

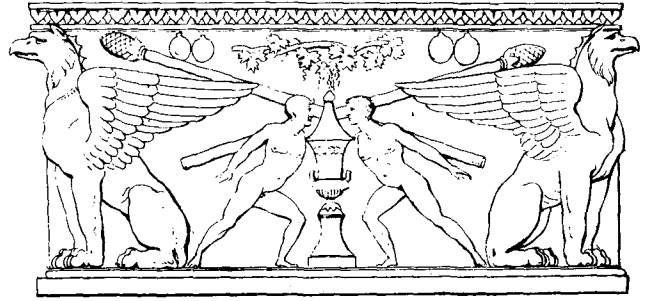
## COMMENT

When William Faulkner addressed the Delta Council, an organization of farmers, at Cleveland, Mississippi in 1952, he spoke about the Declaration of Independence.\* The noble American postulate of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Faulkner observed, seemed to have devolved into little more than a shorthand for material security. His insight was confirmed a few years later when President Eisenhower confessed to being unable to counter Khrushchev's argument that capitalism appealed only to man's baser nature while communism was a spiritual philosophy.

Americans once knew, said Faulkner, what the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness meant, because most men had been without it. Historically, that right was identified with strenuous efforts, not with material abundance. The men who made the hard and often fatal ocean voyages to found new colonies, who challenged the world's greatest power for their independence, who repeatedly penetrated the wilderness, were not seeking comfort. To pursue happiness did not mean an easy sinking into an anonymous hedonistic mass; it meant taking an active responsibility. "Which was exactly what we did, in those old days."

Our Founding Fathers did not glory chiefly in the fact that we were a prosperous people (though they did find that a source of satisfaction) but in the fact that we were a virtuous people. And "virtue" did not mean a mere puritanical avoidance of minor vices or that commercially circumspect behavior designed "to win friends and influence people." Virtue had a stern Roman connotation. It was a striving for republican ethics and personal honor. Men were not virtuous because they enjoyed the boon of self-government. Rather, they enjoyed the boon of self-government because they were virtuous enough to earn and to keep it.

Americans "did not mean," said Faulkner, "just to chase happiness, but to work for it." And by happiness they meant "not just pleasure, idleness, but peace, dignity, independence and self-respect; that man's inalienable right was, the peace and freedom in which, by his own efforts and sweat, he could gain dignity and independence, owing nothing to any man." Faulkner's words must be seen primarily in light of the biblical injunction about the necessity to labor for our daily bread, an assumption that implies a transcendent dimension in labor. Faulkner also knew that "inalienable right" was a term used in a political context. Man's happiness was not pursued atomistically, but within a civil community. The pursuit of happiness could not properly be read to mean putting consumption before labor or pleasure before obligation. Nor could it validate the distortions of sophists who, beginning in the 19th century, took the dependent clause about equality as the main



point, as a jeremiad. Equality was merely the condition appertaining to the individual struggle for freedom and dignity, not a program to be implemented or a guarantee of results.

Faulkner was attempting to reemphasize the sacramental aspect of man's work and liberty, to free them from the materialist and utilitarian aura they had taken on. Man must live by bread, but he does not live by bread alone. The sane man, as Faulkner more than once illustrated in his fiction by contrary example, does not work to pile up riches. He works for the welfare of those of his blood and name—including the generations to come—and for his own dignity as a member of the community. His work and the liberty that makes it possible are not to be seen chiefly as a utilitarian search for maximum profit. Neither democracy nor economic productivity are satisfactory without the spiritual striving that Faulkner was pointing to. He knew, of course, that man would usually fall short of spiritual goals oftener than he would attain them.

Though he was probably not conscious of it, Faulkner was following a theme common in 19th-century Southern political literature. American democracy depended not so much upon its pragmatic methodology of the greatest good for the greatest number as upon its chivalric inheritance of striving for a code of conduct worthy of republicanism. The consent of the governed, Calhoun repeatedly warned in his fruitless attempts to clarify the concept of majority rule, was not a mere counting up of heads with the pie to be divided among the party with the largest numbers. It was a condition of intangible spiritual assent to the higher purposes of a commonwealth, an assent which required restraint and magnanimity on all sides.

