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“Les Amis Myriades et Anonymes à la France  
de Tout le Monde”: *Créolité* and Empire,  
Difference and Indifference,  
in William Faulkner’s *A Fable*

*A Fable*, for those who have not read it or have not read it recently, is set in World War I. It deals, like so many of Faulkner’s novels, with the efforts of several characters to come to terms with an event that none of them actually witnessed firsthand. This event is a mutiny beginning in a French regiment and involving the German regiment directly across the front. In short, on a bright spring morning marked by birdsongs, an order to fire is issued and nothing happens in either of those regiments. For a moment, this mutiny brings an end to fighting and stalls (again only for a moment) the machinery of war. It raises the possibility that we can put an end to war simply by refusing to continue.<sup>1</sup>

The instigator of the mutiny is a mysterious corporal who turns out to be the illegitimate son of the head of the Allied forces in France, a man known as the Generalissimo. As one might expect, the plot was betrayed beforehand, and the French military, under the Old General’s order, is already in the process of staging a phony cease-fire with Germany in order to cover up the scandal and to keep the machinery of war running. For obvious reasons the state does not want the news of the mutiny to be spread abroad. The corporal and his twelve disciples are executed.

The historical depth of the book is remarkable, extending backward into the nineteenth century and beyond to the Roman empire. In its import, it moves forward into the Cold War and on to a remote future where humanity retains only the slightest perch on survival. The geographical scope is also broad, paralleling the historical one, and includes France proper along with its present and past colonies in North

Africa and the U.S. Deep South. It reaches southward and eastward beyond the Pyrenees to Tibet. The dream of *La Plus Grande France* underwrites the story. On one level, *A Fable* explores what Édouard Glissant described as “the splendid and triumphant voice” of “Continental thinking, the thought of systems”; of History, monument, and empire; on another level it traces a more multivocal story of the modern state and its problematic relationship with nation, of modernity and memory or, rather, modernity and the will to forget.<sup>2</sup> It is a story of the state’s efforts to control voice and Faulkner’s own efforts to find a space in and from which voices can be heard.

The corporal’s father, the Generalissimo, may be the most concrete representation of imperial thought in the novel. He is first introduced to us as a “slight gray man . . . who no longer believed in anything but his disillusion and his intelligence and his limitless power,” being driven to headquarters in a car that “seemed to progress on one prolonged crash of iron as on invisible wings with steel feathers, – a long, dusty open car painted like a destroyer” (678), a kind of mechanically chauffeured angel of history as it were. Tales of his mental prowess abound. Like bureaucracy personified, he is said to remember the name of every soldier he has ever met. His illegitimate son’s half-sister attributes to him a kind of panoptic oversight into the lives of her family on their remote farm. His association with death is combined with allusions to the relics of earlier empires as if the empire he presides over is heir to all that has come before.

But his classmates at St. Cyr remember their first sight of him as “framed immobilely by” the gates into the school, “fixed . . . as absolutely and irrevocably discrepant to that stone-bastioned iron maw of war’s apprenticeship as a figure out of a stained glass cathedral window set by incomprehensible chance into the breached wall of a fort” (894). Left alone in the huge boudoir-turned-office at Chaulnesmont, he is

motionless in the chair whose high carven back topped him like the back of a throne, his hands hidden below the rich tremendous table which concealed most of the rest of him too and apparently not only immobile but immobilised beneath the mass and glitter of his braid and stars and buttons, he resembled a boy, a child, crouching amid the golden debris of the tomb not of a knight or bishop ravished in darkness but (perhaps the mummy itself) of a sultan or pharaoh violated by Christians in broad afternoon. (884-85)

The Old General is old man or child, beast or saint, a girl. He is a grotesque figure overmastered in his baroque setting for all of his

power. In public he is legendary; alone, he is associated with abandonment and isolation.

