

# **Faulkner on *Omnibus*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Cultural Ambassador in the Making**

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When the popular television series *Omnibus* aired late in the afternoon of December 28, 1952, the episode featured a short film with an unlikely leading man: William Faulkner. Appearing on national television marked a dramatic turn for Faulkner in more ways than one. For most of his career, he had shown a chronic aversion to the public-facing duties associated with being a literary celebrity. By the midcentury mark, however, Faulkner was becoming somewhat more willing to step into the public spotlight. A key factor precipitating his change of heart was winning the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1949 and garnering the acclaim that comes with the most prestigious literary prize in the world. The post-Nobel Faulkner was much in demand. Among the earliest and most prominent of his suitors were officials from the U.S. State Department, who recruited him to serve as a cultural ambassador. In the mid-1950s, he traveled on junkets to Latin America, Europe, and Japan to promote U.S. concerns through public readings, lectures, and press availabilities. Although Faulkner's role was ostensibly diplomatic, he performed at times as a cold warrior on the cultural front. In that capacity, he fiercely defended individual liberty and self-reliance as deterrents to the oppressive forces of subjugation and fear under totalitarian regimes. This rhetorical stance became part of the stock remarks that Faulkner delivered while carrying out his official duties during a time of great urgency for the cause of democracy.

The narrative of Faulkner's dramatic change in fortunes—rising from relative obscurity in the late 1930s to esteemed Nobel Laureate by the early 1950s—is now a familiar account in Faulkner studies.<sup>1</sup> Only in recent decades

has the story of Faulkner's concomitant development into a Cold War-era writer-diplomat gained traction. Largely neglected by scholars, the *Omnibus* profile of Faulkner—a short film in which he plays himself—is an unusual but instructive document of this post-Nobel transformation in progress.<sup>2</sup> As such, it preserves in an encapsulated form a juncture at which Faulkner was becoming an actor in a geopolitical theater of cultural Cold War routinely staged in mass media.<sup>3</sup> The production of Faulkner's big TV moment employed the ascendant medium as an instrument for rendering the local and global domains the author now inhabited as a writer of international renown.<sup>4</sup> The magnitude of the appearance for Faulkner is apparent when taking into account that *Omnibus* regularly drew a viewership in the range of seventeen million.<sup>5</sup> By this measure, it was by far the largest audience that Faulkner was ever able to reach at once. In presenting Faulkner to the viewer, the production renders what he famously dubbed his “postage stamp of native soil” in Mississippi fertile ground for the cultivation of personal convictions and literary achievements presented as testaments to the generative possibilities afforded by American democracy.<sup>6</sup> Faulkner on *Omnibus* took shape from a combination of televisual image-making and trademark self-fashioning that helped to refine the persona that the writer-diplomat would carry with him to the far-flung places and people he sought to address in the interest of advancing U.S. interests amid a heated ideological conflict on a global scale.

### *Omnibus* Origin Story

The Faulkner profile aired on *Omnibus* in the eighth episode of the show's inaugural season. A blend of cultural affairs and informational programming comprised the standard *Omnibus* format. The programming content was instrumental in establishing the television news magazine as a fixture on the broadcast landscape for years to come. In fact, it was so influential that it became a model for the development of PBS at the end of the 1960s. The shared DNA between the two enterprises was evident when in 1971 PBS launched *Masterpiece Theater* featuring as the host Alistair Cooke, the erudite and affable former host of *Omnibus*, which had aired its final season a decade earlier. Over the course of the show's run, *Omnibus* resided at each of the three major networks and occupied afternoon and primetime slots. When Faulkner made his appearance, the show was in the 4:30-6:30 p.m. time slot on CBS. Mary Beth Hinton notes that this slot was known in television industry parlance as the “intellectual ghetto.”<sup>7</sup> Hinton adds that *Omnibus* capitalized on the undesirable scheduling with a transformative approach that “turned the intellectual ghetto of Sunday afternoons into a garden” in which Nielsen ratings blossomed.<sup>8</sup>

The appeal of *Omnibus* lay in the strategy of channeling a steady stream of diversified content. The inaugural season lineup is a case in point, featuring segments on the following topics among many others: John J. Audubon's illustrations; the daily operations of the *New York Times*; the history of the nine hundred-year-old coronation ceremony soon to get a reprise to install Queen Elizabeth II

as the new British monarch; the story of jazz focused on signal innovators and luminaries; and the important but far from scintillating story of how income taxes became an essential federal revenue stream. In addition to dramatized features and profiles, as in the Faulkner segment, plays and historical reenactments were a staple on the programming menu. The first season, for example, included “Mr. Lincoln,” a five-part series of thirty-minute films written by James Agee that staged scenes from Abraham Lincoln’s early years.<sup>9</sup> Tennessee Williams contributed a one-act play, “Lord Byron’s Love Letter,” featuring Ethel Barrymore in her first dramatic role for television. The catholic approach to subject matter was in keeping with the producers’ stated goal of reaching the largest possible audience without compromising the integrity of the material on offer.

