

GHOSTWRITING THE GHOSTWRITER

William Faulkner delivered his last public acceptance speech, in New York City on May 24, 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, 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 that 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, could Blotner himself have realized, at the time he was drafting his version of the speech Faulkner would utilize, that 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 writing 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 Education 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. With few exceptions, the obligatory oratory that 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 a 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."

These three documents were acquired from Joseph Blotner, in early April 1987.⁴ Ms. Nancy Johnson, librarian of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, confirmed, by a letter, that the academy did have on file the ribbon typescript of Faulkner's Gold Medal speech for 1962.⁵ The accompanying photocopy 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 that 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.⁶ 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.

Transcribed below, in order of composition, are Blotner's ribbon typescript version [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. The typed final version is transcribed as delivered.

[B] Blotner's Typescript Version

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.

[G] Faulkner's Carbon Typescript Final Version

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.

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 rotogravures which record 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.

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 stall[s] 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 or comparison, and should be honored as such.

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.

1. Meriwether, *Essays, Speeches, & Public Letters*, 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. Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File*, p. 149.
3. See Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, pp. 1744-1745, 1649-1652.
4. These materials, along with other significant items from Blotner's Faulkner files, are now housed in the Brodsky Collection at Southeast Missouri State University.
5. 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.
6. All three Faulkner manuscripts, at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library, bear the same accession number: 9817F. Permission to publish is gratefully acknowledged.