He was born into a family of industrialists and bankers, and raised to be an instrument of empire. Faulkner described him as “the dark, splendid, fallen angel,” a Satan who had “usurp[ed] the legend of God. That was what made him so fearsome and so powerful, that he could usurp the legend of God and then discard God.” Faulkner goes on to acknowledge that he was moved by this “dark, gallant, fallen one” (*Faulkner in the University* 62-63). The Old General’s capacity for human passion and his own emotional losses make him a compelling figure. He is one of History’s most grotesque victims: “If I were evil, I would hate and fear him,” perhaps for his humanity, one officer says; “If I were a saint, I would weep,” perhaps for his soul; “If I were wise, and both or either, I would despair,” perhaps for the dualism itself, which limits his capacity to commit fully to state or soul (878). The Generalissimo is also History’s best agent – a figure who can contain within himself and redirect, under the banner of empire and History, the rebellious desires of Western humanity.<sup>3</sup> Hence his remarkable appeal.

While in school, his past and his future are the subjects of impassioned conjecture on the part of his classmates who repeatedly – in a section of the novel that evokes *Absalom, Absalom!* in its attention to a rather desperate attempt to explain a mysterious and appealing figure – construct him as a young man who has done something to shame his family and must be removed from their orbit for the safety of others in the family. The apotheosis of young male dream – ‘the’ Parisian, the supremely entitled by virtue of gender, class, and place of origin, “young, male, unmarried, an aristocrat, wealthy, secure by right of birth in Paris” (894-95) – he is not merely the heir to one city, but the heir to all imperial cities both worldly and religious not only through space but through time: “Paris, which is the world as empyrean is the sum of its constellations . . . that vast and that terrible heritage. A fate, a destiny in it . . . Power, matchless and immeasurable . . .” (989). The intense homoerotic desire he inspires is indicated by his transfiguration, in his classmates’ minds, into the quintessential adolescent girl both ‘fragile’ and ‘impervious’: “frail and fragile in the same way that adolescent girls appear incredibly delicate yet at the same time invincibly durable, like wisps of mist or vapor drifting checkless and insensate among the thunderous concrete-bedded mastodons inside a foundry” (899).<sup>4</sup> It is this linking of fragility with imperviousness that constitutes his seductive appeal for his fellow

officers who long for what Faulkner calls “immunity” and find some hope of it in military service for the empire. In some ways the future Generalissimo is like the creole Charles Bon in his capacity to elicit the powerful emotions of others – curiosity, amazement, envy, hatred, love, devotion, even obsession. Ultimately, in his ability to harness those emotions, he represents something radically different. He is the perfect agent of totalitarianism.

*A Fable* has been called totalitarian.<sup>5</sup> This is one of the charges meant to account for the presumed failure of the book among those who consider the book a failure. But *A Fable* is not totalitarian; nor is it a failure. Noel Polk and Joseph R. Urgo have been arguing against such assessments for years. *A Fable* is more accurately a protest against totalitarianism. Urgo, in *Faulkner's Apocrypha*, got it right when he observed that the book is animated by the rebellious human spirit, which it puts to use as “a political and ideological alternative to . . . the totalitarianism of modern society” (4).<sup>6</sup> Not long after the appearance of *A Fable* and in the midst of the Cold War, Faulkner was quoted as saying, on one of his U.S. State Department trips, that the problem facing humanity was not “two ideologies facing one another that keep everybody else in fear and trembling,” but “one ideology against a simple natural desire of people to be free,” and “man cannot be free under a monolithic form of government.” Of most concern to him were circumscriptions of the freedom “to say what [one] wants” (“Faulkner on Truth and Freedom” 199).

