

William Faulkner, Albert Camus

William Faulkner

Foreword to *Requiem for a Nun*, 1957

The goal of this foreword is not to present Faulkner to the French public. Malraux undertook that task brilliantly twenty years ago, and thanks to him, Faulkner gained a reputation with us that his own country had not yet accorded him. Nor is it a question of praising Maurice Coindreau's translation. French readers know that contemporary American literature has no better nor more effective ambassador among us.

One need only imagine Faulkner betrayed as Dostoevski was by his first adapters to measure the role Monsieur Coindreau has played. A writer knows what he owes to his translators, when they are of this quality. I wish only, since I brought *Requiem for a Nun* to the stage, to make a few remarks for the benefit of those who are interested in the problems that making a stage adaptation poses. The publication of the two texts the novel and Camus's adaptation now makes possible a comparison I would like to encourage.

It will be seen first of all that the original novel, although it is divided into acts, includes, along with the scenes in dialogue form, chapters that are lyrical and historical describing the origin of the buildings in which the action proper takes place. These structures are the court house, the capitol, seat of the governor of the state, and the prison. Each of them serves to introduce an act and the place where the scenes occur. The dialogues of the first act take place in the living room of the young Stevens family, but they occur just after the trial and concern the death sentence that has just been pronounced.

The great scene of Temple's confession, the main point of the second act, takes place in the governor's office, in the capitol at Jackson. Finally, the meeting between Temple and the condemned woman, in the third act, takes place in the prison. Faulkner's intention is plain. He wanted the Stevens drama to be knotted and unknotted in the temples built by man to a painful justice that Faulkner does not believe is of human origin.

From this point of view, the courthouse can be seen as a temple, the governor's office as a confessional, and the prison as a convent in which the condemned Negro woman atones for her crime, and Temple's. To breathe life into these sacred buildings, Faulkner has had recourse to poetic evocations that lay the human and historical foundation for the events that take place in them.

It goes without saying that these chapters could not be used on the stage, except for a few details. I cut them, therefore, aware of what I was losing, but resigned to confide to the scene designer and the director the task of discreetly making evident the religious nature of the places where the play would unfold. Only the scenes in dialogue, then, could furnish the raw material of a dramatic action.

The reader of this book will quickly see that they could not be lifted as is; in many respects, they remain scenes in a novel. Here one senses how different dramatic and fictional time can be. Tense, condensation, the alternation of tension and explosion are the laws of the former, free development and a certain musing quality are inseparable from the latter.

It was necessary, therefore, to redistribute the dialogue in an appropriately dramatic continuity that would permit the action to move forward without ever ceasing to leave it in suspense, that would underline the evolution of each character and lead it to its conclusion, that would clarify motives without throwing too crude a light on them and, finally, that would bring together in the last elevation all the themes touched upon or orchestrated during the

action.

From a practical point of view, this meant eliminating the prologue to the trial, rearranging the scenes in the first act, developing the character of Gowan Stevens—to whom I gave one whole scene with the governor and whom I had reappear in the final scene to bring to a conclusion the matter of the blackmail letters. In addition, for reasons of dramatic effectiveness, it was necessary to rework the scene with the jailkeepers.

With this new framework established, the most difficult problem, the problem of language, remained. Despite appearances, Faulkner's style is far from resistant to dramatic transcription. After reading the Requiem, I was even sure that Faulkner had resolved in his manner, and without even being aware of it, a very difficult problem—the problem of a language for modern tragedy.

How can characters in business suits be made to speak a language ordinary enough to be spoken in an apartment and unusual enough to sustain the high level of tragic destinies? Faulkner's style, with its staccato breathing, its interrupted sentences, its repeats and prolongations in repetitions, its incidences, its parentheses and its cascades of subordinate clauses, gives us a modern, and in no way artificial, equivalent of the tragic soliloquy. It is a style that gasps with the very breathlessness of suffering.

An interminably unwinding spiral of words and sentences that conducts the speaker to the abyss of sufferings buried in the past. Temple Stevens to the delicious hell of the Memphis bordello she wanted to forget, and Nancy Mannigoe to the bund, stunning, ignorant pain that will make her a murderer and a saint at the same time.

