

# Between Chaos and Cosmos: Ernesto Grassi, William Faulkner, and the Compulsion to Speak<sup>1</sup>

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*Ernesto Grassi's rhetorical theory proves helpful in illuminating William Faulkner's conception of humanity's dependence upon language. For both Grassi and Faulkner, language—the fundamental human art—serves metonymically, pointing toward humanity's need for other forms of artifice. Through the use of artificial means, the species is able not merely to survive, but to flourish, to prevail. Characters in Faulkner's novels, such as Quentin Compson and Darl Bundren, who seek to transcend human verbality/conventionality manifest forms of psychic disintegration. Like Faulkner, Grassi considers the attempt to escape artifice as an act of insanity. Contrariwise, Grassi uses the term folly to refer to the willing recognition of the need to accept the forms of human artifice that allow the species to thrive.*

The theory of continental rhetorician Ernesto Grassi would seem to have little in common with the early Yoknapatawpha novels of William Faulkner. Grassi's cosmopolitan career—he worked with both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger at Freiburg—stands in stark contrast to that of Faulkner, a self-proclaimed Mississippi “farmer”<sup>2</sup> who committed himself to his region, what he famously called his “own little postage stamp of native soil,” in order to sublimate “the actual into the apocryphal” (Meriwether and Millgate 255). Most readers, then, will not be surprised to learn that the linking of Ernesto Grassi's rhetorical theory to the imaginative works of William Faulkner is unprecedented. Some, however, will recognize that Grassi's philosophy can offer a helpful gloss on the rhetorical issues running throughout Faulkner's early novels, especially the notion, which both thinkers seem to share, that verbality is a condition humanity is condemned to suffer.

What follows is, first, a brief summary of Grassi's theory, particularly as it reveals his conception that the rhetorical tradition is not merely derivative of the critical-philosophical tradition but, rather, a distinct and legitimate kind of philosophy in its own right. Second, a consideration of the remarkable similarities between Grassi's rhetorical theory and Faulkner's novels is offered. Finally, in the section titled “Bound to Speak,” an examination is presented of a specific area of convergence in their thought—namely, that humanity, having become through history a verbal species, is now *condemned* to continue as such. Thus, if hope is to be found for the species, it must be

discovered in humanity's linguistic participation in the world.

*Rhetoric's Quest for Wisdom*

Just over two decades after its initial publication in 1980, Ernesto Grassi's *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* was reissued. The slim volume of five essays had been Grassi's first English translation, and, for all but a few American rhetoric scholars, the collection had served as their introduction to Grassi's work. In the foreword to the new edition, brought back into print in 2001, Timothy W. Crusius introduces readers to the key issues raised by Grassi's thought, tracing those issues through the arrangement of the collection's essays themselves. It is only logical then that Crusius should end the foreword where Grassi ends his book, at the intersection of rhetoric and religion. Aware of the aversion that his fellow rhetoricians might have for being led to such a point, Crusius exhorts them to remain open to the essays, even as he acknowledges that Grassi "pushes us toward something radically counter to most modernist and postmodernist thought, a question we might like to dodge but must eventually confront less defensively—the question of rhetoric and religion" (xvii). It would seem that Thomas B. Farrell is the type of reader whom Crusius has in mind when he attempts, by forewarning his audience, to mitigate his readers' predispositions against even the broaching of such a question. In his review of the volume, Farrell, ignoring Crusius's anticipatory exhortation, saves his most damning criticism of *Rhetoric as Philosophy* for his conclusion, in which he makes explicit Grassi's unpardonable desire: "Grassi wants religion" (102). Taking Grassi to task for such longing, Farrell's vitriolic piece shows Crusius's entreaty to be perceptive but ultimately incapable of overcoming the contemporary bias against any intersection of the religious and rhetorical realms.

*Rhetoric as Philosophy's* final essay—"Language as the Presupposition of Religion: A Problem of Rhetoric as Philosophy?"—reveals the nature of the "religion" that Grassi seeks. In language suggestive of the "Heideggerian side of his thought" (Crusius xiii), Grassi, speaking of the Bible, offers his own subdued version of his mentor's famous proclamations regarding the "default of God."<sup>3</sup> Grassi writes, "[W]e no longer recognize the mythic word of God," and, hence, a work like Kierkegaard's *For Self-Examination*, which tells readers how to engage scripture, "no longer concerns us" (111). Instead, Grassi finds more interesting language's ability to break free from the "functional circle" of mere organic existence confined to the realm of

sensation. There, all phenomena direct the organism toward “the completion of such different functions as nutrition, reproduction, and flight from danger” (104). This organic sphere is what we might call, metonymically speaking, the “blood-realm,” for its principle and ultimate objective, its first and last purpose, is the maintenance of biological completeness and unity. It is only with the advent of language that the human species can begin to become aware of itself as distinctly *human*. Thus, the religion that Farrell accuses Grassi of desiring is merely the ground that reveals human(e) existence,<sup>4</sup> distinct and discernible as such in the world.<sup>5</sup>

So what can be said of the human species prior to its encounter with language? To answer such a question requires a deeper look into Grassi’s speculations regarding the preverbal human condition. Following his true master, Giambattista Vico, Grassi engages in a speculative anthropology, positing the existence of a human species prior to its possession of language. Although the creatures existing in such a condition lack a symbolic system of conventional communicative signs, they do engage in a primitive form of interpretation, for the physical phenomena that they encounter must be translated into meaning. That is, the sensations that human beings experience necessitate, require of the human organism, some translation into a significant reality. An example will help here: the thirsty desert nomads who sense (see, touch, smell) water must translate sensation into meaning (*the object sensed can satisfy thirst*). What makes possible such a translation—a deed accomplished by both human and non-human beings—we might simply call instinct, though Grassi himself seems reluctant to offer a specific term for this primitive faculty that the human organism possesses.