*A Fable* complicates the perception of the Faulkner of the post-World War II years as a didactic, even sententious, writer whose earlier talent for marshalling varied voices in the service of epistemological fictions had waned. In *Faulkner's Questioning Narratives*, David Minter offers a good overall description of Faulkner's narrative voice when he writes that Faulkner's is a “medleyed voice that emerges from and belongs to the particular imaginative context that has generated” it, and that “when . . . Faulkner leaves the discrete voices” of characters behind, as he often does, “it is not his own discrete authorial voice that we encounter but a voice that draws on, echoes, and extends the . . . voices that precede it” (148). Minter does not deal at length with the work after *Go Down, Moses*, but the authorial voice of the 1954 *A Fable* is very much of a piece with earlier works, not least in being a medley of the voices that have “generated it,” some trying to sing (“trying to say”) beyond the monumentalist forces of History to and for alternative memories.

In short, *A Fable* is as much the product of a Faulknerian multiplicity of voicings as others of his novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* for example. I mention these two because they are very much like *A Fable* in their use of a public voice, what Stephen Ross has described as Faulkner's "oratorical" voice.<sup>7</sup> But note, as well, the "private" voices of the text, those of the young David Levine, of the Quartermaster General in private conversation with the Old General, of the corporal (the leader of the mutiny) also in conversation with the Old General his father, of the corporal's mentally disturbed sister. Note, too, the voice of the "whole man" who appears in the first pages to speak publicly, i.e. to betray the secret of the mutiny to the mass of anxious people who await the return to Paris of the sons and brothers and husbands who were involved. He speaks the secret the military would keep in the very quiet register of "a murmur." It spreads (674-75).

Édouard Glissant asks whether we can "dare" to "suppose that there are some places . . . , Archipelago places (in the Caribbean, in the Pacific, and in so many other areas . . . ) – where . . . a concept of the Relative, of the open links with the Other, of . . . a *Poétique de la Relation* shades or moderates the splendid and triumphant voice of . . . Continental thinking, the thought of systems?" ("Creolization" 275). The scene where the "whole man" murmurs is one of those places. And there are a number of such places in *A Fable*.

If Faulkner's Paris is, on the one hand, "empyrean" (989), the center of all culture, it is, on the other, a metropolis facing a number of challenges to its authority as a pinnacle of Western civilization. It is threatened with military invasion, of course. And this threat is given some resonance by the fact that Paris *was* occupied during World War II – *A Fable*, regardless of its setting, is very much informed by World War II. It's a prophetic text. Faulkner called it an allegory ("Note on *A Fable*" 270). One of Faulkner's favorite words in this book is "adumbrate," and, in some ways, the Paris of *A Fable* is an adumbration of the possible future as Faulkner imagined it.

The metropolis is filled with the presence of the 'alien' among whom are the Central European peasants assimilated by France; the Senegalese soldiers who guard the mutinied regiment, and even, of all people, the Quartermaster General. What makes many of these people aliens is threefold: first there is some resistance among the French people themselves to the ideal of assimilation that was a part of the ideology of empire in the Third Republic; second, the military ma-

chine is so much an arm of the state (the state so much its arm) that even civilians are aliens in *A Fable*. Some members of the military are described as aliens as well: General Gragnon, an orphan from the Pyrenees, and the Quartermaster General, for example. The Quartermaster General, one of the great neglected voices in the novel, is alien by virtue of his provinciality and by his intensely romantic nationalism. Nationalism, although it can so easily be instrumentalized by the state, can also resist the state. In an interview in North Africa with the young officer who will become the Old General, the Quartermaster General appeals passionately to him to explain how he could sacrifice a French national (a man of the gutter, a small-time but vicious criminal) to a group of outraged Algerians who sought vengeance against him for a crime. Later this interview will repeat itself when the Quartermaster General questions the Generalissimo about his betrayal of the entire French nation in his negotiations to cover up the event of the mutiny.

