



**HAL**  
open science

## History and Family Stories in Faulkner from Absalom, Absalom! to The Mansion

Jacques Pothier

► **To cite this version:**

Jacques Pothier. History and Family Stories in Faulkner from Absalom, Absalom! to The Mansion. Javier Coy & Michel Gresset. Faulkner and History, Universidad de Salamanca, pp.181-195, 1986, Ensayos y textos de Filología Moderna. halshs-00769657

**HAL Id: halshs-00769657**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00769657>**

Submitted on 12 Feb 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

SEPARATA  
DEL LIBRO

# FAULKNER and History

---

HISTORY AND FAMILY STORIES IN FAULKNER FROM  
*ABSALOM, ABSALOM! TO THE MANSION*

JACQUES POTHIER



SALAMANCA  
1986

12. HISTORY AND FAMILY STORIES IN FAULKNER FROM  
*ABSALOM, ABSALOM! TO THE MANSION*

Jacques Pothier

However much Faulkner claimed to have fought in the Great War, it was not a personal experience to him. He had not completed his training as an RAF pilot when "they... stopped the war on him"<sup>1</sup>. His failure to step into history as a war hero may have conditioned his conversion to fiction. After he failed to become an instrument of history—even through the fiction of his war experience which he kept alive with dwindling eagerness—he turned history into an essential instrument of his fiction: I intend to show how historical events were brought to interfere with family stories, i. e. relationships between fathers and children.

Readers and critics have often assumed that one of the purposes of the fiction was to signify aspects of the history of the South. Faulkner often denied that he meant to symbolize anything. He would say: "the people to me come first. The symbolism comes second"<sup>2</sup>. Indeed it is hard to believe that "symbolism" always came second when we think of *A Fable*. But if the writer had a "sort of a filing cabinet" or "lumber room"<sup>3</sup> of symbols, history certainly provided a lot of that material, along with the Old Testament and literature.

In *Soldiers' Pay*, the First World War background was more personal and literary than historical, and it was just a backdrop anyway. In *Sartoris*, historical events in the South and the history of Faulkner's own family had a larger part, but such borrowings are certainly not unusual in literature.

1. The statement refers to Julian Lowe in *Soldiers' Pay* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 7.

2. *Faulkner in the University*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1959), p. 117.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 103, 109, 116-7, etc.

In *Requiem for a Nun*, Faulkner introduced the historical dimension of his novel through three preambles meant to "give [the drama sections] the contrapuntal effect which comes in orchestration"<sup>4</sup>. The counterpoint device had always been used in the choice of his titles. One of the earliest examples of such a title might well be "Father Abraham", the abortive early draft of the Snopes legend. No mention of Abraham occurred in the text, and so the reader was left free to imagine the connection with the story of Flem Snopes.<sup>5</sup>

The contrapuntal allusion sounds more biblical than historical. Yet J. Blotner points out that when Faulkner met Sherwood Anderson, he had been working on a biography of Lincoln which was to have the same title: "Father Abraham"<sup>6</sup>. Faulkner may have thought of the title as a homage to Anderson who had encouraged him to use his native country as the setting for his fiction. But as *Sartoris* explicitly compares Flem Snopes to Abraham—the patriarch—the allusion must be to the Old Testament story he avowedly liked very much: "I like all of it. They were scoundrels and blackguards and doing the best they could, just like people do now"<sup>7</sup>. The distinction between History and the Bible may be less important than we could expect if we remember that the history of the family was traditionally recorded by the head of the family in the family Bible—a tradition which Faulkner continued.

Abraham is also mentioned in a novel which I intend to deal with in a little more detail now: *Absalom, Absalom!* The title is puzzling, but Faulkner often explained that it emphasized the parallel between the story of David and his sons in Second Samuel, and his story of "a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many of them and they destroyed him"<sup>8</sup>. To the best of my knowledge, Sutpen is never explicitly compared to David, but he *is* compared to Abraham, in a rather humorous way: Shreve draws a parallel between old Sutpen not paying his debts to his past and old

4. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

5. "Father Abraham" was not completed, so the comparison might have occurred later in the text; but the next draft was complete, and the title, "Abraham's Children", seems even less justified. The "Father Abraham" manuscript in the Arents Collection at New York Public Library was edited by James B. Meriwether and published in 1983. Fragments of "Father Abraham" and versions of "Abraham's Children" (unpublished) are kept at the University of Virginia Library.