A survey of the topics covered on *Omnibus* reveals that the pitch of the news magazine was in a decidedly middlebrow register. It is no wonder, then, that one of the most vocal detractors of the series over time was midcentury cultural critic and curmudgeonly mass culture skeptic Dwight Macdonald. In a pointed critique, Macdonald noted that the producer of *Omnibus*, Robert Saudek, was concerned that the tone might come across to viewers as condescending or pedantic and planned to avoid that by packaging the content as educational entertainment rather than uplift.<sup>10</sup> Macdonald cites a brochure distributed during the development phase to attract “subscribers” (a euphemism for advertisers) to demonstrate a pattern of giving the impression that *Omnibus* was not overly intellectual. Accordingly, the brochure describes the show as “neither highbrow nor lowbrow,” making it middlebrow by default without stating as much. It defines the target audience as people drawn to print publications such as *Reader’s Digest*, *Life*, or *Ladies Home Journal*. The ad copy transforms the envisioned audience from intended into ideal—made up “of America itself.” Macdonald finds the promotional material grounds for positing that the middlebrow register is a veneer designed to conceal crass motives attuned to the bottom line. He finds further confirmation in the content of the program, scathingly pointing out that it comprises “the sublime and the ridiculous, the serious and the meretricious, in the kind of *mélange* that our middlebrow cultural entrepreneurs have found to be commercially profitable.”<sup>11</sup>

The series was the brainchild of creative talent at the Radio-Television Workshop, a production company started with funding provided by the Ford Foundation. Macdonald describes the foundation, incorporated in 1936, as “a large body of money completely surrounded by people who wanted some.”<sup>12</sup> Deciding whether and how to dole out the largess was the charge of Ford officials who were part of a growing sector of white-collar workers that Macdonald brands “philanthropoids.”<sup>13</sup> Flush with over three billion dollars in assets by the late 1950s, the Ford Foundation was the most influential in a network of private foundations that formed and expanded in the aftermath of the Second World War. Frances Stonor Saunders describes this lucre as “the tax-exempt cream of the vast Ford fortune.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the organization’s mission of philanthropy and public service provided excellent cover for the much less altruistic aim of tax

reduction that was also a prime motivation for Henry Ford's beneficiaries to set up the foundation.

The Radio-Television Workshop was able to secure Ford Foundation backing by vowing to help raise the standards of television programming for the good of American society and culture. Such a mission was in line with the cultural ideal that the foundation was determined to make a reality, namely, fostering a host of projects that could express and instill core values of American democracy valorized by the liberal establishment. *Omnibus* appeared in a period from the early to mid-1950s when television was the target of widespread criticism that it was hastening the degradation of American culture. The attacks came from various points on the sociopolitical spectrum: from the right, it was a moral complaint; from liberals, it was a matter of intellectual integrity and good taste; from further left, concern about mass culture as an instrument of mass manipulation was paramount. Despite sharp political differences, detractors agreed on the fundamental point that the burgeoning medium was not fulfilling the higher purpose that pioneers in television had been promising. The increasingly vocal chorus of anti-television rhetoric was deeply concerning to Saudek, who conceived of *Omnibus* as a public service. The goal of not appealing to the lowest common denominator—or better yet, brow—meant that the program was supposed to highlight arts, culture, and journalism geared toward, but not dumbed down for, a popular viewership.

The role of the foundation in the *Omnibus* origin story is essential for putting Faulkner's appearance in the context of Cold War cultural politics. Saunders notes that a number of Ford staff members had previous experience as military top brass or experience in national intelligence or foreign service. Richard Bissell is a case in point—one of the many people who went through the personnel pipeline running between the federal government and the most influential foundation in the country. In 1952, when *Omnibus* premiered, Bissell was at the helm of the Ford Foundation. Prior to assuming that post, he served as a Marshall Plan administrator after a stint at the CIA. With Bissell and others on board, Saunders writes, the officials who were shaping "the foundation's cultural policy in the aftermath of the Second World War were perfectly attuned to the political imperatives which supported America's looming presence on the world stage." This quasi-official relationship was so simpatico that it appeared in many instances as though "the Ford Foundation was simply an extension of government in the area of international cultural propaganda."<sup>15</sup>

