

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S 1962 GOLD MEDAL SPEECH

by

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WILLIAM FAULKNER delivered his last public acceptance speech in New York City on May 24th, 1962, less than six weeks before his death.¹ The occasion was the awarding to him of the Gold Medal for Fiction by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Academy of Arts and Letters. Recalling the ceremony, the distinguished critic Malcolm Cowley assessed Faulkner's speech with prescient, almost prophetic intuitiveness: "Faulkner's acceptance . . . had a tone of retrospection, of lament for the dignity and freedom of the past, that was not exactly new for him, but that seemed to have a new resonance. He compared his own gold medal with those that used to be awarded to products displayed at Leipzig, St. Louis, and other world's fairs."²

Indeed, if Faulkner's tone, as conveyed in a prose style which by then had long become synonymous with his name, was "not exactly new for him," its "resonance" was. But at that time, neither Cowley nor any other individual except the one man who had collaborated in writing Faulkner's acceptance speech, could have known that its resonance owed a substantial measure of indebtedness to the typewritten draft from which Faulkner had drawn his thematic inspiration: a version of the speech composed at his own suggestion by Faulkner's young friend, Joseph L. Blotner, assistant Professor of English at the University of Virginia during and after the academic years of 1957 and 1958 when Faulkner was Writer-in-Residence at that institution.

Nor, for that matter, at the time he was drafting his version of the speech Faulkner would utilize, could Blotner himself have realized he would be co-conspiring in a pattern to which Faulkner had resorted at least twice before. Only during the last years of the sixties, while Blotner was gathering information for *Faulkner: A Biography*, would he discover that Faulkner previously had sought the assistance of Abram Minell in penning his October 2, 1959, speech to the 7th Annual Conference of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO; and that two years prior, Faulkner had coerced Duncan Emrich, Cultural Affairs Officer for the State Department's International Educational Exchange Service in Greece, into writing the speech he would deliver on March 28, 1957, upon receiving the Silver Medal of the Athens Academy.³

Clearly, during the last twelve years of his life, Faulkner seemed to regard literary, civic, and humanitarian accolades bestowed upon him as perfunctory and ephemeral afterthoughts or footnotes to his writing career. And, with few exceptions, the obligatory oratory which was required for him to win deliverance from each award ceremony would be as tediously bothersome and uninspired to compose as it appeared painful for him to deliver publicly. Yet, with uneasy resolve, out of patriotic or professional sense of duty, he repeatedly acquiesced to conventional, formal protocol. If only a few of his public utterances, most notably his Nobel Prize, "Never Be Afraid," and "Delta Council" speeches achieved oratorical and rhetorical eloquence worthy of

universal acclaim, the others, at least, were idiosyncratically Faulknerian in prose style, tone, and attitude; even one like the 1962 Gold Medal speech upon which he had unabashedly collaborated. Faulkner predictably was here a fastidious craftsman striving to make his prose uniquely, distinctively, his own, despite the highly derivative nature of its motifs and image clusters. Indeed, in this case, his most compelling task was to impose his "Faulknerian" style on the imitation in which the draft had been written. Accomplishing this required four revisions before he could feel satisfied that he had adequately transmuted Blotner's original into his own personal expression.

Actually, the document from which Faulkner initially worked, a two-page ribbon typescript with corrections in blue ink, was Blotner's revised draft of his own initial two-leaf, three-page, blue-ink holograph rendering. On the verso of the second leaf of this holograph, Blotner has written the following explanatory comments referring to the diarylike pencil notations he had made on this same page twenty-five years before: "I made these pencil notes after William Faulkner told me, on one of his periodic visits to my office in the English Department in Cabell Hall at the University of Virginia, that he had to write an acceptance speech when he received the Gold Medal for Fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. This was April 27, 1962. When he said 'I hate to swot up a speech for that Gold Medal,' I volunteered to write one for him. I wrote the draft version in blue ink and then gave him the black ribbon typescript version when he visited my office again on May 4. When he returned on May 8, he gave the typescript back to me and the carbon typescript of his final version of the speech. 'Here's your copy,' he said. 'Maybe you can make some money out of it sometime.' He delivered the speech on May 24, 1962 in New York."