6. See J. Blotner, *Faulkner, A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), p. 527. Anderson's unfinished "Father Abraham" was published in *The Sherwood Anderson Reader*, ed. Paul Rosenfeld, pp. 530-602, as "Father Abraham: A Lincoln Fragment".

7. *Faulkner in the University*, pp. 285-6. See *Sartoris* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1929), p. 172; and *Flags in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 154.

8. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. J. Blotner (New York, Vintage Books, 1976), p. 84.

Abraham relying on his sons to complete his work<sup>9</sup>. The humorous, apocryphal misappropriation of the Old Testament is in keeping with Shreve's detached view of history: "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theater, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it" (p. 217). But Faulkner himself referred to the Old Testament in no less secular terms, as we have seen.

The comparison of Sutpen with King David is richer: David's sons killed each other, and David refused to see Absalom although he had recalled him; so in a sense he was not brave enough to complete his work. In the novel, Charles Bon begins to court Judith, and Sutpen, when he has made sure that Bon is his son, tries to get Henry to prevent the incest for him. Henry, whose feeling for Bon is very deep, struggles for justifications for not acting to stop his friend: he reaches for a historical reference. Here again, a parallelism is drawn between the use of History and the manipulation of the Bible. Shreve imagines

*Henry citing himself authority for incest, talking about his Duke John of Lorraine as if he hoped possibly to evoke that condemned and excommunicated shade to tell him in person that it was all right, as people both before and since have tried to evoke God or devil to justify them in what their glands insisted upon* (p. 346).

But the historical precedents do not satisfy him. Fortunately, Henry and Bon get involved in the Civil War, which they expect will make the decision for them. So historical events have two functions: like the Bible, they provide the protagonists with vantage points on their present dilemmas; unlike the Bible, though, history is also present and future in Faulkner—as Michael Millgate remarked<sup>10</sup>—and so it can actually (Ratliff would aptly say "actively") solve the characters' dilemmas without their becoming involved. Basically, the writer comments, the process is the same:

*[N]either Henry and Bon, anymore than Quentin and Shreve, were the first young men to believe... that wars were sometimes created for the sole aim of settling youth's private difficulties and discontents* (p. 336).

On the other hand, as it is only in Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of the past that history is used as a solution to parental conflicts, their use

9. *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 325. Hereafter, all page references will appear in the text.

10. Michael Millgate, "Faulkner and History", in *The South and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha*, ed. Evans Harrington & Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), p. 32.

of the Civil War actually reflects Henry's use of earlier history at another level. History appears as the creation of the living to fulfill personal needs or wishes.

For instance, Shreve's recreation of the drawing room in the house of Bon's mother becomes part of history as far as he and Quentin are concerned, and is "probably true enough" (p. 335). —I need not dwell on how much Faulkner preferred truth to facts.

Faulkner himself said that he read history "exactly as [he did] fiction, because it's people, man, in motion"<sup>11</sup>. He confessed that in *Absalom, Absalom!* he "used the Civil War for [his] own ends"<sup>12</sup>. He felt as free to tap history and the Bible as to move his characters about; although he could occasionally prove extremely particular about factual details.<sup>13</sup>

The protagonists' use of history reflects the author's. But while the author, the narrators and the protagonists can use the same historical event for their own ends, the function of the event cannot be the same, as their needs are not the same. Which further helps to show that history is essentially subjective.

The legend of Absalom was a model of double meaning here: it was not only the story of a family conflict —the rebellion of Absalom against his father— but also a political episode, the revolt of part of the Jewish people against the central power.

In the novel, Bon's agony is that his father refuses to acknowledge him; his situation is not as tragic as Joe Christmas's because he hopes to get his father to signify his identity. He would be content with "a lock of his hair or a paring from his finger nail" (p. 326). More strikingly, he may have started writing to Judith only to provide Sutpen with an opportunity to return one of his letters unopened: a suppression, prohibition of signs would be enough to signify: to him, "No" becomes the key to the whole language. His strategy is one of provocation, to force his father to play his part: voicing the law, which is essentially prohibition.