To restate the matter, sensations and their meanings are not identical. Moreover, the human organism is unable to avoid the impingement of such sensations. For the sensate being, sensible phenomena must be suffered, leading Grassi to conclude that the human condition—even before the species possesses language—is fundamentally passionate.<sup>6</sup> Once suffered, the sensed phenomena call for the organism to interpret—that is, translate—the sensations into meaning.<sup>7</sup> Hence, one can recognize that the world without words is not to be understood as a world without a primitive form of communication. Grassi identifies this primitive translation from sense into significance as a metaphorical act, coming from *metapherein*, meaning “to carry across” (“Metaphor” 13). Grassi’s speculations lead to the conclusion that all communication is metaphorical, a realization that he discovers in the writings of the Italian Humanists.

In “The Underivedness of the Spoken Word: *Phoné* as an Element of Language,” Grassi asks rhetorically, “Do we indeed have a sound-producing [that is, verbal] being preceding all meanings?” (21). In the course of his essay, Grassi answers his own question, claiming that there are not sound-producing beings that precede all meaning, but there likely are meaning-producing beings that precede all sound. Again, even the preverbal desert nomads are able to discern the sensed water’s meaning without the use of sound symbols or spoken language. Grassi further clarifies his position in “Language as the Presupposition of Religion,” writing, “[O]n the basis of the immediately directive signs that govern the organic sphere, we perceive a strictly nonverbal kind of communication and understanding” (106).<sup>8</sup> In fact, Grassi finds such a transfer of meaning to be necessitated by human biological needs. He writes:

In the realm of the organic [. . .] every genus and species of life stands under the signs that are governing and directive for it—“codes” we call them today. By means of these codes living creatures decipher reality and bind it to the fixed order of their environment. Sounds, movements, smells, and colors receive an immediate “directive function.” (“Language” 104)

The functioning of the organic blood-realm is not dependent upon the word, but it is dependent upon meaning achieved through the identified metaphorical process. Two significant consequences result from Grassi’s assertion. First, human language in its initial spoken form—and for Grassi, the spoken precedes the written—comes from this passionate, metaphorical activity that is grounded in human sensation. Second, the application of particular sound symbols to their respective referents is not arbitrarily applied but, rather, grounded in a passionate, organic experience. Regarding this second point, Grassi writes,

From the Aristotelian distinction between sound and spoken word—where the latter is understood to be a “meaningful sound”—there arises the following question: Can we state that sound is transformed into spoken word (*phoné*) when we assign to it an indicative sign (*sema*)? If that were the case, then two factors would be involved in the emergence of a spoken word: a sound (*psophos*) without meaning and our transferal of a meaning or an indication to it. (“Underivedness” 19)

Spoken language, which, as is discussed below, marks the beginning of the species' development from organic to humane existence, has its grounding in the sensate body.

In the opening sentence of "Folly as a Philosophical Problem," Grassi posits, "Human existence stands in the *permanent necessity* of coping with and organizing its environment. What is unveiled by [the] activity [of the senses] counts as the answer to *a demand of life*" (35 italics added). The organic unity of the human contains innate "codes," providing the structure that allows for meaning, and the meaning found is immediate based upon this existent "code of the senses," which "*is not subjective*, nor is it chosen arbitrarily" ("Underivedness" 17, italics Grassi's). Hence, no conscious interpretation is required in the "symbolic functional circle of the organic" ("Language" 17), for all achievement of inevitable meaning results from the codes with which the organic being is born.

Already, even before entering the realm of language, one detects that quality of human existence that leads Grassi to deem it tragic. This quality is, of course, the aforementioned constraint placed upon the species that requires human beings to suffer inescapably the endless succession of sensations received from phenomena. These sensations necessitate a transfer into meaning that results from the intrinsic codes with which organic beings are born. One quickly realizes that a sensate being cannot live and avoid this *passionate* existence; it is an impossibility. As Grassi says, "To reject this sensibility is to die" ("Underivedness" 25). But meaning is achieved without any cognitive effort on the part of the species.

What Grassi identifies as the fundamental metaphorical activity, the translation of sensation into significance, occurs without any need for human volition or exertion. The intrinsic codes maintain a seamless unity within the organic being. Here Grassi discerns the first hint of a divine presence. Looking into Coluccio Salutati's *De Laboribus Herculis*, Grassi finds Erato, the Muse "who presides over the finding of similarities," to be the decisive figure for those who wish to come to terms with the essence of knowing, the discovery of meaning. It is Erato who devises knowledge and allows for the passage from one thing to that which is similar ("Metaphor" 13). In other words, at the root of even the most basic achievement of meaning is a Muse-ical, poetic act that is both divine and inspired, not a rational act springing from humanity's volitional application of inchoate reason. But in introducing divinity Grassi has problematized even the most basic

human functioning<sup>9</sup> in the very way that would cause critics like Farrell to balk at such a project, for, rightly, such critics recognize an attempt to bring religion—or, at least, a trace of the *divine*—into the study of rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> Farrell detects in such a maneuver more of Heidegger's influence on Grassi's thinking and cannot resist the temptation to conflate satirically the thinking of the two "old European men" in one fell swoop: "If we were to paraphrase Heidegger, Grassi's position would be 'Only a rhetoric can save us now!'" (101). The tone of Grassi's theory, however, seems much more modest, resisting in its understatement such a caricature.