Faulkner called upon his audience to remember not just the pragmatic and productive side of their liberty and labor but the chivalric and spiritual side. It is the linking of honor, courage, and loyalty to the earning of our daily bread that gives us whatever dignity we achieve. It is this that tells the plowman that he is not merely scratching in the earth but making it fruitful according to divine injunction; that tells the entrepreneur that he is not just making a quick buck but creating something useful; that tells the writer he is not only satisfying his vanity but communicating something of value to his fellow man.

\*William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Merriwether (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 126-134.

Faulkner was not optimistic. "We knew it once, had it once. . . . Only, something happened to us." The farmers who could not comprehend accepting a payment from the government *not* to grow cotton were anachronistic, even in the 1930's, even in Mississippi. We no longer "believed in liberty and freedom and independence, as the old fathers in the old strong, dangerous times had meant it."

**T**he materialist view of democracy has gained more ground since Faulkner spoke. Many would even argue today that America is actually *premised* upon rejection of the sacramental view, as if the Founding Fathers' unwillingness to state a preference among Christian denominations was equivalent to a rejection of Christianity. As a society, we act as if we believe that the health of the commonwealth consists of things that can be counted—the GNP, the growth rate, the unemployment rate. But the social organism, like the human, can give off good vital signs and still be despairing unto death. Does economic growth always mean a better life for our citizens? Possibly, but so far as one can tell from public discussion it is an independent and eternal value. We are even told that it is our unavoidable fate to admit millions of foreigners to take their places as factors of production and consumption. It is not worth asking, apparently, whether this "growth" will be of actual benefit to our citizens. Beyond that, if, in the process of economic growth, our culture turns into something other than what we want, then that is seen as merely an unfortunate byproduct.

Our national defense is a question only of material means—more money, a better defense; less money, a poorer defense. It does not seem relevant to ask what we are defending and whether we have the guts to do it: it is all a question of means. The soldier willing to die for his country is identical to the mercenary; the leader of dash and courage is interchangeable with the military bureaucrat—after all, they receive the same training and are paid the same salaries. A society that has a spiritual certainty that its existence is worth defending regards the question of means as merely subsidiary, instrumental. A society that, on the other hand, believes it can purchase its defense with money alone is already so far out of touch with reality that its survival is in doubt. So is the society that believes its defense to be a question simply of efficiency in the use of material means. Such a society is suffering from the materialist delusion that it can ignore the terrible contingency of human fate and the need to strive for courage and wisdom.

The same delusion suggests that by relieving a man's material wants you make him virtuous. It might, indeed, in some cases help, but the formula is misleading. If, in so doing, you succeed also in convincing him—and others—that they need no longer strive for virtue, then you have undermined the possibility of a commonwealth in which either prosperity or virtue can flourish. Further, such utilitarian assumptions are bound to work against the individual liberty that the Declaration

and Faulkner referred to; they are bound to lead to collectivism.

Faulkner quoted a maxim of an Irish statesman which said that God granted man liberty only on the condition of eternal vigilance, "which condition, if he break it, servitude is the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt." A child I know wrote the President that in order to save fuel he should make everyone ride horses. From the materialist perspective that pervades our society the youngster was completely logical and public-spirited. His innocent ignorance of the coercion that would be required to implement his suggestion was no different from the ignorance that marks most of our social policy. A well-known scientist recently declared that "we" have the technology to solve the problem of worldwide hunger and that therefore "we must" do so. He assumes, alas, that it is merely a question of means. If his hope is only that the demonstration of available means will enlighten mankind and allow it to save itself from hunger, then I applaud him, though I think he is mistaken. For how will he deal with communism and its planned hunger, or with those societies for which the solution to hunger is to receive perpetual aid from others? But if he means by his assertion that some collective American "we" should undertake to solve the world's problem, then I regard him as a social enemy. I can see what such a materialist fantasy will mean to an American workingman who is not hungry but who is strained to pay for his family's medical needs, for the gas he needs to get to a place to earn a living, and for a neighborhood where his children will be safe—his last neighborhood having been ruined by the same people who propose that it is his duty to save the world from hunger.

**I** do not wish to draw from all this, and I do not think Faulkner intended to draw from it, primarily the conclusion that the free market is preferable to the collectivist state, although that is true. The free marketplace is a pillar of prosperity and a prop to republican liberty. However, I think Faulkner meant that we have our priorities reversed. We are putting the instrument before the spirit. The market does not guarantee virtue. It does not guarantee anything except perhaps a chance to make the most of what nature and our parents gave us. To the contrary, our virtue, won over and over again in daily struggle, is a necessary precondition for the free market. To ignore this is not merely a mistake; it poses a peril that, in our confusion of values, we will lose both our liberty *and* our daily bread. Yet to ignore it is exactly what America does—at least at the level of public discussion and decision, while many of us, mercifully, still continue to observe moral reality as we plow our humble furrows.