I acquired these three documents from Joseph Blotner in early April 1987. A phone call to Ms. Nancy Johnson, Librarian of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, was rewarded by a letter confirming that the Academy did have on file the ribbon typescript of Faulkner's Gold Medal speech for 1962.⁴ The accompanying xerox copy proved to be identical to the carbon typescript Faulkner had given Blotner on May 8, 1962, except that the Academy's copy carried in Faulkner's hand in blue-black ink the superscription, "Speech of William Faulkner for May 24th." Regarding the speech, Ms. Johnson wrote: "I looked through the correspondence files again and there is nothing at all to indicate that there was any other version of this speech. Miss Geffen's requests for an advance copy apparently went unanswered. It seems that Mr. Faulkner brought this typescript with him and left it here following the award presentation."

In point of fact, the complete census of extant manuscripts of Faulkner's 1962 acceptance speech upon receiving the Gold Medal for Fiction numbers seven documents, of which six are textually variant. The Brodsky Collection contains Joseph Blotner's three-page holograph original draft [A] and his revised two-page, hand-corrected, ribbon typescript [B]. The one-page, blue-ink holograph manuscript which Faulkner himself drafted after reading Blotner's text and adopting it as his prototype [C], and two sequentially advancing one-page authorial ribbon typescript revisionary drafts with holograph corrections [D & E] are part of the Faulkner Collections at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library.⁵ The last typescript version in this sequence, the one-page ribbon copy [F] from which Faulkner read to its attending members, and then deposited there, resides in the files of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. The carbon typescript [G] of this reading version, formerly in the possession of Joseph Blotner, is located in the Brodsky Collection.⁶

Transcribed below in order of composition are Blotner's ribbon typescript version [B], Faulkner's holograph first attempt at composing his own rendition [C] on the basis of [B], followed by the carbon typescript [G] of the final version revised from [E]. Joseph Blotner's text is presented without textual apparatus but incorporates all his intended deletions and additions as though it were a fair-typed copy. Faulkner's holograph is transcribed according to a system invented by Fredson Bowers for dealing with alterations in manuscripts.⁷ The typed final version is transcribed as delivered, its typed revisions (no hand alterations) listed as footnotes. A full collation of all variants (except typos) in [D] and [E] is appended keyed to the final version [F—G], which for convenience of reference has been printed line-for-line with the original. All listed revisions in [D] and [E] are in ink unless specified as typed, and the listing includes all deletions and additions to enable the documents to be reconstructed. To this collation has been added for the reader's convenience in following the progress of the revision the variants in the final text of the holograph [C] but its alterations—being noted in the transcript itself—are not included descriptively in the collation.

[B] BLOTNER'S TYPESCRIPT VERSION / BRODSKY COLLECTION

This award is to me a source of double pleasure, in that it is not simply a recognition of work done over long years in a demanding craft, but also because of itself apart, by its name and nature, it recognizes, I think, qualities most worthy of the artist's striving and man's cherishing. The substance of which the tangible embodiment of this award is formed can suggest many things: a system of finance, a long-gone politician's frenetic oratory, or the self-induced catastrophe of a mad king. But in the present context it suggests to me other, utterly different things. It is redolent of the past, of those distant days of quasi-innocence when the world's fairs at which medals were awarded were rare and almost magical happenings and not giant commercial enterprises occurring more often than presidential elections. It suggests not just the faded airs and rotogravures that record the vanished splendor which briefly crowned St. Louis or Leipzig. It evokes the qualities they celebrated, immortalized thereafter on labels identifying everything from great vintages to nonpareil pickle relishes.

I think that those gold medals—and their cousin-german counterparts, the shining blue ribbons that glittered on the tables of myriad forgotten county fairs—recognized qualities which, though they are still present today when the earth is worked like a mine and the factories begin to be worked by machines, were more clearly seen and more highly honored than they are today. Apart from the old testamental virtues, venerated in colony and frontier, these qualities cluster around the idea of individuality of a kind of excellence compounded of resourcefulness, independence, and complete uniqueness.

