

【論 文】

A Study of William Faulkner's “A Rose for Emily”

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In a letter to Warren Beck, written on July 6, 1941, William Faulkner indicated that his original intention all along had been to glorify the human condition: “I have been writing all the time about honor, truth, pity, consideration, the capacity to *endure* [emphasis mine] well grief and misfortune and injustice and then *endure* [emphasis mine] again, in terms of individuals who observed and adhered to them not for reward but for virtue’s sake.”¹

Considering “A Rose for Emily,” (written in 1930) one of Faulkner’s masterpieces, it seems now very difficult to perceive his message because of its dependence on the power of shock. The readers are astonished at the final macabre scene in the bedroom-tomb. There seems to be no suggestion of the human condition which Faulkner wants to glorify. The story has been read so far as a tale of necrophilia in the Gothic mode, or as an allegory of tension between the post Civil War South and Yankee opportunists. This paper is an attempt to search for Faulkner’s message by studying the human condition in the story.

About the story Faulkner comments:

That to me was another sad and *tragic* manifestation of man's condition in which he dreams and hopes, in which he is in conflict with himself or with his environment or with others. In this case there was the young girl with a young girl's normal aspirations to find love and then a husband and a family, who brow-beaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man who didn't want her to leave home because he wanted a housekeeper, and it was a natural instinct of—repressed which—you can't repress it—you can mash it down but it comes up somewhere else and very likely in a *tragic* form, and that was simply another manifestation of man's injustice to man, of the poor *tragic* human being struggling with its own heart, with others, with its environment, for the simple things which all human beings want. In this case it was a young girl that just wanted to be loved and to love and to have a husband and a family. (*FU* 184-185) [emphasis mine]

Faulkner also says, "it's man in conflict with his heart, or with his fellows, or with his environment—that's what deserves the pity." (*FU* 59) In commenting on the title of the story, Faulkner says:

The meaning was, here was a woman who had a *tragedy*, an irrevocable *tragedy* and nothing could be done about it, and I pitied her and this was a salute, just as if you were to make a gesture, a salute, to anyone ; to a woman you would hand a rose, as you would lift a cup of sake to a man.² [emphasis mine]

We see by his comments that Faulkner is quite sympathetic to Emily who he thinks "the poor tragic human being struggling with its own heart, with others, with its environment."

However, from the story we view the image of Emily as "larger than life," as quite monstrous rather than a human who deserves pity. To see the portrait of Emily, let us briefly recount the incidents of the story. At the beginning we learn that Miss Emily had died. She was a fallen aristocrat of "the high and mighty Griersons," "a fallen monument," "a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" and the object of the townsmen's curiosity. (*PF* 433) When called upon by a committee of aldermen seeking to force her to pay taxes, she turns them out of her house decisively. Here we are given our first portrait of Emily—"a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue." (*PF* 434-435)

At the time of the death of Miss Emily's father, she met callers at the door, "dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body." (*PF* 437)

After they had buried her father quickly, Miss Emily was sick for a long time. "The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks" and "a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee—a big, dark ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face" (*PF* 438) began to take her for afternoon rides in a yellow-wheeled buggy and matched team of bays from the livery stables. During this courtship, Miss Emily had bought some rat poison. (*PF* 439) Homer

Barron did not propose, and still Miss Emily was seen with him. One day a neighbor saw Miss Emily's Negro let the Yankee in. And that was the last time Homer Barron was seen. (PF 441)

The years passed, "Miss Emily had grown fat and her hair was turning gray." "Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man." (PF 441) Upon her death, the townspeople crowded into that house like vultures. One room "in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years" (PF 443) was forced open, where they found Homer Barron himself in the bed.

Although the story reaches its conclusion, the questions may assert themselves, "Who is Emily?" "Why did Homer Barron have to be killed?" Without ascertaining the answers, the townspeople are never free from their past. The story begins and ends with Emily's death. Their world is closed within itself. They live in the world of *The Waste Land* where there is no communication with the outer world, a world of solipsism. Here we have to face their problem.

We see that the townspeople believe that the tragic flaw of Miss Emily is the conventional pride "that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were." (PF 437) And "She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness." (PF 439) They felt that Emily's conventional pride was beyond their understanding.