The Senegalese soldiers who guard the imprisoned men of the mutinied regiment occupy one such place from which “the thought of systems” is “shaded.” Dressed in colorful uniforms, the Senegalese are likened by Faulkner to “an American blackface minstrel troupe dressed hurriedly out of pawnshops.” They are described as “contemplative, inattentive, inscrutable, and not even interested. . . . lounging in lethargic disdain among their machine guns above both the white people engaged in labor inside the fence and the ones engaged in anguish outside it, smok[ing] cigarettes and strok[ing] idly the edges of bayonets with broad dark spatulate thumbs” (787-88). They are said to “[lend] a gaudy, theatrical insouciance to the raffish shabbiness of their uniforms” (787).<sup>8</sup> It has always seemed to me that their theatricality, their association with minstrelsy, does more to add to the vague sense of threat they bring to the dream of *La Plus Grande France* than to alleviate it. What, in such a context, can be more threatening than theatre, the performance of difference? The Senegalese, in their gaudy inassimilability, speak both to difference and to indifference. In this text, difference and indifference allude to ‘the difference’ between the colonized and the French citizen, which itself acknowledges an ‘indifference,’ in the sense of the absence of individuation among subaltern populations – the Senegalese are themselves a collectivity and represent a collectivity. They are representatives of the colonial holdings of the Third Republic and, at first sight, have no further role to play. Not one of them is ever singled out.

On the other hand, 'indifference' is, among philosophers, one category of freedom, and with respect to "Continental thinking," as Glissant put it, their "inassimilability," their alterity, *is* a freedom, their difference is dependent on their indifference and, one might add, the source of their significance in *A Fable*. I do not mean to suggest by this any sort of romanticizing of the colonized; but to acknowledge that the awareness of and insistence on difference is one foundation for resistance to colonization. In short, in *A Fable*, the Senegalese constitute, for Faulkner, one site of resistance to 'the one ideology.'

Another site is *créolité* itself. Faulkner had experimented with the figure of the creole very early, in his New Orleans sketches. The figure is richly resonant in *Absalom, Absalom!*'s Charles Bon, who embodies a creole alterity that frames and ironizes the voices, the poetics, of the narrators of that novel.<sup>9</sup> In *A Fable*, a creole presence is located in the humanitarian organization known as *Les Amis Myriades et Anonymes à la France de Tout le Monde* (800). The leader of this group is an African American man who has two names: he is "Toby Sutterfield" in the southern United States and "Tooleyman," a creolized form of "Tout le Monde" in France. He is an astounding figure but also a significant one, for the conjunction of his naïvete, his capacity to minister to the grieving and the lost, and his ephemerality. He is the grandfather of a young and unnamed creole who accompanies him from the U.S. South to France and who himself has an important role to play in the text.

Described as a "grave and fantastic child" (858), the most remarkable thing about this young man is that he is a prodigy of languages, a young "alien" whose French is not the "glib smart febrile argot im-molated into the international salons via the nightclubs from the Paris gutter" (850), which is the British runner's "best" French, but "the French of the Sorbonne, the Institute." "His mamma was a New Orleans girl," Tooleyman explains, "She knew gobble talk. That's where he learned it." "But not the accent," the runner said. "Where did you get that?" "I don't know," the youth said. "I just got it." "Could you "just get" Greek or Latin or Spanish the same way?" "I ain't tried," the youth said. "I reckon I could, if they aint no harder than this one" (850-51).

The young man's ease with both his own southern vernacular and "the French of the Institute" is a delight at this dark point in the novel because he has the gift of mediating different voices. His presence raises the very slight possibility of a kind of mutual approach



among aliens and between aliens and nationals that speaks to the question of hope and resistance across and beyond empire. Tout le Monde's grandson is a figure of creole potentiality.

He makes only brief appearances as caretaker for his aging grandfather. After his grandfather's death in the botched mutiny led by the runner, he never reappears. There is, however, no reference to his presence at the mutiny or to his death – and in his simple disappearance from the text he has predecessors in Kate Chopin's *Désirée* of “*Désirée's Baby*” and Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening*, and the same questions must be asked. Has he really died? Is there any reason the finality of his death is withheld from the reader? Perhaps we must understand his disappearance the way Barbara Claire Freeman understands Edna Pontellier's in Chopin's *The Awakening*, as a “consequence of having awakened to desire in a social and political milieu that . . . offers no means of . . . sustaining” it (Freeman 38). But the absence of any news of his death does keep the possibility of mutual intelligibility alive. It is tempting to speculate that he lives on as the creole imprint in the text.