Whereas the father remains silent, Bon is flooded with his half-brother's speeches<sup>14</sup>. But as long as no word comes from the father, he is nothing.

11. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 251.

12. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 73.

13. Compare the preface to *The Mansion* with a letter "to A. Erskine [early Mar. 1959]": "Research. What day of the month was the last *Thursday* in September, 1946? Insert this correct date in the blank space, in chapter 16, of the day of Mink's liberation from Parchman" (*Selected Letters*, p. 425).

14. Bon desperately tries to use Henry as a substitute for his father: "say you do want me to go back to her. Maybe then I wont do it" (p. 345). But then Henry remains silent. Faulkner's fiction provides examples of brothers actually replacing fathers. In "Tomorrow", a woman's brothers decide to prevent her lover from marrying her. A witness points out that "they got the law" (*Knight's Gambit*, New York: Random House, 1949, p. 102).

Sutpen is not a satisfactory father to Henry either, if we are to believe Mr Compson when he suggests that Henry felt free to nourish incestuous desires toward his own sister, and that Sutpen nevertheless relied on him to prevent the incest between Bon and Judith.

Faulkner makes the climax of the crisis coincide with the beginning of the Civil War. According to Mr Compson, Henry and Bon expect the war to provide them with the figure of authority which their father would not be —a "Judge or Arbiter" (p. 124)— in the same way as Henry invoked the *authority* of historical precedents.

The war provides another pattern of symbolic father figures. For Sutpen, the failing patriarch, it substitutes another Abraham —Lincoln, i. e. Anderson's "Father Abraham"— who is very anxious to have his authority respected by the rebellious Absaloms of the South. The enemy is a "high father" —which is what *Abraham* originally means—, he stands up against the son's struggle for freedom, fulfilling the father's role. Sutpen, when he rejects the conflict with the son, is an *Absalom* —etymologically "the father is peace"— and so is Henry, who dreams of a symbiosis with Judith and Bon. So Bon is aware that the Yankees might do Henry's job —i. e., Sutpen's job— for him.

The father's failure to incarnate authority assumes amplified proportions for Bon just as all language seems to be summarized in the word "No". Faulkner dramatizes the situation to gothic proportions and Bon wants an extremely oppressive father as his own attempts to overthrow him build up.

So the revolt of the Confederation against the North is the counterpoint to the suppressed conflicts within the families of Southern aristocracy. The South is a country of failing fathers, of sons brought up in the imaginary world of Richards and Rolands —historical figures which embody wish-fulfilment, not the actual conflicts of life. The generals "should not have been generals, who were generals not through training... but by the divine right to say 'Go there' conferred upon them by and absolute caste system" (p. 345): they owe nothing to law or merit. To Faulkner, the Cavalier reigns in the Southern imagination, a projection out of literature, more than in the actual Southern social structure. Sutpen's Hundred embodies a myth, and Sutpen is hardly to blame for ignoring the value of the laws of the community in a society where the authority of the father is so mythical.

This is symbolically announced by the case of Goodhue Coldfield locking himself in his attic instead of confronting the crisis and being fed by his own daughter, to whom he has abdicated his authority.

That the North symbolizes the rule of law is also clear in *Requiem for a Nun*: in the first prologue, the community which is founding Jefferson declines to openly acknowledge that it has to obey the law of the federal

State which is recited to them by a mail-rider—that *mail* should sound like *male* may not be fortuitous—whose name is that of a historical father-figure: Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew. They think they pay their debt to the order of law by displacing the prohibition and turning it into the source of their identity: the town decides to call itself Jefferson. But in so doing, they do not necessarily take into account the symbolical function of the father and typically favor his imaginary function.<sup>15</sup>

In sharp contrast to those historical events that are appropriated by Faulkner's protagonists, others are but points of reference; in *Absalom, Absalom!* for instance, the battle of Bull Run is passed off with a careless "Bull Run had been fought" (p. 119) in which the use of the pluperfect makes the historical event sound particularly irrelevant to the story, as if, to use Faulkner's terms, it became WAS without ever being IS. In *The Mansion*, Faulkner has Charles Mallison make just as casual a reference to the surrender in Munich: "Then it was September, 1938... I was still or anyway again in Cambridge... Munich had been observed or celebrated or consecrated, whichever it was..."<sup>16</sup> The fact is isolated like a pre-ordained holiday on a calendar, which had no special reason for happening at that point to anyone and so did not concern anyone in the novel. The event has no reality.