Rather straightforwardly, Grassi reasons, "What is the meaning of finding, of discovering the *similitudo*? It is to provide the premise for the transfer of meanings, to discern the origin of *metapherein*, the very essence of poetic language. Thus, knowledge is grounded on metaphoric language, which pertains to the realm of poetry" ("Metaphor" 13). One certainly might want to go along with Farrell, agreeing that Grassi's conception of the relationship between religion and rhetoric at least risks proving hollow, for, as Farrell concludes, "Grassi's [. . .] distinction between rhetoric and rational speech manages to broaden rhetoric's 'meaning' to the point of incoherence" (102). Such a judgment reveals Farrell's conviction that the venture has gone too far, but perhaps we are willing to take Crusius's urging to heart and confront less defensively Grassi's challenging theory.

Before continuing toward a consideration of Grassi's theory regarding humanity's development of language and the significance of such a progression, let us anticipate key parallels that can be detected in the species' preverbal and verbal conditions. The making of meaning that primitive, organic humanity undertakes is analogous to later, verbal humanity in three ways: (1) both call for an immediate and direct form of knowledge; (2) both originate not in ratiocinative acts but rather in the metaphorical, poetical transfer into meaning; and (3) both place an urgent demand, what Grassi calls a tragic necessity, upon the percipient being. Regarding the first, Grassi argues that the organic "fixed order" in which every creature exists offers "directive signs" proper to the maintenance of life ("Language" 104). The meaning of a perceived sensation is known because of instinctual "codes" that the being possesses, and no deduction is necessary for that meaning to be known. Likewise, in the verbal realm, meaning is achieved in language that is "revealing, or evangelical," and never "demonstrative or proving" (103). Grassi writes, "The statements of sacred language are formulated without any mediation, that is, 'in the twinkling of an eye' and in an imagistic way"

(103). Elsewhere, in describing the resultant wonder experienced upon encountering in the verbal realm the originary metaphor, he writes, “[T]he originary manifests itself only instantaneously and directly [. . .]. It manifests itself in human history and is not logically deducible” (“Metaphor” 7). In both spheres meaning is immediately established, determining those functions that will follow. Within the verbal sphere, this immediate and direct metaphorical language—our second identified parallel—is necessary for the establishment of premises from which rational deduction can take place. The logical, rational discourse that is traditionally considered authentically and exclusively philosophical is possible only after a more fundamental speech. Grassi describes this type of language as “prophetic” rather than syllogistic (“Experience” 70); more important, however, is Grassi’s insistence that the fundamental speech of the orator is a form of philosophic discourse. Hence, Grassi follows in Vico’s footsteps, asserting that these early orators are, in fact, the true first philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Grassi explains:

Rhetorical discourse seeks to move souls [. . .] and does not seek to justify itself rationally. Rational discourse, however, is based on the human capacity to make deductions and thereby to link conclusions to premises. Rational discourse achieves its demonstrative effect and its compulsion by means of logical demonstration. The deductive process is completely closed within itself and as such cannot admit other forms of persuasion which do not derive from the logical process. (“Critical” 1-2)

If this “closed” system of deductive reasoning is taken as the sole realm of philosophy, rhetorical discourse, as Grassi defines it, lies beyond it. But such rationality presupposes a prior, more passionate form of discourse. It is the overarching theme of Grassi’s career that both forms of discourse are, in fact, philosophical.

The third parallel, the urgent demand placed on the being who suffers either the sensation or the word, reveals a consistency in Grassi’s vision of what he calls the human “tragedy of existence” (“Theater”).<sup>12</sup> That is to say, the tragic necessity that organic human beings must endure alters but never subsides upon their entering the verbal realm; its alteration is evidenced in *what*, not *whether*, they must suffer. The urgent demand that the organic being must passionately endure is that of phenomena’s constant, unbidden, and irresistible bombardment of the senses—what René Thom calls

the “tyranny of the ‘hic et nunc’” (qtd. in Grassi, “Language” 109). Upon moving into the realm of language, however, human tragedy manifests itself in the anxiety that the human person feels in being faced with the countless possibilities for meaning, which result from the loss of those codes possessed in a preverbal, organic, unified state.

In the following passage, Grassi expands upon the altered human condition:

The meaning of anxiety as the possibility of freedom certainly lies in the fundamental experience that no immediate code for deciphering the real is available to human beings so that they can define their environment.

On the biological [that is, organic] level anxiety does not arise (which is why Kierkegaard asserts that animals are happy and satisfied because they have no capacity for intelligent thought). Anxiety comes from the loss of a code within which life objects and subjects appear. (“Language” 107-8)

This latter manifestation of the human “tragedy of existence” is the mirror image of the former—an image that both reflects and reverses the prior urgency. Just as the preverbal human is unable to escape sensible phenomena’s demands for meaning, so is verbal humanity incapable of overcoming phenomena’s demands for verbal interpretation.

Grassi’s readers should wonder whether the human being’s loss of the organic codes is the result of language or its cause. To reformulate the question, we might ask, does language emerge as a consequence of the loss of organic codes, or does its onset bring about the loss of organic integrity? Whether verblivity is cause or consequence is not an insignificant issue, for in answering such a question, one begins to approach Grassi’s foundational beliefs regarding the nature of language. Grassi is reluctant, however, to reveal his position too quickly, choosing instead to consider both possibilities. He writes, “There are two reasons that can be taken into consideration as the basis of the collapse of the symbolic functional circle of life. First, language itself is the truest cause of the dissolution of the unity of the organic” (“Language” 108). In such an interpretation, the “child first learns its human [and thus, its un-unified] code from the mother who in turn has learned it as language from the series of generations of a culture” (108). From the earliest moments of existence, the human being encounters the divisive word, separating it



from organic experience. Mark Lawrence McPhail, in his article comparing Kenneth Burke and Grassi, argues that this conception of language is, in fact, Burke's, but it is ultimately rejected by Grassi for the alternate position—namely, that language is not the cause of psychic division but rather an attempt only to remediate it (104-7). McPhail's assessment is consistent with the stance taken by Grassi, who writes,