The tragic 'flaw' ('hamartia' in Greek) we perceive in Miss Emily is that she excludes any intrusion of the present and clings to her tragic loneliness. We see that the central event in each of the five sections of

the story is an intrusion of the present into Miss Emily's tragic loneliness. Furthermore we notice that each section ends with some reference to death. Again, the tragic plight of Emily is that she is a prisoner of the past, of society, of social and moral taboos in her own solipsistic world. She kept her front door closed for many years (*PF* 441). She is so entrapped that her individuality, the central "I—Am" of her being, is practically obliterated. Faulkner comments that Emily "had had no life at all" (*FU* 87); she becomes a ghost alienated from the reality of immediate experience.

Also, we should notice that the townspeople are not free from this flaw either. The position of the townspeople in regard to the problem of time specifically is suggested in the scene where the old soldiers appear at her funeral :

They had the funeral on the second day . . . talking of Miss Emily as though she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years. (*PF* 442-443)

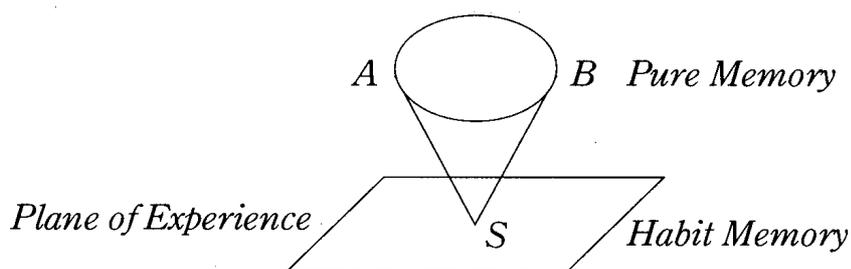
As the subjunctive past tense suggests, the townspeople actually did neither dance with Emily nor court her. They were obsessed by their memory which is not the factual past.

Surely their memory is Bergsonian.³ The scheme described in the passage above appears in a figure from Bergson's *Matter and Memory*. Cone ABS is the whole of memory. At its base, AB, lies pure memory,

where images and sense impressions are stored “in the order in which they occur, leaving to each fact its place and consequently marking the date” (*MM*, 195). If we let consciousness float, that memory is a complete cosmo, in which nothing of our past life has been lost. We clearly drag a heavier and heavier load with us through time, and “the point of the cone is ever driven into the future by the weight of the past.” (*MM*, 324-25) Thus, most of memory is not naturally permitted to become conscious. Instead, the brain selects the memories applicable to present situations and possible future states. Bergson writes in his “la durée,” “duration,” “La durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l’avenir et qui gonfle en avançant. Du moment que le passé s’accoît sans cesse, indéfiniment aussi il se conserve.”⁴

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past gnaws without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation. Memory . . . is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register.

. . . In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside. The cerebral mechanism is arranged just so as to drive back into the unconscious almost the whole of this past, and to admit beyond



the threshold only that which can cast light on the present situation or further the action now being prepared—in short, only that which can *give useful work*.⁵

In this philosophy of Bergson, one can never be free from the past, for it accumulates within. In addition, memory is quite arbitrary. The past lived over again is not memory, and the past remembered was never lived. Because reality is in the past and the mental state here in the present, this present state can be unreal; it may omit the greater part of the past which was reality. What is remembered may likewise be exaggerated or distorted. In short, memory is plainly a construction from the ground of the present. It is inferential throughout and is certainly fallible, and it is there that the problem occurs.

Man is characterized by his acceptance of the past and his commitment to the future. Acceptance is the retrospective view of the self's unity, for it has to do with the actual situation that exists and in which man finds himself. The actual situation has to be accepted in its entirety, with no loose ends rejected. Only if there is this frank and total acceptance can the commitment in turn be a realistic one, and can man enjoy a committed existence. However, when that commitment is not related to an acceptance of the actual situation, man cannot be a participant in the present reality.

Looking back to the story, the townspeople thought that "all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches" (*PF* 443). However, their past was the history of slavery. Instead of accepting their past as it has been with no loose ends rejected, what they have done is to idealize their past.