It was necessary to retain these effects of style at any cost. But if this breathless, agglutinated, insistent language can bring something new to the theater, it can do so only when used sparingly. Without this language the play would certainly be less tragic. But by itself it could destroy any play by a monotonous effect that would tire the most well-disposed spectator, and it would also run the risk of reducing the tragedy to the melodrama it always threatens to become. What I had to do was make use of this language and at the same time deliberately neutralize it.

I am not sure that I succeeded. In any case, this is what I decided: during all the scenes in which the characters refuse to surrender, when the action hangs on a kind of apparent mystery, during all the transitions, also, that serve to bring forward a development, to expose new facts, or to change the rhythm of the scene briefly, in anything that is not suffered directly by the character, and therefore by the actor, but simply experienced and enacted on the exterior—I chose to simplify Faulkner's language, and to make it as direct as I could, adding only, for unity of composition, a few echoes, a few touches, of his "breathless" style.

To compensate, in everything that concerned naked irrepressible suffering, and particularly in Temple's confession and her husband's reactions, I have imitated Faulkner's style in French.

One further word that will doubtless interest those who, after having listened to the last scene in which Nancy proclaims her faith, asked me if I had been converted (please note that if I translated and staged a Greek tragedy, no one would ask me if I believe in Zeus). I did considerably rework the last scene. One will be able to see in this book that it consists above all of long speeches by Nancy Mannigoe and Gavin Stevens on faith and Christ.

Faulkner reveals herein his strange religion, developed still further in *A Fable*, a religion less strange in its substance than in the symbols he proposes for it. Nancy decides to love her suffering and her own death, like many great souls before her; but, according to Faulkner, she thus becomes a saint, the strange nun who suddenly invests the bordellos and prisons in which she has lived with the dignity of a cloister. This basic paradox had to be preserved.

The rest—that is, the long enlightening speeches—are liberties a novelist may take, if he really wishes to, but prohibited to the dramatist. I therefore cut and tightened these speeches and made use of Temple instead in order to challenge the paradox that Nancy illustrates and throw it into stronger relief. I can therefore accuse myself of abbreviating Faulkner's message. But in so doing I only responded to dramatic necessities, and I believe that I respected the essentials.

On Faulkner

In his preface to *Sanctuary*, André Malraux wrote that Faulkner had introduced the detective story into classical tragedy. This is true. There is, moreover, something of the detective story in every tragedy. Faulkner, who knows this, didn't hesitate to choose his criminals and heroes from daily newspaper stories. In my opinion this is what makes his *Requiem* one of the very few modern tragedies we have.

In its original form, *Requiem for a Nun* is not a play. It is a novel in dialogue form. But it has a dramatic intensity. First of all because it gradually discloses a secret and sustains throughout an expectation of tragedy. Secondly, because the conflict that brings the characters face to face with their destiny, centering around the murder of a child, is a conflict that cannot be solved except through the acceptance of this destiny.

Faulkner has contributed then to hastening the time when the tragedy at work in our history can also take its place in our theater. His characters are our contemporaries and yet they are confronted with the same destiny that crushed *Electra* or *Orestes*. Only a great artist could attempt to introduce the noble language of pain and humiliation into our public rooms this way. Nor is it accidental that Faulkner's strange religion is experienced in this play by a Negro woman who has been a prostitute and is a murderer.

On the contrary, this extreme contrast summarizes the human grandeur of the *Requiem* and all Faulkner's work. Let me add in conclusion that the great problem of modern tragedy is language. Characters in business suits cannot talk like *Oedipus* or *Titus*. Their language must at the same time be simple enough to be our own and lofty enough to reach the tragic. In my view, Faulkner has found such a language. I have tried to recreate it in French, and to betray neither a work nor an author I admire.

1956

Program note to the Camus adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun*.

Excerpts from Three Interviews

I

"I had to put the form back in, to prune the text; it is not a play, it's a world into which I introduced logic. For the French public, the theater is inconceivable without unity....