The meaningful function of language can be explained only as the overcoming of the rise of 'isolation,' 'abstraction,' and the separating out of subject and object. [. . .] Language is not the *cause* of the separating out of the duality of subject and object but rather the result of it, with the task of reconstructing the broken unity in a *new* way. ("Language" 110)

Thus, Grassi conclusively rejects language as a negative principle, finding "the word," instead, to be the "bridge" that seeks to reunite subject and object. Although Grassi rejects the possibility that language itself causes the division, here he is content to leave unidentified what he finds to be the authentic cause, merely describing it as the consequence of a process in which "directive sounds" (104)—that is, those possessing an organic immediacy—are transformed into pure sounds, capable of ordering humanity only after being interpreted and, thus, resulting in language (*logos*) that names or identifies mere sensation. Even more significant is Grassi's position that this absence of an immediate code is "a distinctly human phenomenon" (110); other creatures do not naturally move out of an existence in which the codes bring about the metaphorical meaning through the senses. Only human beings develop the absence and its subsequent awareness that results in the need for language.

### *Grassi and Faulkner*

It is at this point that we can begin to discern striking similarities in the thought of Ernesto Grassi and William Faulkner. In "The Priority of Common Sense and Imagination," Grassi identifies the absence that leads to language as humanity's "spirituality"; he writes, "Spirituality is to be interpreted here as a 'lack,' in the sense of a slackening of the originally firm union between imagination and impulse or need. [. . .] 'spirituality'—surprisingly, I repeat—would be identical with a 'deficiency'" (30, 45).

An interpretation of humanity's spiritual component as a deficiency, or lack, requiring language is a position in alignment with the conception of words offered by Faulkner's character Addie Bundren. She maintains that words are "gaps in people's lacks" (174). Such expressions on the part of Faulkner's fictional speakers reveal that he, like Grassi, is capable of conceptualizing the eruption of language as occurring in order to fill a psychological void. It is doubt regarding speech's ability to accomplish its purposes that plagues Faulkner, whose chosen vocation requires his use of words.

As the medium that is spawned by lack, words possess the potential fundamentally to reveal, to signify absences rather than presences. Or as John T. Matthews writes, "Language represents what it cannot present" (57). For Grassi each articulation might meet a need by making present a new reality, but when it does so, it brings with it a revelation of even further needs requiring even more words. These ever-new and ever-pressing revelations bind humanity within a historical existence, leading Grassi to conclude that "human society never 'is'; it is always 'becoming'" ("Priority" 45). It is humanity's historical self-awareness that allows it to conceive of itself as free from—that is, *not bound within*—nature. Rather, the species finds itself bound to choose. Human history is, then, essentially the long human recording of choices made. Our necessity is no longer that of the sensate organic being; instead, the tragic human existence is defined by our need to act volitionally and to speak historically. As Grassi writes, "This brings us to the all-important [. . .] question of *how* man is torn from the unity of nature and is thereby opposed to it in a subject-object relationship. Animals live *in* nature, but we human beings live over and against it, because whoever knows he is not 'bound' by nature does not recognize it as his home" (45-6). What is humanity's spiritual home, then, must be defined in terms of the species' inextricable bond to language.

As we have already recognized, Grassi finds human existence, because it is marked by necessity in both its preverbal and verbal conditions, to be inescapably tragic. For verbal humanity, speech is a defining characteristic. All that humanity can know of itself must come through the interpretation that language affords. Moreover, after the onset of language, speechlessness is no longer an option, for even silence takes on significance, serving as a kind of interpretative act, after language is present. Grassi hypothesizes about such (non)verbal maneuvering by man, calling to mind the etymology of what he calls language's *elenctic* character. The term *elenctic* comes from the Greek verb *elegchein*, which has as a possible meaning "to tie to the pillory"

(“Metaphor” 9). From this definition Grassi deduces a theory of humanity’s irrevocable necessity to speak if it is to possess self-awareness. All that is able to be known requires articulation. He writes, “Even if he [the human being] were to have recourse to silence [. . .] his silence would be a meaningful statement as well. Man is chained to the pillory of the world. He must speak: his very silence is a sign of this” (“Metaphor” 9). Grassi’s assertion is worth considering carefully, for it points toward an understanding of silence that is rather illuminating.

The wordless realm is one that in its most literal sense lacks intelligibility. To identify humanity in such a condition requires that one first imagine the verbal condition in order then to negate or move away from such a state. Descriptors such as speech-*less*, word-*less*, and *pre-verbal* have meaning only in their standing against or negating the positive condition of language. Likewise, after the onset of verbality, the realm of silence cannot be known as a positive domain but, rather, is intelligible only as a negation of sound itself. Furthermore, the very attempt to identify the preverbal realm verbally, so that its essential character can be discussed and considered, points toward the way that humanity’s wordless condition can only be *known* after language comes along to name—that is, interpret—it.<sup>13</sup>

