Between Allegory and History:
Reading William Faulkner's *A Fable*[*]

Satoshi KANAZAWA

In a letter he wrote to Robert Haas on Jan. 15, 1944, Faulkner explained the fundamental argument he wanted to make in *A Fable*. It was in the midst of WWII and Faulkner had just returned from Hollywood, one of the centers of war effort in the nation. But when Faulkner began a new novel, it was not set in the war they were just fighting but in the war they had fought about thirty years ago: namely the Western Front of WWI. It seems Haas implied some concern about the setting but Faulkner's answer clearly explained why he made that decision.

> I think your feeling is wrong about the date of the fable.... The argument is (in the fable) in the middle of that war, Christ (some movement in mankind which wished to stop war forever) reappeared and was crucified again. We are repeating, we are in the midst of war again. Suppose Christ gives us one more chance, will we crucify him again, perhaps for the last time.
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> 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 us to save him.[1]

Clearly Faulkner regarded the second war as the repetition of the first. Moreover, his emphatic tone implies his real fear that the mankind might repeat the same mistake again. Here we can point out Faulkner's particular view of history: history is not a chronological chain of events but possibly nightmarish repetitions that give us the same opportunity and test again and again.

This particular view of history seems to have deep roots in Faulkner's psyche. The creative process of *The Sound and the Fury* is enough to show how he was obsessed with repetition and failures. Or we can say the life of Thomas Sutpen consists of repeated failures about the same test. John Irwin has already shown how Faulkner was obsessed with the Oedipal pattern of repetition throughout his career.

On the other hand, it was also deeply related with the nature of the novel he had just begun. It is well known that the germ of *A Fable* was an idea he was given in Hollywood that the one who was buried under the tomb of an unknown soldier was Christ. In this idea we can find two incompatible elements: the timeless and transcendental nature of the Christ's Passion and the real or material historicity of World War I. Faulkner's view of history as repetition can be seen as a way to solve this dilemma: if we regard history as continual repetition of same failures, then the history itself becomes abstract and finally all that remains is the same old pattern of allegory or fable, in which the historicity of World War and the transcendency of Christ's Passion can be cancelled and/or overlaid with each other. This is precisely what Faulkner achieved in *A Fable*, which was Faulkner's ambitious try for the allegorized history of mankind.

To achieve this peculiar fusion between allegory and history was no easy task,

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1   Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, 180. All quotations of Faulkner's letters are from this book and the paginations are shown parenthetically in the text.

though. His answer to this challenge was, in a word, to invent a new style based on the tradition of Christian typology. This new style enabled him to link the historical details of World War I with the story of Christ. Besides, it places *A Fable* in the main tradition of American literature.

First, let's see how Faulkner himself was aware of the importance of this new style. In a letter he sent to Radom House on January 10th, 1945, he reported the deliberate effort he was putting in while writing this novel. "Well, I'm doing something different now, so different that I am writing and rewriting, weighing every word, which I never did before; I used to bang it on like an apprentice paper hanger and never look back." (188) In fact he had to invent a new style that encompassed the whole history of mankind. His famous statement about his style, that he was trying "to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period" should be understood in this context.[2]

In *A Fable* he actually tried to achieve this ideal by cataloging out the whole range of society in one endless sentence or evoking the names of the ancient or modern heroes in describing a historical event of the 20th century.[3]

On the other hand, Faulkner weaved into the allegorical narrative of Corporal/Christ many historical details of World War I. These details are often disguised or transformed to conform to the allegorical pattern so that critics have paid little attention to them. However it is actually their presence that makes up a uniquely allegorical/historical texture of this novel. Here I'm going to focus on three of them and analyze how Faulkner made allegory out of the historical facts.

First, mutinies or rebellions of men against their superiors were no rare incidents in WWI. In fact, the French Army Mutinies of 1917 involved no less than 54

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2 Malcolm Cowley, *Faulkner-Cowley File*, 14.

3 See William Faulkner, *Novels 1942-1954*: Go Down, Moses, Intruder in the Dust, Requiem for a Nun, A Fable, 807, 887-890. All references to *A Fable* in this paper are from this edition and the paginations are shown parenthetically in the text.

divisions.[4] Besides, in the first year of the war there was a legendary episode of Christmas armistice. If we add to these incidents the Russian Revolution of 1917 or the waves of revolutions across Europe which really brought the war to end in 1918, we can legitimately allegorize history and say that in World War I the conflict of two opposing movements in the humanity, one led by the Authority which promotes War and the other embodied by the nameless Men which tries to abolish War, really reached a decisive moment. These facts provide powerful historical relevance to *A Fable*, which is after all not a pacifist fantasy but an allegorized history depicted in its most significant moment.