While the producers insisted that they developed *Omnibus* with public service in mind, they were wary of going too far in the direction of collaborating with the federal government. The private and commercial aspects of the operation were indicative of the consensus that government patronage of arts and culture was not a viable model financially or politically. Anna McCarthy, in *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America*, observes that the producers of *Omnibus* had a "political motivation . . . to maintain the separation of culture and state" based on concern that "state-administered culture" was susceptible

to “the threateningly redistributive energies of the New Deal.”<sup>16</sup> In the 1930s, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and other programs organized mainly under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration were mechanisms for promoting and administering state-sponsored culture. These New Deal initiatives operated on the assumption that the U.S. government was obligated to assist people in need. In this case, the aim was to subsidize cultural production so that individual artists could do meaningful work that would enrich national life. By the 1950s, however, the New Deal philosophy put into practice by the WPA-affiliated programs was anathema to people in the culture industry such as the *Omnibus* producers, who felt that the public funding model was a violation of the renewed faith in the free market as the postwar economy rapidly expanded. Under the circumstances, then, reliance on private foundation grants and advertising revenue was a business model cast in an ideological mold. As McCarthy astutely observes, this decision “affirmed the cultural values of capitalism in the wake of the Depression and in the face of communist alternatives.”<sup>17</sup>

The notion that relying on private foundation grants and advertising revenue somehow immunized the production against undue influence from the state was suspect. In actuality, the connections between the production of *Omnibus* and the strategic deployment of cultural production by the U.S. State Department suggest strategic alignment rather than creative autonomy. This tacit arrangement brought *Omnibus* into the fold of an effort to shape cultural politics at home and abroad to gain advantage in the wider Cold War conflict. The result was an ideological state apparatus promoting individual artists as testaments to ingenuity and invention figured as inherently American virtues.<sup>18</sup> According to this logic, democracy in America fostered a culture of artistic expression and achievement standing in stark contrast to that of the foe on the other side of the Iron Curtain, where repressive social and cultural conditions stifled creative genius. On these grounds, as McCarthy contends, *Omnibus* exemplified “a less well-known form of interventionist culture.”<sup>19</sup> As such, the program was operating in part as a commercial venture helping to advance the mission of U.S. cultural diplomacy driven by an overarching strategy of containment. Prescribing doses of “postwar uplift,” McCarthy argues, *Omnibus* promoted the “philosophy of cultural consumption as a path to self-governance” and, in turn, “epitomized the cultural dimensions of Cold War governmentality.”<sup>20</sup> Faulkner’s appearance on the program positioned him squarely as an actor in this midcentury geopolitical theater of the cultural Cold War.

### **(Tele)Visualizing Faulkner on *Omnibus***

By early November 1952, all the plans for producing the short documentary profile of Faulkner were in place. Later that month, the director, Howard Magwood, and a crew of ten arrived in Oxford for filming.<sup>21</sup> The premise of the feature is that the announcement of Faulkner’s Nobel Prize win has reached the Associated Press office in Memphis, Tennessee.<sup>22</sup> The good news prompts an

assignment editor to call Phil “Moon” Mullen, one of Faulkner’s friends and the editor of the local newspaper, the *Oxford Eagle*, to request that he interview the author and gauge the reactions of Oxford residents for a syndicated feature article. Conceptually, the reporting for the print story serves as the narrative framework for the short film. In actuality, Mullen had to travel to Oxford to play himself because he had moved to Paris, Tennessee, to start a new job by the time filming began. Mullen’s return to his old beat points to a pattern of manipulating and altering places, events, and actors to cast Faulkner in a certain light. In one of the few treatments of the *Omnibus* appearance to go beyond concise accounts by biographers, Noel Polk finds “jarring discrepancies” between the Faulkner on screen and the real-life version. Among the false notes, Polk cites the “iconic depiction” of Faulkner as an exemplary family man and an Oxford social butterfly.<sup>23</sup> Both qualities, Polk observes, are pure performance, running contrary to biographical evidence of Faulkner’s often fraught family relations and his tendency to withdraw from the community he inhabited. Polk views the film as an attempt “to mainstream Faulkner, to normalize—i.e., to neutralize—him,” so that he complies with the moral, ethical, and ideological imperatives of mainstream American culture. The result is “a domesticated and safe Faulkner” made for TV.<sup>24</sup>

The version of Faulkner presented by *Omnibus* may have been “domesticated” for public consumption on the home front, but it was also a product of a containment culture shaped by the ideological conditions of the Cold War. Although not a documentary in the conventional sense, the short film does work in this cultural context to record for posterity a convergence of public performances that marked a transitional moment in Faulkner’s career. It shows how at this moment Faulkner was working from home to build on his post-Nobel fame. Accordingly, the premise is that the project captures the author in his local environment—a natural habitat that seems quite the opposite to the contemporary viewer once the stagey and stilted performances that were commonplace during the dawn of television ensue.

