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War and Modernism in Faulkner's *A Fable*

I want to begin with two stage props in William Faulkner's 1954 novel, *A Fable*. The first occurs in an intricately staged setting for the old general's interview with the three women, his son the corporal's sisters and wife, who have come to Allied Headquarters at Chaulnesmont to ask him to spare their kinsman's life. The interview takes place in a sparsely-furnished ante-room in which sit a table, a chair behind it, and a bench against the other wall; on either end of the table perch two bronzes, "a delicate and furious horse poised weightless and epicene on one leg, and a savage and slumbrous head not cast, molded but cut by hand out of the amalgam by Gaudier-Brzeska" (928). The old general has just come from another roundtable discussion with other Allied generals about the Christ-corporal, his son, who has masterminded the vast mutiny whereby an entire battalion of French soldiers has refused to charge the enemy as ordered. The mutiny has caused the Allied officers to confer with a German general about how to get the war re-started with a minimum of damage to civilization – that is, of course, to the civilization of the wealthy and powerful upper classes of the nations at war with each other. As the runner says, with perhaps a nod toward Jean Renoir's great 1937 film, *La Grande Illusion*, all of the generals "speak the same language, no matter what clumsy isolated national tongues they were compelled by circumstance to do it in" (961): some things are more important than war. Prior to the German general's entrance, the Allied officers discuss the corporal, each of the lesser generals offering personal testimony as to the several forms and names under which the corporal has appeared on and around the battlefields, the various miraculous acts he has performed, the ways in which he has died and been buried, and the legends his activities have created throughout the trenches; the discussion the old general is about to have with the corporal's three kinswomen will cover more mundane but equally important

facts about the corporal's actual birth, life, and participation in the war.

The other scene occurs during the famous 'horsethief' episode of *A Fable*, before the New Orleans lawyer begins a long-planned speech defending the old Negro handler and the cockney groomsmen against the crowd; he does not understand that the crowd wants to free the thieves and squirrel them safely out of town to where they will be safe from prosecution for stealing the astonishing, legend-making race-winning three-legged horse. The lawyer pauses a moment to reflect on his position in the world, both at this moment and in general. He remembers a picture he owns,

a painting, no copy but proved genuine and coveted, for which he had paid more than he liked to remember even though it had been validated by experts before he bought it and revalidated twice since and for which he had been twice offered half again what he had paid for it, and which he had not liked then and still didn't and was not even certain he knew what it meant, but which was his own now and so he didn't even have to pretend that he liked it, which – so he believed then, with more truth than any save himself knew – he affirmed to have bought for the sole purpose of not having to pretend that he liked it; one evening, alone in his study . . . suddenly he found himself looking at no static rectangle of disturbing Mediterranean blues and saffrons and ochres, nor even at the signboard affirming like a trumpet-blast the invictable establishment in coeval space of the sum of his past . . . (835-36)

The lawyer would seem to have bought himself a Cézanne, perhaps a Braque or a Derain, but almost certainly a Fauvist painting or one of the Vorticist school. Thomas L. McHaney thinks there's reason to believe that the lawyer miraculously owns one of Cézanne's *Chateau Noir* canvases.¹ Indeed, all five in the *Chateau Noir* series fit Faulkner's description of the lawyer's infuriating and disconcerting possession. *Chateau Noir* also has other intriguing resonances with Faulkner's work: one reasonable translation of the French is "Dark House," a working title for two of his most famous novels, which each time he rejected in favor of *Light in August* and then *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner might have seen one of the *Chateau Noir* paintings in the Louvre, but I am less concerned to prove that the lawyer owns a Cézanne or to demonstrate that Faulkner knew it than to note these paintings' and Cézanne's stature as precursors of modernism and to suggest the significance of the fact that at two dramatic moments in *A Fable* Faulkner introduces the modern in twentieth century European art, almost incidentally, casually, as interpellations in the larger narrative, as the horsethief episode in America intervenes in the novel's larger European theatre.

These modernist works of art form part of a multitude of references to European art and politics and history throughout the novel, so thickly woven into the novel's various narratives that they become part of its fictional texture. For example, the original mutinous regiment "had been raised in this district, raised in person, in fact, by one of the glorious blackguards who later became Napoleon's marshals, who delivered the regiment into the Emperor's own hand, and along with it became one of the fiercest stars in that constellation which filled half the sky with its portent and blasted half the earth with its lightning" (669). Faulkner elevates one minor character out of his very minor-ness by his slender connections with that history. He is a

staff officer already four years a captain even though only five years out of St Cyr, descendant of a Napoleonic duchy whose founder or recipient had been a butcher then a republican then an imperialist then a duke, and his son a royalist then a republican again and – still alive and still a duke – then a royalist again . . . who should have been the idol pattern and hope not merely for all career officers but for all golden youth everywhere, as was Bonaparte not merely for all soldiers but for every ancestorless Frenchman qualified first in poverty, who was willing to hold life and conscience cheap enough . . ." (902-03)