There are historical links between *Absalom, Absalom!* and the Snopes trilogy, which *The Mansion* concludes. In the Civil War, the father's shallow authority was defeated. It left the door open for more efficient, law-minded father figures such as Flem Snopes, the "Father Abraham" I mentioned at the beginning of this study. In spite of the very different historical backgrounds, there are many parallel features in Sutpen and Flem Snopes. The traumatic experience which triggers off Sutpen's ambition resembles "Barn Burning", which Faulkner considered a possible induction to *The Hamlet*, together with "Wash"<sup>17</sup>. But whereas Sutpen, as a representative of Southern aristocracy, was discredited by History, Flem is a forerunner, the Abraham

15. See my paper at the First Faulkner Colloquium in Paris (1980) "Jefferson, From Settlement to City: The Making of a Collective Subject" in *William Faulkner, Materials, Studies and Criticism* (Tokyo: Nan'un-Do, April 1984). On the functions of the father, see Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire III: Les Psychoses* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 240.

16. *The Mansion* (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 207. Hereafter, all page references will appear in the text.

17. See Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 26. Other details, such as the fact that they both have a marble monument carved for them in Italy, might also be mentioned. Their common struggle for respectability was noticed early enough for Faulkner to deny the similarity. See *Faulkner in the University*, pp. 97-8. For further comparison, see Duane Edwards, "Flem Snopes and Thomas Sutpen: Two Versions of Respectability" in *Dalhousie Review* 51, 4 (Halifax: Winter 1971-2), pp. 559-570.

of the new mercantile middle class which has swept the South after the Civil War: while the Jeffersonians enjoy telling or hearing stories which are part of the slow, cyclical time of an agrarian society, he is silent, confident in the written records and shrewd enough to take advantage of the existing laws. In other words, history is no idle words for him. *The Hamlet* shows that the laws of the community condoned his morally unacceptable trade practice, whereas Sutpen was rejected by Jefferson. To take up the issue of family relations, there should not be much in common between Linda Snopes and Charles Bon. Bon is Sutpen's son, but he can never be sure, as Sutpen denies to acknowledge him; while Linda is not actually Flem's daughter and does not know it; obviously Flem would never acknowledge that either. So what Sutpen and Flem do have in common as regards their children is their failure to communicate with them: this silent, absent relationship is a central feature both in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Mansion*.

In both novels, the theme is at first presented in a minor key, which is in keeping with Faulkner's use of the technique of counterpoint. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, there was Goodhue Coldfield; in *The Mansion*, the First World War is the opportunity for Tug Nightingale to rebel against his father who kicks him out for joining what he calls the "Yankee Army". At the end of the comic vignette with literary as well as historical implications, the elder Nightingale dies, "killed, Uncle Gavin said, by simple inflexibility, having set his intractable and contemptuous face against the juggernaut of history... in 1865 and never flinched since" (p. 187).<sup>18</sup>

Flem does not quite ignore Linda as Sutpen had ignored Bon: he even knows how to turn a breach of his silence to his own advantage. He foresees that the first evidence he provides of a disinterested parental love will drive Linda to illimited gratitude as it is the first evidence that she exists for him. And there is nothing she can thank him with but what he so strongly desires from her—her share of her grandfather's estate. Symbolically, this could be interpreted as the males recovering the power lost to the unvanquished women by the failing fathers of the Old South, but Flem is obviously the representative of a very different class of men. Flem immediately takes advantage of Linda's will, which precipitates her mother's suicide. So we understand that she realizes what Flem was up to and by the end of the novel, she helps Mink to avenge her mother for her, just as Charles Bon had been trying to avenge his.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner had the Sutpen crisis coincide with the Civil War; in *The Mansion*, he has fascism rise in Europe and intole-

18. Nightingale's name is reminiscent of Keats's nightingale, a symbol of a past which does not die, "the warm South", as Keats puts it ("Ode to a Nightingale", in John Keats, *Poems*, London: Dent, 1944, p. 189).

rance rise in the States at the time when Linda goes to Greenwich Village<sup>19</sup>. There she lives some time with a communist Jew, Barton Kohl, whom she eventually marries. Her real father is present at the wedding. Whereas Bon had too few fathers, Linda has two; but Hoake McCarron, her natural father, introduces himself as "a old friend of her mother's family" (p. 174): he is therefore no more adequate than the legal father.