When the Faulkner profile ran, Alistair Cooke delivered the introduction to the segment with his trademark air of erudite affability. Cooke’s delivery calls to mind Macdonald’s assessment of the host as “an inspired choice,” the dose of sarcasm revealed by the further observation that Cooke comes across as “a kind of cultural headwaiter who simultaneously intimidates and flatters the customers.”<sup>25</sup> The prelude features Cooke standing next to a framed Nobel certificate and explaining that “in 1949 it was given to a southern farmer, William Faulkner, who had rarely strayed out of his hometown, which is Oxford in the county Lafayette County, Mississippi.” Noting that the show is about to “take you way down south,” Cooke informs viewers that the man they are about to meet is behaving out of character given that he has exhibited an acute shyness and distaste for publicity (including an aversion to appearing in family photos) for more than two decades. Before the profile even begins, Cooke establishes three key features ascribed to Faulkner in this post-Nobel framing: 1) writing as

an avocation contrasted with his “true” vocation of farming; 2) rootedness in a local and regional domain; and 3) reluctant acceptance of his newfound place on the international stage.

The film proper starts to stress these attributes in the opening sequence. When Mullen arrives at Rowan Oak, the author’s home in Oxford, to interview his friend, Faulkner politely denies the request for a photograph. Mullen persists by pointing out that the local high school newspaper was able to get a snapshot. But Mullen’s effort is to no avail, the film citing Faulkner’s painful camera shyness and discomfort with media attention as grounds. The irony that Faulkner is performing such shyness in front of a camera remains conveniently unacknowledged. The penchant for performative gestures on display here has long been a topic of critical discussion in Faulkner studies. As James G. Watson remarks, “Self-presentation and performance are manifested in the guises and disguises of a moment—gentleman dandy, soldier, and farmer are familiar ones—as well as in his art, where these and other personae are separate but interlocking elements of fictional representation.”<sup>26</sup> In the *Omnibus* appearance, Faulkner relies on parts from his standard repertoire and cultivates a new role that he would play in the years to come: that of a worldly Mississippian.

The narrator picks up where Cooke left off at the end of the introduction. Accompanying shots of Faulkner and his wife, Estelle Oldham Faulkner, at Rowan Oak is a voice-over in which the narrator intones, “[Faulkner’s] family is Old South.” The regionalized description becomes more evocative in the subsequent shot of the white two-story house with columns, tucked away at the end of a lane lined with majestic trees. From the Old South motif, the film pivots to a more egalitarian stance by focusing on a representative sampling of the local community. A series of alternating close-up shots comprises a montage of black and white faces that represent, in the words of the voice-over narration, “what Faulkner writes about.” Though Faulkner comes across in this instance as a country gentleman of the old school, the film uses narrative and visual rhetoric to emphasize that he is not bound to that circumscribed sphere. Such framing suggests the influence of Malcolm Cowley’s introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, a 1946 compendium that made the case for reassessing Faulkner in the aftermath of the 1930s. Like Cowley, the *Omnibus* profile stresses how he transforms local material into a fictional domain that stands in for Mississippi and the South at the same time it moves beyond provincialism to achieve universality.<sup>27</sup> Casting Faulkner in such a humanist light was a means of arguing for the broad reach and meaningful depth of his literary achievements.

Both Cooke’s introduction and the voice-over narration make it clear that a staple of Faulkner’s self-presentation shapes the version of him projected in the *Omnibus* profile. Cooke’s characterization of Faulkner as a “southern farmer” comes into focus with a close-up shot. The narrator states that “we have a citizen who refers to himself as a farmer—a farmer who also writes. This is William Faulkner of Oxford, Mississippi.” Later, the narrator describes the multi-faceted roles ascribed to Faulkner: he is “to some of his friends, a farmer, a woodsman,

a hunter; to the world, a writer.” By these varying measures, Faulkner is at once provincial and cosmopolitan. Depending on the perspective, his image is firmly rooted in the local terrain of Mississippi or widely dispersed in national and global realms. Furthermore, a key implication is that although his avocation may have brought him fame and fortune (certainly more than he had before becoming a Nobel Laureate), Faulkner remains a humble farmer and outdoorsman by nature and vocation.