Their world consists of the memories depicted abruptly. Living in such a Bergsonian world which is far from the frank and total acceptance of the past, the commitment of the townspeople, including Emily, is not a realistic one. They have attempted to stop physical time and have refused to accept changes even though the roads have been paved for the cars which have replaced horses and “garages and *cotton gins* had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood” (PF 433) (*emphasis mine*). They have clung to the notion of that “*noblesse oblige*” (PF 438). They thought it natural that the Yankee should go home (PF 440) and they still use the word “nigger.” In other words, they choose to remain in their solipsistic world, excluding the outer world as “the gross, teeming world” (PF 436).

Then where is Faulkner’s message? In contrast to Emily and the townspeople who are preoccupied with Bergsonian memory and trapped in the world of solipsism, there appears Tobe who is going out of this world “to be.” Although only few references are made to the Negro, Tobe alone can respond to Emily’s needs. He does the gardening, marketing, and cooking, all of which sustain Miss Emily physically. While meeting the world for her, he provides her with the means for contact with it. He, as protector of Miss Emily, is thus engaged in purposeful and altruistic action, quite in contrast to the townspeople who have been just by standers of Emily.

For further consideration we should recall Faulkner’s manifestation of humanity from Judith Sutpen’s words in *Absalom, Absalom!* :

You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you

keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they don't know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it can't matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying. (AA 127)

We are all in a sense "on the same loom." Thus, to respond to others' needs is an indispensable human quality to live in the actual present. So long as they think "Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town," and don't admit that Emily is part of them and live in the same ambiguous attitude towards their past, Emily remains an enigma for them and they remain prisoners of the past, of society, of social and moral taboos, in their solipsistic world. In other words, the townspeople choose to let Emily be an enigma so that they can keep their world intact.

Here we have the answers to the questions which the townspeople cannot secure because they do not want to face the facticity; "Who is Emily?" and "Why did Homer Barron have to be killed?" Emily is just one of the Southerners who obstinately keep their solipsistic world intact. Homer Barron has been killed because Emily thinks of him as her possession in her solipsistic world just as the South has been using the black people as their possessions in their solipsistic world. Emily has been sleeping with the dead body that symbolizes the pre-Civil War South. Thus, Emily is the embodiment of the Southerners. And

Faulkner thinks Emily deserves pity as one of the defeated who desperately tries to keep her world intact. Tobe, "the only sign of life about the place," (*PF* 435-436) is the only one that is not a prisoner of the past. He survives as the embodiment of Faulkner's virtue, *endurance*. The message Faulkner conveys through this story is that we are easily enslaved by time like the townspeople including Emily. However, man's dignity consists of submitting to time and change through his *endurance* while preserving his identity and his sense of continuity. The only way to live in reality is to think of time as the most important ingredient of human existence in order to act and respond to others' needs as a real participant in reality.

Notes

N.B.—The following abbreviations have been used here below:

PE: The Portable Faulkner. Ed., with an introduction and notes, by Malcolm Cowley. N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1946.

FU: Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958. Ed. by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner. Charlottesville, Va.: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959.

MM: Matière et mémoire: Essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit. Paris: Felix Alcan, 1896. Translated as *Matter and Memory*, by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: Macmillan, 1911.

EC: *L'Évolution créatrice*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969. Translated as *Creative Evolution*, by A. Mitchell. London: Macmillan, 1914.

AA: *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, 1955.

¹ *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed., Joseph Blotner. (New York: Random House, 1977), p.142.

² *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed., Robert A. Jelliffe. (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956), p.71.

³ John Conder writes in his *Naturalism in American Fiction* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), "Hence, by way of Bergson, Faulkner comes into possession of all the component elements of a naturalistic vision. . ." (p.21), with which Paul Douglass agrees and he proves that Faulkner is Bergsonian in his *Bergson, Eliot, & American Literature* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

⁴ Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), p.4.

⁵ *Creative Evolution* [1907], translated from the French by Arthur Mitchell, New York, 1911, p.6. Copyright 1911; copyright renewed 1939 by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, and Macmillan & Co. Ltd.