Immediately after the wedding, Linda goes to Spain, just as her mother, when Flem proved an impotent husband, became the faithful mistress of a real *man*, *Manfred de Spain*. So "the one in Spain" —i. e. Franco— seems to be the counterpart of Charles Bon's Yankee enemy. Of course Major de Spain is mentioned in works which were published before the Spanish Civil War took place, so this might be a particularly striking case of Faulkner reaching into his private "lumber-room" of history and finding a fresh war whose very location made it fit Linda Snopes's story because of the coincidence between *de Spain* and *Spain*.

Franco is no less oppressive a father figure to Linda than Lincoln had been to Bon and Henry; so much so that he leaves her mutilated. But where Donald Mahon lost his sight (in *Soldiers' Pay*), she loses her hearing. "The one in Spain" is so jealous that her husband is killed, and he is so noisy, as compared to silent Flem, that he bursts her ear-drums— not to mention that this was the organ through which she had been sensitive to Barton Kohl's call. So, as in the case of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the father's disruptive intervention, because much delayed, is all the more mutilating.

Linda's experience in the Spanish Civil War seems limited to this personal consequence: according to Charles Mallison, she has not even realized her camp has lost there. Having failed to find an adequate symbolic father, Linda returns home even more isolated than she had been. There had been hardly any possible communication with Flem; now it is impossible. She becomes "the bride of silence... forever safe, in that chastity forever pure, that couldn't have heard him if he had had anything to say to her" (p. 216).

Like Rosa Coldfield, she is deprived of a father-figure, then of all the other men around her<sup>20</sup>. She tries to establish a relationship with Gavin Stevens. But Gavin's only means of communication is talk—in that he resembles Henry Sutpen—and to communicate with Linda he has to restrict himself to what he can write quickly on tiny tablets. Linda is ready for a more physical relationship, but he declines to get involved in physical love or even in truth—like telling her whose daughter she actually is—and she is left to her virginity. Again history becomes the surrogate for a human relationship when she associates with two communist immigrants who have little command of the English language. She sets out to help with the Negroes' emancipations—like Joanna Burden in *Light in August*<sup>21</sup>. With arguments which look as if Faulkner carried the situation of the fifties, when the book was written, back to the late thirties, when it was supposed to take place, Gavin tries to get her to understand that her form of action is not appropriate, but besides being deaf, she seems to be blind. We are to learn later on that she has lost her sense of touch too.

More than Charles Bon's predicament did, Linda's struggle between a father who does not use his disruptive function, as he refuses to address her, and politics—history in the present—which she cannot grasp either brings us to consider the problem of language and the written word.

When studying the typescripts of *The Town* at the University of Virginia, one notices that the reverses of most pages are scribbled over with drafts of essays and open letters referring to the contemporary issues Faulkner was called upon or felt it his duty to take sides on, at a time when his fiction-writing had become slack. Stevens's scribbling on the ivory tablets, which carefully avoids getting involved in the issues concerning Linda, his neighbor, may be considered a self-deprecating and pessimistic reflection on Faulkner's own fringe activity as a Southern liberal, which, by the way, had all but stopped by 1959 when the novel was published. At the end of a decade of public addresses, Faulkner seems to

20. On Rosa Coldfield's struggle with the father-figure, see Robert Con Davis, "The Symbolic Father in Yoknapatawpha County" in *Journal of Narrative Technique* X, 1 (Winter 1980) pp. 39-55. What Davis writes about Rosa might equally apply to Linda:

*deprived of a strong father, she subsequently encounters men who do not perform the disruptive function she needs in order to break her virgin-like state... Virginity becomes for Rosa a kind of hermetic seal against the world* (p. 44).