The characterization of Faulkner as a farmer and incidental writer gains further traction in a scene staged at Greenfield Farm, the 320-acre property that he purchased in 1938. In it, Faulkner engages in a conversation with Arthur Arenza McJunkin, whom he calls “Renzi,” a farm laborer described by Joseph Blotner as also a frequent “body servant.”<sup>28</sup> The former role eclipses the latter in the scene, which begins as Faulkner enters the frame of a medium shot to join McJunkin, who is sitting on the back of a wagon against the rather unfortunate backdrop of two horse’s posteriors [Figure 1]. “What’s on your mind, Renzi?” Faulkner replies. McJunkin inquires, “Is it so that folks are all over the country reading these books you write—those homemade books they pay you big money for?” When Faulkner delivers a colloquial “sho is” as confirmation, McJunkin cheekily cautions, “If you ain’t careful, your name is going to be known further than your face.” Faulkner chuckles at the idea, making a facetious promise to send anyone with inquiries to “get a recommend” from his fellow interlocutor. The momentary duration of the scene does not prevent it from doing significant work with respect to the overall (self-)presentation of Faulkner. First, the characterization of his literary production as “homegrown books” aligns with the trope of organic genius that was key to Cowley’s recovery and rehabilitation of the author and that formed a staple of Cold War cultural narratives. The claim was that democracy in the U.S. made for naturally fecund ground to cultivate native artistic expression. It was a means of drawing a stark contrast between the cultural richness of Western democracies and the cultural deprivation of countries governed by totalitarian regimes. Second, the exchange between Faulkner and McJunkin suggests an attempt to counter preconceived notions of race relations in the South in general and Mississippi in particular. The performed jocularity and bonhomie, however, fails to conceal the power differential between landowner and laborer as they stand on agricultural grounds that evoke the material history and current conditions of racial oppression that influence their relations.

The effortful rendering of racial harmony is further on display in the second of three scenes filmed at Greenfield Farm. As in the conversation with McJunkin (and a subsequent one with a worker named Tommy), Faulkner chats with a farm laborer named Jim as they work together to mend a fence in a bit of symbolic staging that is by no means subtle. Later, as he walks around the Oxford town square, Faulkner stops to speak with an African American man named Gilbert, who makes light of a work-related minor injury that cut into a day’s wages. All of these contrived encounters play out in a production designed to keep the actual conditions of race relations in Jim Crow Mississippi outside the frame. Never-





**Figure 2:** Screen capture from the closing sequence of the *Omnibus* feature. Faulkner is in the driver's seat of a tractor at Greenfield Farm.

theless, the fact that Faulkner encounters African Americans in separate scenes and spaces from those involving white people visually replicates the social order glimpsed only briefly in an establishing shot of people moving about the town square in accordance with the quotidian social customs of segregation. Moreover, in the Greenfield Farm scenes, the manufactured air of camaraderie dissipates as Faulkner's paternalism shows. The disingenuous portrayal of Faulkner's Mississippi is consistent with McCarthy's observation that "the pedagogical address of the middlebrow" at the heart of *Omnibus*'s mass appeal was not up to the task of resolving the conflict between "free world" ideals expressed in U.S. Cold War rhetoric and the oppressive realities faced by African Americans living under Jim Crow. Instead of addressing this matter, the *Omnibus* profile tries to circumvent it by portraying Faulkner as a democratic social being whose movements and routine interactions nullify the dictates of the color line. Nevertheless, the attempt to obscure social reality stands exposed by the racial optics visible at key moments.

While the racial anxieties are present, they are less pronounced than those attending gender norms. Indeed, the specter of compromised masculinity looms large, eliciting strained attempts to keep it at bay. Polk's observation, noted above, that Faulkner is cast as "a man about town" places emphasis on his sociability, but what it means for Faulkner to be a man is a more essential (in every sense of the word) concern for the filmmakers. The strategy of downplaying Faulkner's literary pursuits to present him as a yeoman is at work, as we have seen, in Cooke's introduction to the segment. Along similar lines, testimony from Ike Roberts, a man identified as one of Faulkner's hunting buddies, burnishes the brand of rugged outdoorsman applied to the documentary subject. Accordingly, when

Mullen asks if Faulkner is a good hunter, Roberts is quick to deliver his assessment: "I've never seen a better one." The staging of a subsequent scene makes it appear as though Faulkner has happened upon Roberts during a stroll around the town square. When Roberts inquires about his friend's recent travels, Faulkner steers the conversation away from what he gathered in Stockholm—namely, the Nobel Prize in Literature—to what the two men might hunt and gather on their next excursion to the woods. The scripted exchange diminishes the importance of the trip abroad, since Faulkner insists that the necessity "to get back in time to go deer hunting" remained foremost on his mind the whole time.