One might question whether there is a more illuminating term than those posited for humanity’s preverbal state. One that Grassi does not use but that may be appropriate is *innocence*. Certainly Grassi would know that using such a term would import undeniable moral implications, and, as we have already noted, the “religion” that Grassi seeks—one grounded in Being or, perhaps Nature, rather than revelation, and thus apprehended through philosophy rather than tenuously held by faith—is not one that typical religious jargon could invoke. Grassi does not find the passion that verbal humanity suffers to be any more or less necessary than that suffered prior to the onset of language; hence, the term *innocence*, meaning “unharmful,” would suggest a non-tragic organic human existence.<sup>14</sup> As we have already seen, however, Grassi finds the tragic suffering of human existence to exist even prior to the onset of human verbality; hence, it would be inaccurate to speak of the development of language as somehow injurious to humanity. For Faulkner, however, whose imagination germinated within two<sup>15</sup> distinct but related forms of Southern Christianity, and whose mind is more inclined than Grassi to view language as a cause of humanity’s suffering, the term fits.<sup>16</sup> In the following Grassi quote, one hears unwitting echoes of Faulkner, especially his Nobel Prize address: “It is the word ‘suffered’ as a necessity

and experienced as a command that we live through in our desperation and doubt and which presents us ‘directly’ to the new” (“Language” 112). One’s willingness to engage in the passion of this verbal necessity marks his authenticity as a speaker of historically required words—that is, “words which come at the right moment (*kairós*)” (“Experience” 69). Note, it is *willing* engagement that authenticates the speaker’s words; engagement, as a tragic necessity, takes place, but the speaker of kairotic words chooses to answer such a call.

At this point, it is worth considering a particular way in which Heidegger’s influence is apparent in Grassi’s thought. In “What Are Poets For?” Heidegger writes of those who are willing to engage in the act of speaking, knowing that such activity is the means by which Being is manifested in the world. Language is the “house of Being,” and the authentic poet must be brave enough to “dare [that is, risk participating in] language” (129). We can safely apply Heidegger’s description of the poet to a novelist like Faulkner, who self-consciously attempts to “dare language,” attempting, as he famously wrote, “to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period” (Cowley 14). Writers who would attempt such an undertaking are, like Heidegger’s poets, offering readers the means by which humane existence, human being-in-the-world, is known. Heidegger ambitiously summons those poets able to “say more sayingly” to the work of re-founding, or re-grounding, humanity. The work of the poet is to make possible humanity’s understanding of itself, and this undertaking is nothing short of a Herculean task, according to thinkers like Grassi and Heidegger.

Although Heidegger avoids the use of the term *kairós* in his essay, thus keeping poetry distinct from rhetoric, his discussion of the timeliness of the poet’s “saying” is another evident correlation with Grassi’s theory. Commenting upon Rilke’s poetry, Heidegger makes much of Rilke’s use of the qualifier “sometimes,”<sup>17</sup> taking the adverb “not at all [to] mean occasionally and at random.” Instead, Heidegger interprets the term to signify “rarely and at the right time in an always unique instance in a unique manner” (134). Although he does not identify it as such, what Heidegger calls for here is kairotic speaking on the part of the poet. It must, then, serve a rhetorical purpose, addressing the temporary needs of a given society’s historical moment. Although much of Grassi’s career and his writings are motivated by Heidegger’s rejection of the Humanistic tradition, with its concern for concrete and historical action, here Heidegger seems willing to go against the Western tradition, as Grassi understands it, by granting “rational value

to rhetoric or poetic language” even though they are “tied to the ‘here’ and ‘now’” (“Allegorical” 65), rather than freed from the ceaseless becoming of human history.<sup>18</sup>

Heidegger’s essay further iterates humanity’s dependence on language for engagement with not only that which affords humanity self-awareness, but also that which allows engagement with other beings. He writes, “When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word ‘well,’ through the word ‘woods’ [. . .]. All beings [. . .], each in its own way, are *qua* beings in the precinct of language” (129). Human reliance upon language is total and complete, for it is the only means by which the species, finding itself separated from other creatures in nature, can identify and distinguish them from itself. Whereas other creatures are a part of nature, at home in the physical world, human beings find themselves alienated by existence. Speaking, then, must necessarily be ventured—again, the poet must “dare language”—if the anxiety caused by the separation of subject and object, self and other, is to be overcome. Quoting from the poet Johann Gottfried Herder, Heidegger expands upon this inexorable human condition, writing, “In his *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Man*, Herder writes as follows: ‘On a bit of moving air depends everything human that men on earth have ever thought, willed, done, and ever will do’” (136). Were it not for the more venturesome sayers, who bravely speak during a society’s “destitute time,” what is not yet recognizable as a being—that is, *nothing*—could be known.<sup>19</sup> Heidegger comments on Herder’s assertion, “[T]his one breath by which they [that is, the ‘sayers who more sayingly say’] are more daring is not just a saying of any sort; rather, this one breath is another breath, a saying other than the rest of human saying. [. . .] it is a breath for nothing” (137). Heidegger’s position cannot be overstated: poetic saying is necessary if humanity, however defined, is to survive. It is fortuitous, then, that mankind’s utter dependence upon language coincides with ceaseless verbosity.

### *Bound to Speak*

What Heidegger has described is Grassi’s notion of the *elenctic* quality of language. Humans are tied to the pillory of the world, and the world that they can know is mediated through words. Although Heidegger does not speculate in “What Are Poets For?” about the development of language in history, presuming that recognizable humanity has always possessed such

an art, his thesis does consider the existence of a tragic disintegration that only human beings experience. Other organic beings, finding themselves at home in nature, lack awareness of the disunity between the self and the other. As such, these other organic beings lack spirituality, as Grassi has defined the term, for the deficiency that compels humanity to speak is unknown to these integrated organisms.