I like and I admire Faulkner; I believe I understand him rather well. Even though he did not write for the stage, he is in my opinion the only truly tragic dramatist of our time.... He gives us an ancient but always contemporary theme that is perhaps the only tragedy in the world: the blind man stumbling along between his destiny and his responsibilities. A simple dialogue must be found, acceptable for people who are simple too, but who have access to grandeur despite their coats and ties. Only Faulkner has known how to find an intensity of tone, of situation, intolerable to the point of making the heroes deliver themselves by means of a violent, superhuman act."

Combat, 1956

II

The Requiem was not a play, but a novel in great dialogued scenes filled with a historical-poetic accent and a psychological climate that I have taken pains to preserve....

I wanted to clear the way for a more theatrical than fictional progression.... I developed only the role of the husband which I find admirable.... The play poses no racial problem. Faulkner is too great a creator not to be universal. In the Requiem, the religion of suffering, notably in the seventh scene, becomes one with the catharsis, that ancient purification."

Nouvelles littéraires, 1956

III

Is the meeting of Albert Camus and William Faulkner equivalent to a first modern tragedy? The stage setting will already have told you that the detective element in this tragedy plays a strong role. It does in all tragedies for that matter. Take Electra or Hamlet. Faulkner, who has never been reluctant to look for his characters in news items reported in the newspapers, knows this well. A secret, then. And a conflict. Something which sets the protagonists against their destiny and is resolved with their acceptance of this destiny.

These are the keys to ancient tragedies. Faulkner used them to open the way to modern tragedy. Even though it was not written for the stage, his work, whose intensity is wholly dramatic, seems to me one that most nearly approaches a certain tragic ideal. This problem of modern tragedy, I believe, has always interested you. Is this the reason you agreed to produce the Requiem?

It is precisely the reason. Together with the admiration that I plainly hold for someone I consider the greatest American novelist. You see, we are living through a highly dramatic time that does not yet have a drama. Faulkner permits us to catch a glimpse of the time when what is tragic in our own history can at last reach the footlights. Doesn't the whole difficulty consist of making contemporary people speak a tragic language?

Without a doubt, but I hope to have surmounted it. Faulkner's "breathless" style, that I did my utmost to imitate, is the style of suffering itself. The basis of his whole religion ...

Just so. A strange religion, more clearly expressed in his latest work, A Fable, whose symbols give a glimpse of the hope for redemption through pain and humiliation. Here, Nancy Mannigoe, murderer and prostitute, is his message bearer. This is not accidental. And the meaning of his title: Requiem for a Nun, did he explain it to you?

He? Not at all. I saw him for only ten minutes and he didn't say three words to me. No, the title takes on its meaning when one knows the role that bordellos and prisons play in Faulkner's universe. Nancy and Temple are two nuns who have entered the monastery of abjection and expiation. As diffuse as it is, doesn't Faulkner's faith run counter to your own agnosticism?

I don't believe in God. that's true. But I am not an atheist nonetheless. I would even agree with Benjamin Constant that there is something vulgar ... yes ... worn out about being against religion.

Should one see in this the sign of a certain evolution in your thinking, and doesn't this interest in Faulkner foresee an eventual rallying to the spirit if not the dogma of the Church? Certain readers of The Fall seemed to hope for this. Nothing really justifies them in this. Doesn't my judge-penitent clearly say that he is Sicilian and Japanese? Not Christian for a minute. Like him, I have a good deal of affection for the first Christian. I admire the way he lived, the way he died. My lack of imagination keeps me from following him any

further.

There, in parentheses, is my only similarity to the Jean-Baptiste Clamence with whom people stubbornly insist on identifying me. I would like to have called that book "A Hero of Our Time." Originally it was only a short novel, meant to appear next January in a collection that will be called Exile and the Kingdom. But I let myself get carried away with the idea: to paint a portrait of a small prophet like so many today. They proclaim nothing at all and find nothing better to do than accuse others in accusing themselves.

Le Monde, August 31, 1956

The end