The notion that Faulkner was eager to return to his natural habitat so that he could go hunting is ironic when taking into account that a trip to the woods with Roberts and others nearly kept Faulkner from even attending the Stockholm ceremony. According to Blotner, Faulkner spent far more time drinking than hunting on this particular occasion—the bender was so extreme, in fact, that he fell ill as the time of his departure drew near. The prospect that Faulkner might not be on hand to accept his Nobel in person renewed tensions that surfaced immediately after the news broke that he had won the award. At that time, Faulkner made an impromptu announcement to the press that he could not travel to Sweden because of pressing matters at home related to Greenfield Farm. It caused something of an international incident, forcing family members and officials in the U.S. diplomatic corps to intervene in an ultimately successful effort to convince Faulkner to change his mind. Blotner surmises that Faulkner's bout of heavy drinking at the hunting camp was precipitated by the introverted author's anxiety about having to take part in a ceremony held in the glare of the international media spotlight.<sup>29</sup> It is all the more remarkable, then, that he somehow managed to compose himself enough to fulfill his ceremonial duties. Decked out in a white tie ensemble, he endured the pomp and circumstance, accepting his certificate from the King of Sweden with gratitude. The only noticeable hitch came when he delivered his acceptance speech, which was virtually inaudible to the audience in the hall due to a combination of standing too far away from the microphone and speaking in his characteristically thick southern accent.<sup>30</sup>

The noticeable attempt by the *Omnibus* filmmakers to downplay the Nobel experience and play up his credentials as a yeoman farmer and hunter suggest wariness about a link between artistic pursuits and compromised masculinity prevalent in public discourse at the time. An anticommunist tactic in American Cold War culture was to paint men Red by calling their manhood into question, often by insinuating that they were overly intellectual or bookish. James Penner describes how Senator Joseph McCarthy, the infamous anticommunist demagogue, would deploy the charge of "soft masculinity" against his targets. For the senator, alleged communists and fellow travelers fit the mold of the "egghead," a figure whose weak constitution subverted the American ideal of "hard masculinity" characterized by rugged physicality, minimal introspection, laconic verbal expression, and stifled emotions.<sup>31</sup> Penner documents how such rhetoric influenced public conversations about Adlai Stevenson, who mounted a

failed presidential bid the same year that the Faulkner profile aired on *Omnibus*. During the campaign, Stevenson was “mocked as effeminate in the popular press” for his intellectualism and an alleged aversion to the kind of manly attributes so urgently ascribed to Faulkner.<sup>32</sup> The emphasis on his compliance with compulsory hard masculinity is evident in a clear delineation between the local and global domains he inhabits. Grounded in Mississippi, Faulkner is free to exercise his supposed inclination toward physicality, the outdoors, and male bonding forged through hunting rituals. In contrast, the stock footage of Faulkner in Stockholm receiving the Nobel Prize from royalty stresses that he was out of his element—a momentary concession to a softer form of masculinity necessitated by the demands of his literary sideline.

Granted, identifying the *Omnibus* feature as a relic of Cold War containment culture involves having to identify rather faint marks when it comes to the problem of the Jim Crow social order or worries about compromised American masculinity. Other marks come boldly into relief, however, during the closing sequence of the short film. The scene involves a reenactment of the commencement address that Faulkner gave when his daughter Jill and her classmates graduated from University High School in Oxford on May 28, 1951.<sup>33</sup> In this sequence, a bespectacled Faulkner stands at a podium in the high school auditorium as he reads from his prepared remarks. The perspective alternates between medium and close-up shots from eye-level and distant shots from over the shoulders of people in the audience. The (self-)presentation appears calibrated to project an image of Faulkner attuned to the pressing political, philosophical, and ontological issues of the Atomic Age. The power of national television transforms the local high school gymnasium into a venue for addressing a global threat. In this mediated space, Faulkner speaks to the pervasive anxiety about the terrifying prospect of nuclear annihilation:

What threatens us today is fear. Not the atom bomb, nor even fear of it, because if the bomb fell on Oxford tonight, all it could do would be to kill us, which is nothing, since in doing that it will have robbed itself of its only power over us: which is fear of it, the being afraid of it.

The syntactic web of words, a Faulknerian trademark, contains an urgent warning and a call for vigilance. Accordingly, Faulkner elucidates the danger posed by “the forces in the world today which are trying to use man’s fear to rob him of his individuality, his soul, trying to reduce him to an unthinking mass by fear and bribery.” The bribery Faulkner has in mind is the (re)distribution of wealth by governments—“communist or socialist or democratic . . . American or European or Asiatic”—to those who have not earned it by virtue of hard work. The conflation of the social welfare state in the U.S. implemented during the New Deal with communist systems in the Eastern bloc and Asia went on to become a hallmark of Faulkner’s full-throated defenses of individualism as a bulwark

against totalitarianism. He continues in this rhetorical vein: “It is not men in the mass who can and will save Man. It is Man himself. . . . Man, the individual” acting in concert with other individuals, “not as a class or classes,” who are best equipped to defeat tyranny: “all the Napoleons and Caesars and Mussolinis and Stalins and all the other tyrants who want power and aggrandizement.”