*Créolité* is born in violence. It is an appropriate mode of resistance to empire in particular because it is the product – a precipitant or remainder – of empire. It is what is left over, and it talks back. The creole in U.S. literature, and certainly in Faulkner, is a figure who possesses a disturbing cultural agency. What is so disturbing about it is that it mediates the historical past, the repressed prenational histories discarded by literary historians working with nationalist paradigms until very recently. The creole is certainly a reminder that racial and ethnic purities are fictions, but more importantly for my argument is that *créolité* troubles conceptualizations, logics, and economies. One way to speak of this is through the trope of music, more specifically through “crossed rhythms.” Janheinz Jahn writes that a crossed rhythm is where “the main accents of the basic forms employed do not agree, but are overlaid in criss-cross fashion over one another, so that, in polymetry for example, the particular basic meters begin not simultaneously but at different times” (*Muntu* 229). In Antonio Benítez-Rojo's words, the crossed rhythm is

a polyrhythmic space that is Cuban, Caribbean, African, and European at once, and even Asian and Indoamerican, where there has been a contrapuntal and intermingled meeting of the biblical Creator's *logos*, of tobacco smoke, the dance of the *orishas* and *loas*, the Chinese bugle, Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, and the *Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre* and the boat of the Three Juans. Within this chaos of dif-



ferences and repetitions, of combinations and permutations, there are regular dynamics that coexist, and which, once broached within an aesthetic experience, lead the performer to re-create a world without violence, or – as Senghor would say – to reach the Effective Word, the elusive goal where all possible rhythms converge. (81)

Benitez-Rojo's detailed list of "differences and repetitions" recollects (re-collects) ironically the words of the Yoknapatawpha sheriff that passion, "which is ephemeral," is why ". . . Eve and the Snake and Mary and the Lamb and Ahab and the Whale and Androcles and Balzac's African deserter, and all the celestial zoology of horse and goat and swan and bull [are] the firmament of man's history instead of the mere rubble of his past." The difference, of course, is that the Yoknapatawpha sheriff (a man of depth and human sympathy though he be) is a 'sheriff,' after all, a marshall of the law. The 'law' of his list is, to make a long story short, canonical. Benitez-Rojo's list mixes it up, drawing not only on legend but on material objects and natural effluvia (tobacco smoke), a variety of cultural artifacts and performances.

The most significant implication of this contrast between the perspective of the Yoknapatawpha sheriff and that of the creole speaker is that the creole imports into the book a different aesthetics which is an aesthetics of difference and, at the same time, an aesthetics of indifference – what Glissant describes as "*open* (italics mine) links with the other." This aesthetics of indifference points to the possibility of freedom. So that when Benitez-Rojo writes that the polyrhythmic space "lead[s] the performer to re-create [in an aesthetic performance] a world without violence," we are reminded that *A Fable* is about the dream of putting an end to war and asked to take the creole in the text very seriously. I want to go back to the point Paul Giles makes in his contribution to this symposium – that new work in trans(south)atlantic and Circum-Caribbean cultures risks simply recapitulating the region, substituting one regionalist sensibility for another – to suggest that *créolité*, understood as a poetics rather than a state of being, is one possible response to this problem. Édouard Glissant understands: the archipelago, after all, is very different from a 'region' precisely in its openness to the other.

Although we sometimes hear that Faulkner is more and more irrelevant in a diversifying intellectual culture, it is precisely the anthropological (relativistic) and poetic critique of a philosophy of History that has made it possible to reopen the question of Faulkner in pro-

ductive ways. History is a troubled and troubling potentiality in Faulkner's texts, by no means a narrative of progressive emergence. It is more likely to be associated with death and the longing for death, with dying orders, doomed dynasties, a time (and place) where the dawning of any new day is seldom other than a staging of old conflicts. If this is true in those novels from the thirties commonly acknowledged as Faulkner's major works – *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* – it is still true of those later texts written by a man increasingly conscious of his public and his cultural responsibilities in the aftermath of the Nobel Prize and during the early years of the Cold War, supposedly more optimistic about humanity's capacity not only to 'endure,' but to 'prevail.'