So, today when roads get shorter and neighbors closer, needs better provided for and range more circumscribed, it seems to me a good time to remember the qualities denoted by the gold medals of the last century. And I think it is vital for them to be a part of the artist and his work—for him and for those who read it—individuality and independence, to go beside the other qualities in the hierarchy that makes up man's best virtues, the pride and pity, the honor and compassion that sustain him in his life.

[C] FAULKNER'S HOLOGRAPH ORIGINAL / VIRGINIA

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 recognises and affirms *and so preserves [*intrl.*] a ['quality-lack,' *del.*] quantity in our American legend and dream well worth preserving.

I mean our past, *a [*ab. del.* 'that'] happier time in the sense that we were then innocent of many of the strains and anguishes and fears which these atomic times have compelled upon us. It evokes the faded [*illeg.*] and roto-gravures which record the vanished splendor which is still inherent in the names of St Louis and Lipzig—the quality they celebrated still immortalised even *when [*ab. del.* 'though'] on the labels of wine bottles and pickle jars.

I think that those gold medals—and their myriad spawn—the *gleaming and [*ab. del.* 'blue'] beautiful ['blu' *del.*] ribbons fluttering and flashing among the countless booths and stalls of county fairs—['recognised' *del.*] in recognising no more than a jar of pickles or an apple pie, did much more than that. They postulated 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 comparison, and should be honored as such.

We should keep that, more than ever now, when roads get shorter and there is less and less room between elbows, ['We should remember th' *del.*] and there is more and more pressure ['to' *del.*] on the individual to retreat into anonymous['ly' *del.*] serration like filled teeth in order to breathe. We should remember those times when the idea of individuality composed of excellence compounded of resourcefulness and independence and uniqueness not only deserved a blue ribbon, but got it. Let the past abolish [*del.* 'the past' *ab. del.* 'it—if' *['bec' *del.* 'when—and if—' *undel. in error ab. del.* 'when it can substitute **[*doubtful* 'ing' *intrl. undel. in error*] something better; not us to abolish the past simply because it is the past.'] the past when—and if—it can substitute something better for it; not us to abolish the past simply because it was.

[G] FAULKNER'S CARBON TYPESCRIPT FINAL VERSION / BRODSKY COLLECTION

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 recognises and affirms, and so preserves, a quantity in our American legend and dream well worth preserving. 5

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 the faded airs and dimming roto-gravures which record that vanished splendor still inherent in the names of Saint Louis and Leipzig, the quantity^a which they celebrated and signified recorded^b still today in the labels of wine bottles and ointment jars. 10

I think that those gold medals, royal and unique
 above^c the myriad spawn of their progeny which were the shining ribbons
 fluttering and flashing among the booths and stall^d of forgotten county 15
 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 or^e comparison, and should be
 honored as such. 20

We should keep that quantity, more than ever now, when
 roads get^f shorter and easier between aim and gain^g and goals become less
 demanding and more easily attained, and there is less and less space^h between
 elbows and more and more pressure on the individual to relinquish into one 25
 faceless serration like a mouthful of teeth, simply in order to
 findⁱ 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. 30

- a the quantity] *aft. del.* 'so that'
 b recorded] *aft. del.* 'is'
 c above] *aft. del.* 'among the'
 d stall] *uncorrected error* for 'stalls'
 e or . . . or] *ab. del.* 'and . . . and'
 f get] *ab. del.* 'are'
 g gain] *ab. del.* 'goal'
 h space] *ab. del.* 'room'
 i find] *aft. del.* 'breathe.'

COLLATION OF C–E AGAINST G

- 3 work. It] work, it C
 3 also] *omit* C
 4 affirms,) affirms^ C
 4 preserves,) preserves^ C
 6 a quantity in] *omit* C
 6 past:] past, C
 6 that past which was] *omit* C; *intrl.* D
 7 were] were then C–D
 8 on] upon C
 8–9 This award] It C
 9 dimming] *omit* C–E
 9 that] the C
 10 still] which is still C–D
 10 Saint] St C
 10 Leipzig,) Lipzig—C; Leipsic—D; Leipsic, E
 11 the quantity] the quality C; the['y' *del.*] quality D; the quantity [*alt. fr.* 'quality'] E
 11 which] *omit* C
 11 and signified] *omit* C
 11 recorded still] still immortalised C–D; still alive E
 12 today] even when C; *ab. del.* 'even when' D
 12 in] on C–D; in [*typed* 'i' over 'o'] E
 12 labels] lables D