—Clyde Wilson

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## Literature & Ur-Reality

George Konrád: *The Loser*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; New York.

Milan Kundera: *The Joke*; Harper & Row; New York.

by Gary Vasilash

One of the ways that man knows himself is through writing. Writing of any type—from the driest technical report to the most flamboyant fantasy story—is a fiction. That is, it is beyond veracity. To call all written works fictions is not to diminish their importance in any way; fictions in this sense do not apply to superfluous constructs. Indeed, they are the bases of cultures. The Bible is a fiction in the sense that its message cannot be empirically proven. It exists for belief. And for those who do believe, nothing is more real. All forms of literature are fiction. It is extraordinarily hard to say that a particular piece of writing is a bona fide work of literature for reasons (a), (b), (c), etc. Everyone knows that *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses* are fictions that are literature; their qualifications for fitting within that category change with the person providing the parameters. One way that a work of literature can be defined is to say that it is a work that has time, field, and depth, and that it is a universe. (The Bible, then, is not, as some university classes would have it, literature, as it doesn't comprise *a* universe but *the* universe, as far as its believers are concerned [did anyone ever read Homer as gospel?], which is not to deny its obvious literary qualities.) The universe created in a work of literature cannot be a hermetic one; its signs must be accessible to an audience. Literature is public. It permits the reader to know something about himself, his world, and perhaps his god. Followed to an extreme, this argument might lead to the

conclusion that *Time* magazine's issues are chapters in *the* novel. After all, it is a fiction by the definition used here. The writing it contains is artful. Its subject matter is the given universe; its departments include "People," "The World," and even "Religion." However, everyone knows that *Time* is not literature. One thing more than any other prevents its acceptance as such. Although this may sound like an appeal to Keats, it must be stated that literature provides Truth. *Time* magazine purportedly reports the "facts." When it reports, for example, that the space shuttle went up and came down, it is being, in its own way, truthful (i.e., R. Buckminster Fuller would point up that "up" and "down" make little sense when the earth is pictured as being something other than flat). A reader of every issue of *Time* will have the command of a large number of "facts" (pieces of information about what's taken as objective reality), but what will he really know?

Consider the Soviet Union. What does a Westerner who has never been there (or even one who has gone Intourist) know about it? Perhaps he knows a great many "things" if he reads *Time* magazine faithfully, and even more if he supplements his collection of pieces through the use of other periodicals. However, that person really doesn't know much at all about the Soviet Union. The reader looking for Truth (as opposed to Gradgrindian facts) would find it in the pages of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Life does not consist just of a series of facts (things done), of discrete events, of causes and effects. It is simultaneously more simple and more complex than that. The role of the writer of journalism is to attempt to create facts, events, causes. The role of

the writer of literature is to put together a series of public signs that, through some synergistic effect that involves the signs, their place and time, the writer, and the reader, has a meaning which transcends the apparent coded message on the page: Truth is made manifest. This is not to say that a Western diplomat who may have to deal with Yuri Andropov should skip the available journalistic reports and just read Solzhenitsyn. However, this *is* to say that said diplomat would miss an entire facet of the situation, the dominant face behind the mask, if he were to go without reading Solzhenitsyn.

George (György) Konrád, a Hungarian, and Milan Kundera, a Czech, probably aren't the Solzhenitsyns of their respective homelands. Still, they are authors of literature which, in addition to serving the needs of their people, was apparently written so that Westerners can better understand Hungary and Czechoslovakia. For the people in these countries, the works act as an aide-mémoire. For the rest, they are a revelation. Truth knows no political, geographical, or chronological boundaries.

Concern for the West is fairly clear in both novels. Kundera writes in his preface to *The Joke* that the novel, much to his amazement, was published "without a trace of censorship!" in 1967, "in Communist Czechoslovakia one year before the Prague Spring." Undoubtedly it was published in a limited edition, one that would be rapidly bought up and so disappear. The book was banned in Czechoslovakia after the military invasion of 1968; it was removed from library shelves, erased from literary histories. Kundera was forced to emigrate. Kundera's amazement about the original uncensored publication indicates that he knew beforehand that his book would have a difficult official reception at best. The criticism in the novel of the people in the communist

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