The second historical detail is the presence of the Senegalese soldiers on the Western front. Faulkner's descriptions of them are significant in that they show the true nature of colonial soldiers. Faulkner's rhetoric reveals the theatricality of their presence in the battlefield where they had nothing at stake. (787, 788) Moreover, at one instance Faulkner succinctly sums up the colonial soldier's essential rootlessness and the absurdity of their presence on the strange land (873).

However, his descriptions of these soldiers are always abstract and categorical. In fact, no one of them is ever given a name and we are never told of their personal stories. We can ironically say that in emphasizing their inherent theatricality the author himself makes them just flat figures. In other words, in Faulknerean allegorical history there is little room for anyone's personal matters because allegory is by definition abstract and tends not to individuality but generality.

In this regard, it is interesting to review Faulkner's way of representations of the main characters of *A Fable*. Neither the runner nor the sentry has their personal names revealed in the text. The Old General and the Quartermaster gener-

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4   See "French Army Mutiny, 1917." Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The European Powers in the First World War: An Encyclopedia*.

al also are never called by their own names. This abstract way of designating char-
acters is surely one characteristic of the novel to give an impression of allegori-
cal morality play. On the other hand, Levine and Gragnon are called by their own
names. The most interesting case is the Corporal's, whose real name Stephan is
revealed only at the very end of the novel. Thus Faulkner's treatment of these char-
acters might seem inconsistent. However, when we consider that Faulkner gives
all these characters ample room for their personal histories we have to conclude
that this seeming inconsistency is actually the author's intentional strategy to set
up the unique texture of the novel: that is, a text between allegory and realistic
novel.

Third, *A Fable* captures the definitive moment in the twentieth century by
emphasizing the role of the United States in the last phase of WWI. Though the
presence of America in *A Fable* has been generally neglected (except for the
"Horsethief" episode), it constitutes the backbone of the novel. In fact, references
to the rising power of the United States are scattered throughout the novel. It is
also implied in the geography of the novel. The name of the city Chaulnesmont,
the symbol of the military and masculinity and one of the two centers of the novel,
comes from Chaumont where the headquarter of the AEF was located.[5] More
importantly, St. Mihel is the historical site of the battle in which the AEF played
the leading role for the first time in World War I.[6] However, here again Faulkner
allegorizes the history by overlaying it with his own allegorical significance. The
heavy bombardments near St. Mihel not only announces the debut of the United
States upon the world stage but also "resurrected" the Corporal from the ground
and ultimately leads to his entombment under the Tomb of an Unknown Soldier.
Thus America plays a decisive role both to end the war and ironically to establish

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5   See the map "The Western Front as the United States saw it, June-November 1918." John
     Laffin, *A Western Front Companion 1914-1918*, 93.

6   Andy Wiest, *The Illustrated History of World War I*, 221.

a monument of the Corporal/Christ's attempt to stop the war.

These historical facts are all overlaid with some allegorical meanings while they retain their own original historicity. Thus *A Fable* is not a rigid allegory for some abstract argument but a novel of uniquely historical/allegorical hybridity. It was surely a tour de force.

Interestingly, Faulkner's attempt to fuse history and allegory puts *A Fable* outside the modernist aesthetics and set this novel in the older tradition of American Literature.

What I want to suggest now is an unexpected similarity between *A Fable* and Cotton Mather's biography of John Winthrop in *Magnalia Christi Americana*. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, Mather faced in *Magnalia Christ Americana* the same dilemma Faulkner faced in *A Fable*. He wanted to give account of historical events and experiences of America in terms of timeless workings of Providence: hence its title. In the case of Winthrop's biography Mather portrays him as an American parallel with Nehemiah. Here we can point out the problem of possible conflict between historicity and allegory again. Mather's solution to this problem was, of course, typology, which, Bercovitch says, "translates secular history, whether of individuals or of communities, into spiritual biography." [7] Bercovitch also explains the problem Mather faced in this work as follows:

> The problem with "Americanus" is that it connects Winthrop with a terrestrial and a supernal country. As the representative American, he stands at once for citizen and saint, state and church. New England and ecclesiastical history, res Americana and res Christi. In sum, his exemplary status yokes together two historiographical modes—one providential, the other figural—apparently as different from each other as ... historia is different from allegoria. (44)

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7   Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 36. Hereafter the paginations are shown parenthetically in the text.