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In a letter to Robert K. Haas, Faulkner wrote: "The argument is (in the fable) in the middle of that war, Christ (some movement in mankind which wished to stop warfare forever) reappeared and was crucified again. We are repeating, we are in the midst of war again. Suppose Christ gave us one more chance, will we crucify him again, perhaps for the last time. That's crudely put; I am not trying to preach at all. But that is the argument. We did this in 1918; in 1944 it not only MUST NOT happen again, it SHALL NOT HAPPEN again, i.e., ARE WE GOING TO LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN? now that we are in another war, where the third and final chance might be offered to save him" (*Selected Letters of William Faulkner* 180).
- <sup>2</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 64; For Michel Foucault 'history' (lower-case) is "the empirical science of events" and 'History' (upper-case) is a "radical mode of being that prescribes [the] destiny [of] those particular beings that we are" (Foucault, *Order of Things* 219). Here I will capitalize 'History' in accordance with Foucault's practice. Where 'history' is not capitalized, it does not carry the same weight of imperial import.
- <sup>3</sup> Exactly what he presides over, for Faulkner, is indicated in his futuristic and cynical rant about the ultimate fate of mankind to become more and more mobile, more and more placeless, until he is ultimately the victim of his own machinery as automobiles become first homes and then tanks and then the very atmosphere which man cannot live outside of until "he will crawl shivering out of his cooling burrow to crouch among the delicate stalks of his dead antennae like a fairy geometry, beneath a clangorous rain of dials and meters and switches and bloodless fragments of metal epidermis, to watch the final two of them engaged in the last gigantic wrestling against the final and dying sky robbed even of darkness and filled with the inflectionless uproar of the two mechanical voices bellowing at each other polysyllabic and verbless patriotic nonsense" (994).
- <sup>4</sup> See Noel Polk's "Woman and the Feminine in *A Fable*," Polk, *Children of the Dark* 196-218, for a discussion of the Generalissimo's usurpation of the feminine.

- <sup>5</sup> For a good survey of the “quarrel with *A Fable*,” see Hoffman and Vickery, introduction, *Three Decades of Criticism* 37-42. See also Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner* 323-25 and David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* 226-28.
- <sup>6</sup> On the spirit of rebellion, see Urgo, *Faulkner's Apocrypha* 113-23. For Urgo, “Faulkner is a far more politically challenging and politically radical writer than has yet been explicated in any systematic fashion . . . His radicalism has been . . . muted by a specific reluctance on the part of critics to address issues raised in his most ambitious projects as well as by a more general failure to appreciate the implications of his apocrypha. Faulkner's apocrypha includes much more than the county he called Yoknapatawpha, which is only a synecdoche for the writer's larger production of alternatives of self and place and time. The apocrypha in its entirety . . . stands as a political and ideological alternative to what Faulkner considered to be the totalitarianism of modern society. . . . When Faulkner demanded the word ‘apocryphal,’ he insisted upon his relevance and his challenge to ‘official,’ historical reality” (4, 14).
- <sup>7</sup> Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* 185-233.
- <sup>8</sup> Donald Kartiganer might observe, here, that their theatricality speaks to Faulkner's interest in the “gesture,” in the “pose,” and he might point out that Faulkner himself, with virtually no war experience, enjoyed playing the role, striking the pose of the wounded aviator. Surely he hoped to realize some kind of freedom in that pose. See “So I, Who Never Had a War . . .”
- <sup>9</sup> Glissant considers Faulkner to be a writer who has more in common with writers of the Caribbean and Latin America than with writers from the northern United States. See Glissant's *Faulkner, Mississippi* for an extended meditation on this issue.

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