Dozens of such references fugue throughout the text – *Gaston de la Tour*, Clovis and Charlemagne, Dickens and Hugo, Flemish painters, Antipas and Tiberius, Desmoulin and Robespierre, Hannibal, Caesar, Gauguin, Byron, Tiberius, Agincourt and Crecy – similar references to the Levant, for obvious reasons, given the geographical sources there for the story of Christ and its relationship to Europe and the rest of the West. Not incidentally, he interweaves that rich past with what the Christian world at any rate has accepted as the central event in world history: Christ's direct intervention in that history. We may easily enough argue that Faulkner included such references in *A Fable* to give ponderable historical weight to the setting of his novel at such a crucial moment in European and world history, but I think much more is at stake in his depiction of the simultaneous advent of the new Christ and Modernism.

Faulkner binds these two scenes together in a number of ways beyond the sculptures and the painting, by his usual method of carefully-sculpted comparisons and contrasts, here based in European and, to a lesser extent, American history. He describes the New Orleans lawyer as a man of some "bulk: . . . not only tall but big" (824), the general as very small: he looks like "a masquerading child beneath the

illusion of crushing and glittering weight of his blue-and-scarlet and gold and brass and leather” (925). He sits “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;” he sits “not only immobile but immobilised beneath the mass and glitter of his braid and stars and buttons, he resembled a boy, a child” (884-85) too small for all the “crushing and glittering weight” of the “braids and stars and buttons” of that history, which “immobilize” him. But the braids and stars and buttons, which create merely the “*illusion* of crushing and glittering weight” (925, my emphasis), suggest the degree to which the weight of command is a charade enacted by commanders to manipulate the commanded. He is, then, even at his advanced age, an infant relative to the long history of the civilization he has inherited; even so, he bears that weight, defends that civilization in the name of his class. To be sure, he claims that he defends order, which he opposes to the corporal’s problematic gift to humanity of individual freedom – which, unfettered, would lead to the chaos that the old general and his class abhor as antithetical to *everybody’s* best interests. His commitment to the ‘crushing’ weight of the illusion may smack of the self-serving longsuffering of Henry IV’s sleepless complaint that “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (2 *Henry IV*, III.i.31).

Likewise, the New Orleans lawyer, in Missouri, before his romanticized confrontation with the crowd, wanting to make himself part of European history, one among the Greats, looks “across the flimsy barrier” that separates him from the crowd

into no brick-and-plaster barn built yesterday by the God-fearing grandfathers of other orderly and decorous and God-fearing Missouri farmers, but back a hundred years into the stone hall older than Orleans or Capet or Charlemagne, filled with the wooden sabots until yesterday reeking with plowed land and manure. (826)

He begins to play the hero, imagining himself among the great manipulators of the human masses as he stands in the courtroom “solitary,”

but anything but alone amid, against, as a frieze or tapestry, that titanic congeries, invincible and judgmatical, of the long heroic roster who were the milestones of the rise of man – the giants who coerced compelled directed and, on occasion, actually led his myriad moil: Caesar and Christ, Bonaparte and Peter and Mazarin, Marlborough and Alexander, Genghis and Talleyrand and Warwick, Marlborough and Bryan, Bill Sunday, General Booth and Prester John, prince and bishop, Norman, dervish, plotter and khan, not for the power and glory nor even the aggran-

disement; these were merely secondarily concomitant and even accidental; but for man. (833-34)

Like the general, he lives under the illusion that he and all his predecessors want what's best for humanity; but we may well doubt the intentions of both. The lawyer is one among the giants, here in the Missouri backwoods, playing Caesar with a ragtag bunch of country folks and failing spectacularly.

Both the lawyer and the old general deal with crowds; they stand for long periods looking out of upper-storey windows down on the crowds whom they feel it is their destiny – and duty – to influence and control. The old general disdains them: “They want only to suffer,” he tells his aide, who wants to close the shutters on their noisy moiling (884). The crowd that has gathered to await word of the fate of the mutineers and the thirteen ring-leaders are bound by their common history; they are helpless to thwart it and rendered incompetent by it: an officer in the streets with the crowd, trying to keep them from stampeding themselves, thinks contemptuously of the “stupidly complicating ineptitude of civilians at all times” (672). They crowd into the *Place de Ville*, “filling it again, right up to the spear tipped iron fence beyond which the three sentries flanked the blank door,” they stumble clumsily against each other, “until even if they had wished to stream, stumble, pant back to the compound and at least be where they could hear the volley [from the executioners' rifles] which would bereave them, there would have been no room to turn around in and begin to run; immobilised and fixed by their own density in that stone sink whose walls were older than Clovis and Charlemagne” (789).