The inclusion of footage from the Stockholm ceremony signals that Faulkner’s remarks to the high school graduates derive from his Nobel address in terms of content, but an unfortunate performative resonance also registers. The muted delivery in monotone of the graduation speech, like that of the Nobel acceptance, neutralizes the force of the rhetoric and diminishes the sense of urgency. Faulkner’s vocal performance calls to mind the passage of his Nobel remarks envisioning the survival of man confirmed by a lone sound: “that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking.”<sup>34</sup> The commencement speech is characteristic of the air of overdetermined reenactment that pervades the fourteen-minute runtime of the film. Watching it now, the glaring artifice registers as a bug in a feature conceived with the apparent intention of exhibiting Faulkner and his community with an air of homespun authenticity. In the post-production moment, however, no such concerns were raised about the project. An internal memorandum from the Radio-Television Workshop predicted that the Faulkner profile would surely be “of great interest now and in the years to come for Mr. Faulkner undoubtedly is one of the world’s greatest writers.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Faulkner drew praise for his performance on and off camera. The memorandum described him as “a good actor and a considerate host,” citing the director’s favorable impression punctuated with a backhanded compliment: “He’s very good . . . I was amazed.”<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 1:** Screen capture of William Faulkner conversing with Arthur Arenza McJunkin at Greenfield Farm.

It took some time for the Oxford community to have the chance to assess Faulkner's dramatic turn, since CBS was not available in the area when the segment originally aired on *Omnibus*. For this reason, the producers worked with local officials to organize a special screening at the Civic Auditorium on February 23, 1953. While the ostensible purpose was to make the film available, the event also served as public confirmation that the man once branded as "Count No Count" for his youthful dandyism and lack of direction was now fêted as Oxford's most famous native son. The appreciation shown to Faulkner for casting the community in a positive light stood in stark contrast to the anger and hostility directed at him in years past by people who felt that he was giving the community a bad name by creating a fictional analogue rendered with Southern Gothic stylings deemed scandalous and obscene. The transformed state of relations between Faulkner and the community created resonance between the *Omnibus* profile and the special screening. In the penultimate shot of the film, an eye-level close-up, Faulkner finishes his commencement speech, removes his glasses, and looks down at the podium with an air of humility as the audience bursts into generous applause. A match dissolve facilitates a shift from Faulkner standing at the podium to Faulkner sitting in the driver's seat of a tractor, presumably at Greenfield Farm. As he smokes his pipe and stares into the distance beyond the left side of the frame, the narrator says in voice-over delivered with a portentous tone, "William Faulkner of Oxford, Lafayette County, Mississippi—a farmer who looks deep into the heart of life and writes what he sees there" [Figure 2]. The final line provides closing reinforcement to the claim that the wide reach of Faulkner's appeal comes from the deep roots he maintains in his native Mississippi. The collaborators on the *Omnibus* feature—not least Faulkner himself—took great liberties in crafting "William Faulkner, the farmer who writes." But in doing so they left to posterity an odd yet ultimately revealing document of Faulkner in the process of becoming a reluctant but willing actor on the global stage of the cultural Cold War.

## Notes

1. See Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988). Schwartz documents how Malcolm Cowley's spearheading of *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946 resurrected Faulkner, who had fallen into relative obscurity by the end of the 1930s. He identifies Cowley's championing and a postwar boom in paperback publishing as contributing factors that positioned Faulkner for the Nobel win and, subsequently, for inclusion in the canon taking shape in the postwar American academy.

2. Faulkner biographies treat the *Omnibus* production summarily if at all. See Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*. Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1974), 1435, 1437-39, 1452; Fredrick R. Karl, *William Faulkner: American Writer* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 854. (Karl erroneously places the episode air date in 1953 instead of 1952.)

3. See Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) on the impact of the Cold War in American culture. In recent years, there has been a spate of work published on Faulkner's role as a cultural ambassador in a Cold War historical context. See Greg Barnisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 124-33. Barnisel makes the case that Faulkner was the author who made the most significant contributions to State Department cultural missions. In a critical move relevant to my examination of Faulkner's *Omnibus* appearance, Catherine Gunther Kodat scrutinizes the attenuated Cold War timeline in Schwartz's *Creating Faulkner's*

*Reputation*, making the case for going beyond 1950 to account for Faulkner's work on behalf of the U.S. State Department as crucial to his change in status. See Kodat, "Unsteady State: Faulkner and the Cold War," in John T. Matthews, ed., *William Faulkner in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 156-65. See also the following: Joseph Blotner, "William Faulkner, Roving Ambassador," *International Educational and Cultural Affairs* (Summer 1966): 1-22; Deborah Cohn, "William Faulkner's Ibero-American Novel Project: The Politics of Translation and Cold War," *Southern Quarterly* 42.1 (Winter 2004): 5-18 and "Combating Anti-Americanism during the Cold War: Faulkner, the State Department, and Latin America," *Mississippi Quarterly* 59.3-4 (Summer-Fall 2006): 396-413; Helen Oakley, "William Faulkner and the Cold War: The Politics of Cultural Marketing," in Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 405-18; John T. Matthews, "Many Mansions: Cold War Conflicts," in Annette Trefzer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Global Faulkner: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 3-23; Harilaos Stecopoulos, "William Faulkner and the Problem of Cold War Modernism," in Jay Watson and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner's Geographies: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2011* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 143-62; Spencer Morrison, "Requiem's Ruins: Unmaking and Making in Cold War Faulkner," *American Literature* 85.2 (2013): 303-31.