- 12 ointment] pickle C; *alt. fr.* 'condiment' *ab. del.* 'pickle' D
- 13 medals,] medals—and their myriad spawn—C
- 13–14 royal . . . progeny] *omit* C; *gleaming and unique [*ab. del. intrl.* 'standing in prolific'] ['splendor' *intrl. del.*] ** among the myriad spawn of their [*ab. del.* 'and ***even [*intrl.*] their myriad ***progeny [*ab. del.* 'spawn'] D
- 14 above] among D; among [*ab. del.* 'at the heart of'] E
- 14 which were] *omit* C
- 14 shining] gleaming and beautiful C; shining and beautiful D
- 15 booths] countless booths C; uncountable booths D; ['uncounted' *del.*] booths E
- 15 stall] stalls C; stalls [*final* 's' *added*] D
- 15 forgotten] *omit* C
- 16 fairs] fairs— C; fairs ['], even' *del.*] D
- 16 recognition] recognising C; *alt. fr.* 'recognising' D
- 16 and accolade of] no more than C
- 16 accolade] *alt. fr.* 'accolading' D
- 16 of] *ab. del.* 'no more than' D
- 16 piece of tatting] jar of pickles C–D; *illeg. del. 3 letters intrl. between 'a' and 'jar'* D
- 17 record a victory.] that C–D; *record a fact. [*ab. del.* 'that'] E
- 17 affirmed] postulated C–D
- 18 degrees] *final* 's' *added* D
- 18 best; that] best. That C–E
- 19 no . . . comparison,] *intrl.* E
- 19 time or space or] *omit* C
- 19 or space or] and space and D
- 21 quantity] *omit* C–D; *intrl.* E
- 22–23 and easier . . . attained,] *omit* C
- 22 and easier . . . gain] *omit* D; *stand easier [*intrl.*] between **aim [*ab. del.* 'point'] and ***goal [*ab. del.* 'point'] E
- 22 become] *intrl.* D
- 22 less] less pure and D
- 23 space] room C–E
- 24 elbows and] elbows, and there is C
- 24 pressure] pressure ['to relinquish' *typed del.*] E
- 24 relinquish into one] retreat into C
- 24–25 one faceless] anonymous C–D
- 25 a mouthful] filled C
- 25 teeth,] teeth. C–D
- 25 simply] *omit* C, E
- 26 find room to] *omit* C; have *space [*typed ab. del.* 'room'] to D; have space to E
- 26 an] *omit* C; *intrl.* D
- 26 individuality] individuality ['composed' *del.*] D
- 27 of excellence] *omit* C
- 27 compounded of] composed of excellence compounded of C
- 28 uniqueness,] uniqueness, D–E
- 28 ribbon,] ribbon, C–D
- 28 one.] it. C
- 29 better;] better for it; C

NOTES

1. *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner*, ed. James B. Meriwether (1965), pp. 168-169. This speech was originally published in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*, second series (1963).
2. Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (1966), p. 149.
3. See Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974), pp. 1744-45, 1649-52.
4. Letter from Nancy Johnson to Louis D. Brodsky, April 9, 1987, signed ribbon typescript, 1 page, on letterhead of American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.
5. All three Faulkner manuscripts at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library bear the same accession number: 9817F. Permission to publish is gratefully acknowledged.
6. The Brodsky Collection of Faulkner books and manuscripts is currently on deposit in the Rare Book Room of the Kent Library on the campus of Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. I wish to acknowledge my appreciation of Jill Faulkner Summers for her continued support by allowing me to publish certain documents written by her father which are either contained in the Brodsky Collection or illuminate those that are and which subsequently will appear in the developing series, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, edited by Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin and published by the University Press of Mississippi. Also, I express my gratitude to Joseph L. Blotner for allowing me to acquire and publish manuscripts of his which form a substantial part of this article.
7. Fredson Bowers, "Transcription of Manuscripts: The Record of Variants," *Studies in Bibliography*, 29 (1976) 212-264.