We have already noted Grassi's assertion that language is merely the result, not the cause, of human disintegration. We have yet to determine conclusively whether Faulkner takes such a position. We can be confident, however, that the two thinkers do share an understanding of language as developing in the history of the species as a lapse, of sorts, irreversibly altering the human condition. The psychic unease that plagues the species is not original but subsequent to its beginning. As such, one might find for it an analog in the biblical account of the Fall. It is my contention that Faulkner intends for such analogs to be recognized. For Grassi, they are evident but latent within his essays. Hence, both writers might be understood as commenting in some fashion on the myth of the Fall, especially as it reveals a separation that results in a new kind of human community. As a Southern writer with an imaginative workshop chock-full of his culture's religious imagery, which traces the story in Genesis through to Christian gospels and epistles, Faulkner is especially interested in the rhetorical foundations of Christianity's particular adaptation and interpretation of the Fall. Grassi, true to his Mediterranean roots, considers the mythology of the Bible in essays examining both the Hebraic and the Christian conceptions of language and the Fall.<sup>20</sup> In any case, both find humanity's bond with language to be unbreakable. Language, for Grassi but even more so for Faulkner, also serves as a metonym for other humanizing arts.

Foremost in Faulkner's mind is the communication not from person to person but, rather, from generation to generation in the form of historical narratives. The histories that Faulkner's characters receive certainly stabilize their Southern culture, but they also often fixate and stultify existence in the present. The sounds and sights that one receives of the past reveal the way in which language, a set of cultural symbols with origins in previous human history, is only one of the many forms of conventional communication, consisting of rhetorical tools at the disposal of the present to be used for the well-being of the future. For Faulkner, then, humanity's verbal fate points toward a more general fate, in which the species is inextricably tied to artifice. Grassi also recognizes that a consideration of language's artificial character.

reveals that the species must come to terms with its conventional existence. Those who would attempt to transcend such humanizing conventionality suffer a form of madness, a motif frequently recurring among Faulkner's characters as well. Finally, both writers recognize that there is a type of human speech that is able to refund and revivify a society. Conceptualizing a type of language capable of achieving a balance between refunding and sustaining a people is a task that both Grassi and Faulkner carefully seek to accomplish. In doing so, they reveal their agreement regarding humanity's perpetual "becoming." As a historical species, human society never *is*; thus, the humanizing work is never complete, requiring that members of any given generation undertake their respective and varied responsibilities for the sake of the species' future.

For Grassi, the philosopher, the identities of the ultimate cause of humanity's organic disintegration remains unspeakable and unknown; Faulkner, on the other hand, as a poet, is much more willing to look to mythology and theology as sources capable of informing his own speculations regarding language. Both thinkers, however, share a desire to offer their readers humanistic knowledge of existence rather than to move readers, through hubristic and authoritative claims, to any indubitable certainty—this despite their somewhat paradoxical sympathy for oracular, sermonic rhetoric. The paradox is intelligible, however, for all words, even those of the prophet, must find their place within the human, historical context if they are to exert any suasive power over their hearers.

Another point of confluence between the two thinkers is their agreement that human beings are "doomed" to speak. Such is the inevitable reality of history, both societal and personal. This fate to speak transcends mere verbal intercourse, including instead all "symbolic exchange" (Baudrillard 24)<sup>21</sup> that humanity undertakes. Throughout Faulkner's works, this exchange finds symbolic representation in distinctly "Southern" correlatives from the region's troubled history. The order in which I am proposing Faulkner comes to these symbols is from the conceptual to the concrete, not vice versa. A thematic reading of Faulkner's earliest novels reveals that his concern with language—the chief concern of this study—is already there at the beginning of his career as a novelist. *Soldiers' Pay* and *Mosquitoes*, both published prior to Faulkner's discovery/creation of his apocryphal county, are set outside of the racial turmoil that pervades most of the novelist's great Yoknapatawpha novels. But, while miscegenation is not a theme in these first works, Faulkner's preoccupation with language and its converse,

silence, is an important *topos*, especially in the last of the pre-Yoknapatawpha novels, *Mosquitoes*. There, in a novel that self-consciously examines the role of the artist and the reliability of language, while also offering contending representations of beauty, readers can detect the same issues that remain paramount throughout Faulkner's career. For this reason, the premise of Edouard Glissant's recent meditation upon the novelist, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, leaves much unexplored. There Glissant claims that the racial complexities explored by Faulkner are the means by which he continues to be relevant both directly and indirectly, through his own works and through the works of those whom he has influenced. Glissant persuasively argues that it is miscegenation, or what he calls "Creolization," that emerges as the primary concern in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels, for his stories never stop "investigating both the curse of this 'menace' and the damnation of those who fight it" (30). This ever-present "threat" to a white, Southern hegemony, the "unpredictability" of which "terrifies those who refuse the very idea, if not the temptation, to mix, flow together, and share," repeatedly erupts, producing new life in all of Faulkner's imagined generations, pointing to something fundamentally and "essentially" human, which might serve as the grounds for political change. Hence, its purposes are mythic, apocryphal,<sup>22</sup> or even primordial, although its prophetic effect is to bring about change in the present historical moment. In bringing to light the possible nature of these inevitable political implications, Glissant's book should be reckoned with and considered deeply. My contention, however, is that the miscegenation within the novels of Faulkner is placed there as an artistic choice for an imaginative purpose, the discovery of which can be sought only within the unity of the entire Faulknerian corpus, his overall poetic artifact. In Faulkner's ongoing pursuit to allay his own doubts regarding language, this "mixing" of one with another, this outward compulsion to communicate meaningfully with those unlike oneself, finds a fitting analog in the (potentially) "Creolized" people, those of mixed race and caste, who inhabit his cosmos. And while Faulkner seems willing to acknowledge the risks involved in both a culture's *incestuous* and its *promiscuous* intercourse, he unapologetically affirms that only the latter is able to perpetuate human society.