4. The relationship between Faulkner's work and mass media has attracted the interest of scholars as of late. Most of this work centers on film, which is understandable given Faulkner's stints in Hollywood as a story developer and screenwriter. The essays collected in Julian Murphet and Stefan Solomon, eds., *William Faulkner in the Media Ecology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015) evince the diversity of media and critical approaches entailed in this branch of Faulkner studies. Catherine Gunther Kodat's contribution, "What is Television For? (or From 'The Brooch' to *The Wire*)," 34-48, is an exception to general rule that television has not played a significant role in studies of Faulkner in/and the media ecology. On a related note, Stefan Solomon, in *William Faulkner in Hollywood: Screenwriting for the Studios* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), briefly mentions the *Omnibus* profile in making the observation "Faulkner had some interest in television" (220). See George Lipsitz, *Time Passages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), especially chapters 3 and 4, for an account of the early phase of television production and reception in relation to collective memory in American popular culture.

5. Dwight Macdonald, *The Ford Foundation: The Men and the Millions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, [1956] 1989), 88.

6. For the source of the postal metaphor, see "Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel," in James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 255.

7. Mary Beth Hinton, "Omnibus: Precursor of Modern Television," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 26, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 43.

8. *Ibid.*, 48.

9. See William Hughes, *James Agee, Omnibus, and Mr. Lincoln: The Culture of Liberalism and the Challenge of Television, 1952-1953*. Hughes offers Agee's project on Lincoln as a case study to examine ambivalent liberal perceptions of television as a medium.

10. Macdonald, *Ford Foundation*, 88. Saudek's stress on entertainment value makes *Omnibus* a prime example of what Macdonald later defined as "Midcult" fare. For Macdonald, this type of popular culture derives from a mode of production professing an aim to elevate high culture while actually degrading it as an instrument of mass manipulation. "Masscult and Midcult," in Dwight Macdonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*, ed. John Summers (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 3-71. Mary Beth Hinton contends that the broad-based appeal took shape as a strategy to fend off the charge of elitism. Hinton, "Omnibus," 49-50.

11. Macdonald, *Ford Foundation*, 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. *Ibid.*, 96.

14. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000), 116.

15. *Ibid.*, 116.

16. Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 127.

17. *Ibid.*, 127.

18. Louis Althusser counts television among the ideological state apparatuses that reproduce the state by producing consent. See Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 104.

19. McCarthy, *Citizen Machine*, 128.

20. *Ibid.*, 129.

21. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*. Vol. 2, 1437.

22. "William Faulkner," *Omnibus*, season 1, episode 8, directed by Howard Magwood, featuring William Faulkner, aired December 28, 1952, Entertainment One, 2011. All subsequent references are to this source.
23. Noel Polk, *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 243.
24. *Ibid.*, 243.
25. Macdonald, *Ford Foundation*, 88.
26. James G. Watson, *William Faulkner: Self-Presentation and Performance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 5.
27. Schwartz discusses the pivotal role that Cowley played in reviving Faulkner's literary career. Although the collection did not enjoy brisk sales upon initial release, it did spark a newfound appreciation of Faulkner in the literary establishment. An influential review by Robert Penn Warren, for example, reinforced and extended the argument about the universal appeal of Faulkner's work. See *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, 24-27.
28. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*. Vol. 2, 1349.
29. *Ibid.*, 1345-50.
30. *Ibid.* Blotner notes that Faulkner's remarks seem to rise in estimation with each subsequent awards ceremony until it was eventually "recalled as the best speech ever given at a Nobel dinner." In the American literary establishment, there was a "mixed reaction" comprising appreciation for the rhetorical force and confusion about a "seeming position of faith and affirmation" by an author whose fiction expressed a view to the contrary (1366). Closer to home, the speech drew praise from the *Oxford Eagle* and the *Commercial Appeal*, the largest newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee, located just across the state line about ninety miles from Oxford (1373).
31. James Penner, *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 95.
32. *Ibid.*, 96.
33. The speech was published in the *Oxford Eagle*. For the full text, see "To the Graduating Class, University High School, 1951," in William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 122-24.
34. William Faulkner, "Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1950," *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, 120.
35. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*. Vol. 2, 1438.
36. *Ibid.*, 1438, 1439.