It is apparent Faulkner and Mather tried to solve the same problem with the same method of typology. Interestingly, Faulkner's numerous references to ancient or modern heroes in *A Fable* can be understood as the consequence of this method. For example, in a long set piece to praise the role of rapacity in the human history Quartermaster General refers to many heroes or artists such as Caesar, Hannibal, Napoleon Michelangelo or Newton. In another case, at the beginning of the horsethief episode, the sentry's relationship with the horse is compared to that of Paris and Helen. These numerous references often seem far-fetched and sometimes too deliberate to be assimilated into a novel. Likewise, in his biography of Winthrop, Mather also refers to numerous personalities of Greece and Rome as well as many religious leaders of New England. According to Bercovitch,

> It incorporates exampla from every corner of Christian and pagan antiquity, and it extends the ancient to the modern world. Mather is careful to make these "embellishments" conform to the theme of government; and if at times they seem to run to an indiscriminate catalogue of memorabilia, that is precisely his intent: the random, sweeping effect conveys the density required by his soteriological concept of Winthrop, the model both of sainthood and of theocracy.... (58)

Now we can see Faulkner's numerous references in the text is precisely in the tradition of typology. It is a result of his attempt to overlap the historicity of WWI with the transcendental story of Christ's Passion.

However Faulkner's use of typological style differs from that of Cotton Mather in one important way. That is, Faulkner lacked belief in ultimate salvation or "the history of redemption" to which Mather tried to refer the historical facts (*littera-historia*) in Winthrop's life. For Faulkner history is not a straight flow of time through redemption toward salvation but rather a circular repetition of the same test. In other words, as his letter to Haas clearly suggests, Faulkner was surely haunted with the idea of repetition. However, it seems he was quite ambivalent

about his own view of history. That is, for Faulkner the end of repetition means a kind of catastrophe in which there is no possibility for man to atone for his failures. On the other hand eternal repetition can imply nightmarish repetition of the same test from which there is no escape. Thus, in the stark contrast with Mather, the refusal of redemption and possible salvation leads Faulkner to a serious dilemma.

In *A Fable* this dilemma find an unexpected solution. It is suggested in the long speech by Old General about man's "invincible and deathless folly." The Old General's claim for man's immortality through his folly is quite important because it has an echo from Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.

In the Nobel Speech Faulkner famously refused to accept man's end upon "the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening" and insisted that man "will not merely endure; he will prevail." [8] In *A Fable* these famous lines are given to Old General, who actually parodies the Nobel Speech by attributing man's immortality to his folly such as inventing more and more sophisticated machines. In fact, while Faulkner at Stockholm never mentioned how man survived "the red and dying evening," Old General here eloquently talks of man's triumphant escape to another planet. We can say that Old General supplies an escape route from Faulkner's dilemma by suggesting an unexpected image of the mankind propelled by "invincible and deathless folly" into the outer space.

> Oh yes, he will survive it because he has that in him which will endure even beyond the ultimate worthless tideless rock freezing slowly in the last red and heatless sunset, because already the next star in the blue immensity of space will be already clamorous with the uproar of his debarkation, his puny and inexhaustible and immortal voice still talking, still planning; and there too after the last ding dong of doom has rung and died there will still

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8   William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, 120.

> be one sound more: his voice, planning still to build something higher and faster and louder; more efficient and louder and faster than even before....(994)

Here in this elated voice of the Old General we can sense a proud refusal of the pessimistic view of repetitive history. This is the decisive moment in *A Fable* at which a break through from the vicious circle of history is at last envisioned.

Of course in *A Fable's* allegorical system Old General is Satan just as Corporal is Christ, and his view of humanity is contrasted with that of Corporal/Christ. But he is also the father of Corporal/Christ and Corporal's argument against General is made in silence so that it hardly constitutes a real counterbalance. Thus we have to say that at the center of its allegorical system this work holds a deep ambivalence toward itself. We might further say that it is precisely this ambivalence that makes *A Fable* ultimately a novel.

In conclusion *A Fable* is a Faulkner's unique attempt to fuse history and allegory by inventing a new typological style. On its base lies Faulkner's unique view of history that it is either a nightmarish repetition or a disastrous catastrophe. But *A Fable* also parodies that pessimistic view of history, and thus makes itself ultimately a novel.

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