Although it might now seem as if we have strayed far away from our purpose, to identify the similarities between Grassi and Faulkner, in fact the theme of miscegenation leads to another key intersection in the thought of the thinkers. Grassi and Faulkner possess rather sophisticated understandings of the complexities of humane existence, recognizing that it is dependent to



a great degree upon artifice. Moreover, both men are unwilling merely to point out this dependence, seeking instead to offer some means by which one might cope with the ironic aphasia<sup>23</sup> that could result from such an awareness. Grassi, on this point, delves more deeply than does Faulkner, but there is agreement as to what it means to detect the conventionality of human existence and then to attempt to reject such a fact for an unadorned existence. To reiterate, it is a prescription for madness, resulting in a greater loss of humanity to any who would seek to know existence unfettered from and unaccommodated by all artifice.

To recognize the artificial quality of humane existence and then to remain within it is, according to Grassi, to live within the reality of human folly. Although the term *folly* possesses its own connotations of dementia, it is, in fact, a mode of existence grounded in humanistic humility and, thus, celebrated by those who understand the incumbent realities of humane society. Its preservation is dependent upon a recognizable culture, capable of manifesting its identity, but that culture must also maintain its respect for vitality, growth, and life-giving transgression. Such transgression leads to a final point of convergence in the writings of Grassi and Faulkner. Both endorse—one in his theory, the other in his practice—a kind of speech that is capable of refounding and revitalizing human society. This form of rhetoric addresses a given society's historical moment; hence, its kairotic character verges upon the evangelistic, for it speaks with a sense of divine timing into the human realm. To call for this type of human speech is to call paradoxically for a rediscovery of the "old verities" as they are manifested by a new set of codes and customs within a refounded order. Vivifying speech, then, is capable of bringing into presence a new awareness of the verities that define humanity. For Faulkner these include—among others, to be sure—love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, and sacrifice, all of which he lists in his Nobel Prize address (*Essays* 120). Though the object of one's love, the recipient of one's pity, or beneficiary of one's sacrifice may change, the humanizing acts will manifest to the species images of its ideal existence.

As we have already discussed, the history just prior to the beginning of Faulkner's career as a writer had greatly diminished the reverence in the West for the "old verities," a degradation perhaps best expressed by Hemingway's character Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, who says, "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. [. . .] Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene" (184, 185).<sup>24</sup> Because the legitimacy of these terms

and their signified “verities” cannot be rationally established, they will not regain their vitality through commonplace reasoning and discourse. Rather, they must be called forth in a kind prophetic rhetoric, a form of speaking that evokes a seemingly fideistic response, lacking any articulable defense or justification. The sermonic, oracular style that Faulkner often employs is for the purpose of evoking the verities that have been denied existence. In fact, it is silence regarding these verities—that is, the unwillingness to give them articulation—that fails to bring them into being, for their existence is inextricably joined to language itself. The only refutation that Faulkner and Grassi give and find necessary is the proof of renewed import that the words, once invoked, bring back into society.

What Grassi speaks about philosophically, Faulkner, through his characters, wrestles with in his art. The origins of what can be considered *the human* are in the open realm of words, a realm “precariously and [...] only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane “of silence (Faulker, *The Sound and the Fury* 335).<sup>25</sup> Humane existence, then, is a frail endeavor, for it is reliant upon little more than passing sounds. This disturbing reality lurks behind Faulkner’s own discomfort with his medium and its potential as (the) humanizing artifice, an unease seen especially in the characters of Quentin Compson in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Addie Bundren and her three oldest sons in *As I Lay Dying*, and Gail Hightower in *Light in August*. Ernesto Grassi’s theorizing about language, noticeably similar to what lies behind Faulkner’s narratives, proves helpful in making sense of the characters’ fates—their tragic, passionate, and necessary existence in humanity’s ongoing history—and their creator’s own aesthetic shift from his earlier to his later works.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The opening phrase of my title is found in Grassi’s essay “The Underivedness of the Spoken Word” (24). There Grassi writes, “Meaningless sound is sound that remains unheard and, precisely because of this, is unsettling; unrevealing light is terrifying. Every organic being is preoccupied with what his organs announce and with what appears; he wavers between chaos and cosmos” (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Allen Tate writes of his acquaintance with Faulkner:

I suppose the main source of my annoyance with him was his affectation of not being a writer, but a farmer; this would have been pretentious even had he been a farmer. But being a “farmer,” he did not “associate” with writers—with

the consequence that he was usually surrounded by third-rate writers or just plain sycophants. I never heard that he was a friend of anybody who could conceivably have been his peer. (274-5)

<sup>3</sup> This is one of Heidegger's many famous declarations, found near the beginning of his essay "What Are Poets For?"

<sup>4</sup> In "Italian Humanism and Heidegger's Thesis of the End of Philosophy," Grassi acknowledges and borrows Heidegger's coinage "house of Being" (12) as an accurate definition of language.

<sup>5</sup> I believe that Farrell would be only more disturbed by my drawing out further similarities between Grassi and Heidegger. Farrell bitterly writes of that era in which the two men were publishing, identifying its influence as resulting from merely "a vast pathetic fallacy. Old European men projecting their world-weary pessimism upon the captioning of their age. 'Only a God can save us now,' quoth Heidegger. Indeed" (99).

<sup>6</sup> Grassi uses the terms *passion* and *passionate* to connote meanings more in line with the philosophic tradition; hence, they are to indicate something more akin to suffering than to fervor or zeal, as they often suggest in contemporary usage. Whereas the modern connotation invokes images of activity and agency, the traditional connotes just the opposite.

<sup>7</sup> The contextual nature of meaning is evident. To continue with our example, we might wonder what the meaning of the sensation of water will be to the desert nomads once they have quenched their thirst.

