagination. For the authors of these works, American and not, were rhetoricians. Otherwise we would not remember (and would never have admired) their handiwork. From the ancients they learned well that good rhetoric draws its best resources from the same fountainhead as poetry. Faulkner's valedictory cannot be called impressive if we consider it as would philosophers, looking for system in logic and propositional exposition.[12] But, as we often forget, the same holds true of the Declaration of Independence and the mighty testimonials which herald its coming or complete its promise. They resist discursive reduction. Furthermore, these are nonetheless arresting or powerful by reason of their "unsystematic" attributes. A voice speaks in each, to an identified audience, within an envelope of tone, and out of sequence of image or inference. Through a conjunction of such agencies, liberty and equality may be brought from disparate value systems to abide together in peace, competition and community be reconciled. That is, inside men, auditors and readers subjected to an aesthetic calculus. It is a small miracle, but one we need and need to understand. Otherwise, ideology will be left free to do its worst.

[1] I do not say nation or "united states," or anything thus specific because in 1776 we ended our connection with England and announced our intention to form a common government. However, sovereign commonwealths, united in such purposes, can already be called a country.

[2] In July of 1971 President Richard Nixon announced a five-year Bicentennial Era of Reconsideration of the Founding.

[3] I refer especially to Harry Jaffa's disagreeable *Equality and Liberty* (New York: Oxford, 1965), his *Crisis of the House Divided* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), and to several papers by the late Willmoore Kendall: "Equality: Commitment or Ideal," *Phalanx*, I (Fall, 1967), 95-103; "Equality in the American Tradition," *Politea*, II (Winter, 1964-65), 2-10; "Equality and the American Political Tradition," *Willmoore Kendall Contra Mundum* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1971), ed. by Nellie D. Kendall, pp. 347-361; and (with

George W. Carey) *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

More conventional (but useful as indications of the fashion) are Robert J. Harris' *The Quest for Equality: The Constitution, Congress, and the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); Russell B. Nye's *The Almost Chosen People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), p. 306 *et seq.*; and Sanford A. Lakoff's *Equality in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1964).

[4]It is, of course, better for our volatile political atmosphere if we do not mention equality at all. For in those without considerable philosophical sophistication, the word can only excite envy or resentment.

[5]I mean here that Faulkner practiced what Richard Weaver called "the ethics of rhetoric." For the dialectics behind what he argues are not disguised by the method of his argumentation.

[6]The speech appears on pp. 168-169 of James B. Meriwether's edition of *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters* (New York: Random House, 1965).

[7]Faulkner made some conversion of this sort in most of his addresses and other non-fiction prose: for instance, see "To the Delta Council," "Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," and the graduation speeches gathered in the Meriwether collection. Individualism is a portion of his song in all of these performances.

[8]The device is well discussed in Ernest Robert Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), translated by Willard R. Trask, pp. 79-89.

[9]Chaucer, as he presents himself inside of *The Canterbury Tales,* is an illustration of the latter.

[10]See Paul Fussell's *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 283-305.

[11]When he could, Faulkner was always talking over his audience to the nation or to the world. The habit is evidence of what he perceived his role to be after 1950 and the Nobel prize.

[12]My quarrel, to be specific, is with the disciples of Leo Strauss.