The French masses are bound by that long history that goes back past even Clovis, the founder of modern France, who inherited his kingdom from the finally defunctive Romans. As Keen Butterworth long ago pointed out, the huge walls of the ancient fortified city of Chaulnesmont, like that history, work to contain and control the masses; inside the walls the crowd “bunch[es] onto itself like a blind worm thrust suddenly into sunlight, recoiling into arrestment . . .” Outside those city walls, where their history cannot shape them, they “spread out fanwise across the plain, so that already they no longer resembled a worm, but rather again that wave of water which had swept at dawn across the *Place de Ville*” (786).

The American crowd is quite different, not having that history or those walls; the doors to the courtroom, even barred, are no match for their right to, their ownership of, the courtroom they want to enter;

only a slight wooden fence and a flimsy easily-breached gate to keep them on the audience side of the courtroom, momentarily separated from the lawyers' tables and the prisoners' dock and the jury's pen and the judge's bench. The lawyer tries to contain them on the viewers' side of the fence with a speech, but they will have none of it, flinging the gate open and simply lifting the lawyer out of their way toward the justice – freedom – they claim for the three-legged horse and the Negro and the cockney groom.

Standing there, thinking of the rhetorical opportunity to sway the crowd, the lawyer thinks of them as confused and stumbling into and against each other, much as the crowd in France at the *Place de Ville* behaves. For him it is as if they

had walked full tilt, as into an invisible wall, into the room's massed and waiting cynosure; and on through the swing gate into the enclosure, to stop facing the massed room in almost the same prints he had stood in ten minutes ago . . .

and he believes that he is still in control, that he can control his destiny and theirs,

by putting some of him in one motion in one direction, by him of him and for him, to disjam the earth, get him for a little while at least out of his own way; – standing there a moment . . . still holding as in his palm like putty, the massed anonymity and the waiting as the sculptor holds for another moment yet the malleable obedient unimpatient clay, or the conductor across his balanced utensile hands the wand containing within its weightless pencil-gleam all the loud fury and love and anguish. (833-34)

Before he begins this speech, however, he thinks of that Cézanne. Looking at its Mediterranean blues and saffron and ochres, he sees not a revolutionary modernist masterpiece but rather a flag heralding himself centuries backward in to a castle where like the Norman earl he can contemplate the usable poverty of his serfs: the painting is the 'cognizance', that is, a banner

of *his* destiny like the wind-hard banner of the old Norman earl beneath whose vast shadow not just bankers and politicians clicked and sprang nor governors and lieutenants blanched and trembled but at the groaning tables in whose kitchens and sculleries or even open courtyards and kennels daily sixty thousand who wore no swords and spurs and owned no surnames made the one last supreme sacrifice: the free gift of their pauperism . . . (836, my emphasis)

He is completely wrong about the Cézanne: he buys it so that he does not have to like it (835); he does not like it because it is the precursor of the modern. Like the orators and military leaders of the European

and American history that he identifies with at this moment, he feels that he holds the crowd "in his palm like putty, the massed anonymity and the waiting as the sculptor holds for another moment yet the malleable obedient unimpatient clay . . ." (834). It is no accident that he thinks of himself as a sculptor, but unlike Gaudier-Brzeska, he is clearly thinking of molding the crowd into traditional, even representational sculptures based in the traditional history that the orators and military leaders he invokes represent.

He does well to dislike the Cézanne, and would no doubt dislike the Gaudier-Brzeska too, if he could, if only because they augur an intervention in history that would make him, the would-be Norman earl, obsolescent. His speech, which the American crowd ignores, demonstrates his assumption, like the old general's, that history will always operate as it has always operated, in his own interests: his language, predicting a millennium of peace, parodies the political rhetoric that keeps his class in power, that assures the world that his class alone can maintain order and security. Speaking in the summer of 1914, literally on the precipice of the yawning abyss, the lawyer assures his constituency that the election of Woodrow Wilson on "the fourth of November two years ago" has inaugurated "the sun of a thousand years of peace and prosperity such as the world has never seen" (836). Even Europe, he claims, has "already entered into its own millennium of peace and reason, freed at last after two thousand years of war and the fear of war . . ." (837).

Unlike the French hordes who patiently await the word from on high, the American crowd will have none of his speechifying, and they simply move him out of their way as they go about their business of freeing the Negro and the groom whom the turnkey has already spirited out of town. Americans can move without the great man to lead them – for a while yet, at any rate.