<sup>8</sup> Note the implicit chronology in Grassi's speculations. The theory assumes development that has on one side the "nonverbal" being and on the other side the "sound-producing" being.

<sup>9</sup> In light of our attempts to connect Grassi to Faulkner, the following quote from *Rhetoric as Philosophy* is especially relevant: "It is certainly no coincidence that, by means of the definitive aspects of the sacred and their parallelism with the organic, the Greeks joined to celebrate the cycle of the organic in cults like those of Demeter" (106). Of course, the Demeter myth occupies Faulkner's imagination throughout his career, exerting its greatest influence through Addie's character in *As I Lay Dying*.

<sup>10</sup> Here Farrell's complete "parting shot" is worth including: "The last chapter gives the game away. In a world absent hope, Grassi wants religion. So do I. But I still remember a rhetor who once put the matter (dare I say?) eloquently: 'Here on this world, God's work must truly be our own'" (102).

<sup>11</sup> For Grassi, the counterpart to rhetoric is rational speech.

<sup>12</sup> Tragedy is Grassi's assessment of the human condition throughout his

works, but it nowhere more evident than in his essay “The Theater as a Model for the Tragedy of Existence.”

<sup>13</sup> Both Grassi and Faulkner hold language as a microcosm for general human(izing) arts, which are able to go beyond what humanity can know without such accommodations. Feibleman, introducing the boundlessness of the capacity of the human imagination, writes, “What-is is obviously part of what-could-be, but only part. [ . . . ] The possibilities are infinite, and actuality samples only some of them” (479). And in “Aesthetic Objects and Works of Art,” Dorothy Walsh writes in terms that echo Faulkner and Grassi’s shared conception of art’s rhetorical purpose: “It is neither an accident nor an error that so many theories about art have stressed expression, and even if we hold the view that to refer to all art as a kind of language involves an over-stretched use of the word ‘language,’ we nevertheless recognize what is meant [in its usage]” (11).

<sup>14</sup> It must also be acknowledged that even this new condition (unharmd) exists only as the derived negation of its opposite (harmd). Innocence, or unharmd-ness, like virginity, can only be known after it is lost.

<sup>15</sup> Many critics have noted that the predominant denominations of Christianity in the American South during Faulkner’s time were Baptist and Methodist. But the two sects of the religion that appear most prominently in his imaginative works are Calvinism (Presbyterianism) and Roman Catholicism. On an aesthetic level, Faulkner’s sensibilities clearly moved him to despise the former and to desire the latter. But both added to and illuminated his understanding of language and the word/Word.

<sup>16</sup> In a letter of apology to Hemingway, Faulkner writes, “I have believed for years that the human voice has caused *all human ills* and I thought I had broken myself of talking” (Brodsky 96, emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> On page 97 of his essay, Heidegger includes the entire poem. A relevant excerpt from Rilke’s verse follows:

we, more eager than plant or beast,  
go *with* this venture, will it, adventurous  
more sometimes than Life itself is, more daring  
by a breath [ . . . ]. (6-9)

One can also detect parallels to Grassi’s notion of human freedom as being that which both *separates* humanity from its organic unity, distinguishing it from other organic beings, and *compels* it to speak. Freedom necessitates acts of the will.

<sup>18</sup> Although Verene identifies “Heideggerian” and “Humanist” sides to Grassi’s thought (Crusius xiii), perhaps it would be more accurate to consider both sides as “Heideggerian,” with Grassi’s Freiburg colleague and teacher divided on the general

character of Western philosophy—i.e., whether the Western philosophic tradition allows for a Humanistic strain.

<sup>19</sup> I recognize a certain ambiguity in the construction of this sentence. The ambiguity is that one might, if successful in the quest for reconciliation through language, gain some deep awareness of nothing. Moreover, those who do speak are constantly negotiating some balance between humanity's union with nothingness and humanity's avoidance of its awareness.

<sup>20</sup> An example of Grassi's consideration of a Hebrew text can be found in his "The Lament of Ecclesiastes." Because of his interest in the Christian Humanistic tradition, several of his essays take up Christian themes. An example of a particular essay that does so is "History Without Myth," in which Grassi examines Paul's fundamental transformation in the New Testament of the terms "fool" and "wisdom" in the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Wisdom.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard offers this term as an alternative to the term *communication*, which he feels has been degraded into nothing more than *information*, that capable of only bringing "about a relationship between things already in existence" (24).

<sup>22</sup> Joseph R. Uργο, in *Faulkner's Apocrypha: A Fable, Snopes, and the Spirit of Human Rebellion*, takes to heart Faulkner's description of his body of works as an "apocrypha." In doing so, he offers much insight into Faulkner's understanding of his own project and the novelist's latent rebellion against Southern orthodoxies.

<sup>23</sup> *Aphasia* is the inability to articulate speech resulting from some cerebral trauma. Again, "speaking" is to be read as an engagement in broader symbolic exchange; thus, aphasia, as I am using the term, can mean an inability to participate in human(izing) conventions.

<sup>24</sup> George Monteiro points out the similarities between Faulkner's Nobel speech and the words of Hemingway's character, Frederic Henry (see "Faulkner-Hemingway" 83). Monteiro also writes, "It is unlikely that Faulkner would have missed Archibald MacLeish's essay, in *Life* magazine in 1940, criticizing postwar writers, like Hemingway, for devaluing the 'old verities'" (91, note 40).

<sup>25</sup> I have appropriated Faulkner's description of Quentin's conception of honor as imagined in Caddy's (lost) virginity. The tenuous and temporary nature of silence seems analogous to honor understood in this way.

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