At the center of the novel's themes is the interview between the old general and corporal, during which the old general tempts his son to save his life by joining with him to rule the world rather than forcing him, the old general, to make him a martyr to the tradition that the old general upholds. The corporal represents no tradition except himself: he "seemed to have [no] history at all beyond the day when [he] had appeared, materialised seemingly out of nowhere and nothingness in the quartermaster's store-room . . ." (784). The interview articulates the competing claims of the history and tradition that the old general represents and the corporal's revolution against that tradition,

the competing claims of the mass need to be shaped by the ideological ordering forces of history and of the burgeoning individual's need to speak, act, and create individually: the old alliances and systems versus the new. The corporal-son argues that European history fears the voice of the individual; the general-father finesses him by arguing that he alone, the scion of that history, can create value out of the son's act of self-sacrifice: by executing him, he can make his son the martyr he wants to become and then interpret that martyrdom to the masses as he finds necessary and useful to his own interests. He argues his tradition, of course, as "an alternat[ive] to chaos" (972).

Indeed, the interview takes place at the "old Roman citadel" that sits above the city of Chaulnesmont, whose "stone weight . . . seemed to lean down and rest upon them like a ponderable shadow" (983). The citadel does not "loom" above them but "squat[s], not Gothic but Roman: not soaring to the stars out of the aspiration of man's past but a gesture against them of his mortality like a clenched fist or a shield" (983). Faulkner's choice of such a setting for this climactic confrontation between father and son, between the generations, places that confrontation directly in the insuperable shadow of European history: imperial Rome's, Ozymandias's, "gesture . . . of . . . immortality."

At a climactic moment in their dialogue the old general claims that the two of them are articulations "of the two inimical conditions [freedom and order] which . . . must contend and – one of them – perish." He begins with a curious image: "we are not two Greek or Armenian or Jewish – or for that matter, Norman – peasants swapping a horse . . ." (988). But in fact perhaps they are swapping a horse – not one horse for another horse, but two symbolical ones, Faulkner's own prized symbol of masculinity and personal empowerment for a bronze sculpture of one, one historical tradition for a new way of thinking about humanity's relationship to that history. The old general, sitting between the bronze horse and the bronze Gaudier-Brzeska head, then, is poised between the old and the new, the one which is changing into the other which he despises. Richard Godden has suggested that the bronze horse, surging upward on one leg, supplies the fourth leg for the three-legged horse in the Horsethief narrative (82-83); if Godden is right, and I think he is, the crippled 'epicene', effeminized representational horse stands in contrast to both the three-legged American horse and the Gaudier-Brzeska sculpture. The American horse is not at all fey or feminized or epicene, though it is crippled: indeed, the cockney groom kills him precisely to prevent the owner's economic

interests in the horse's bankable sperm from putting him out to stud for the rest of his life. Even so, on both sides of the Atlantic the horse is a crippled and doomed creature, increasingly useless under the onslaught of the modernizing forces that Gaudier-Brzeska represents. Faulkner, writing on our side of World War II and, as I think, actually thinking of World War II though writing about World War I, would have understood the obsolescence of the horses that he loved, especially as a defense against the German panzers. Paul Fussell cites Robert Wernick's *Blitzkrieg*: "Witness the behavior of the Polish cavalry in September, 1939, setting out with impressive élan to repel the invading panzers: 'In a few minutes . . . the cavalry lay in a smoking, screaming mass of dismembered and disemboweled men and horses'" (5). The old general staunchly opposes the new, as his long tirade against tanks, probably based, in Faulkner's mind, on the ferocious battle of Kursk that comes near the end of his dialogue with the corporal, suggests. The creatures of modernism, of mechanical mobility, he fears will be a "frankenstein" which "roasts [man] alive with heat, asphyxiates him with speed, wrenches loose his still living-entrails in the ferocity of its prey-seeking stoop" (994). Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was also, along with Ezra Pound and others a proponent of Vorticism, a modern theory of art and life that specifically embraced the energy of the new, the personal, the vital, especially as they expressed themselves in the mechanical.

Like Pound and Eliot in language, Picasso and Braque in art, Schoenberg and Stravinsky in music, Cézanne and Gaudier-Brzeska propounded a new language for a new time. Modernism addressed directly the traditions of language, history, and convention that made European crowds into worms within the high constricting walls of their histories, and mere water on the plain when they are outside those walls. They wanted to intervene into and revise that history so that it would stop endlessly repeating itself for the benefit of the ruling classes. Jesus too: Faulkner's corporal. It is no coincidence that the only two names the Allied generals have known the corporal by are Brzonymi and Brzewski, both of which connect him directly to Gaudier-Brzeska, who was killed in the trenches of northern France in 1915: this, too, no coincidence, both of them, working against the traditional, killed precisely by the forces of that tradition that was struggling to keep itself alive.

Note

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