21. It is interesting to compare Joanna to Linda (incidentally, both names sound Hispanic). Joanna's patronymic, *Burden*, emphasizes the inescapable weight of the word which signifies the father-figure—but she is from New England, the North, i.e. the country of strong father-figures. In the light of this precedent, Linda's commitment with colored people also obeys the law of the North. For a study of father figures in *Light in August*, see André Bleikasten, *Parcours de Faulkner* (Universités de Strasbourg, 1982), pp. 321-343: "La religion des Pères".

19. Historical chronology seems to be manipulated to make these events coincide: Eula dies in 1927. Only one year and a half after her head-stone is set, and anyway before 1936, Gavin Stevens talks about "that one already in Italy and one a damned sight more dangerous in Germany... And the one in Spain... not to mention the indigenous local champions like Long in Louisiana and our own Bilbo in Mississippi" (p. 160-1). Long was killed on September 8, 1935, one year before Franco started his mutiny and gained political prominence (July 18, 1936). In a typical anticipation of history not yet in the making, Stevens seems to think of Bilbo and Long as forerunners of the witch-hunt in the fifties.

conclude that this sort of writing can have no influence on the course of history; any involvement a writer may have is as a man doing his job of writing fiction.

The communists in *The Mansion* who "took it for granted that there was a proletariat in Jefferson as specific and obvious and recognisable as the day's climate" (p. 213) might be compared with other idealists, or millenarians, in Faulkner's fiction<sup>22</sup>. In *Go Down Moses*, Ike McCaslin offers another example of history manipulated in relation with a failure to identify one's role as a father-figure. Ike's theory on the defeat of the South, his desire to stop history to expiate the sin of his countrymen, covers up his denial of his role as a father.

The general scheme of troubled parental relationship which Faulkner develops by turning to history is reversed in *A Fable*. That there may be a family story behind the young corporal's revolt is revealed almost as an afterthought. However, the pattern which could be identified in *Absalom, Absalom!* seems to apply too. The corporal, like Charles Bon, is a foundling who manages to confront a father-figure in the historical opportunity of a war: in his case, it is the High Command. I think that his silence and paradoxical reverence when he should enjoy the unbelievable opportunity of opposing the father figure must be compared to Charles Bon's silent relationship with Sutpen. Only the Old General does explain his views and he can hardly be described as a failing father. The point is that in *A Fable*, the absent father and his substitute are the same, ambivalent person, acting as a father and as the embodiment of the High Command. Obviously the starting point of the novel was of a different kind from what it was for other novels: strikingly, Faulkner did not refer to it as a "germ" of the story, his usual phrase, but as an "argument"<sup>23</sup>. Referring to Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, Faulkner once said that "that Christ story is one of the best stories that man has invented", but it is part of the New Testament, which, he also said, was "full of ideas", and that was why he preferred the Old Testament, "because it's full of people, not ideas"<sup>24</sup>. The symbol, the idea seem to overwhelm the imaginary, the story, in the content as much as in the form of the novel. It is difficult for a reader with a Christian background to take the story of Christ as just another story; rather, he will take the novel as a new interpretation of the Passion

22. Cleanth Brooks, in "Faulkner and History" (*Mississippi Quarterly*, Spring 1972, XXV, Supplement, pp. 3-14) studies Faulkner's skepticism towards abstract theories and idealisms. Idealism, the impulse to explain history and appropriate it, is the opposite of Gail Hightower's attitude in *Light in August*: he escapes from present commitments into one fascinating event of his past. Opposite ways bring about the same outcome: a failure to adapt to a changing present.

23. "to Robert K. Haas" [15 Jan. 1944], in *Selected Letters*, p. 180.

24. *Faulkner in the University*, pp. 117, 167.

Week, one of the touchstones of Western religion. Even if the problem lies partly with the reader, just as in the story itself the father figure managed to come out strongly over the son, so in the novel the symbols overpower the imagination.

What many have called the failure of *A Fable*, implying in no way that it might be a "splendid failure", may be related to the fact that for once the "symbols" of history came first and the story came second.

This assessment can be compared to a peculiar feature in Faulkner's artistic credo: to him, there was a special relationship between history and fiction in the South. Even if it was partly meant as a joke, Faulkner once answered a question about why there was so much literary activity in Mississippi saying that

*the wisest thing any nation can do when it gets into... economic muddle is to pick out some rich nation and declare war, and get licked... The folks in the South write because the North has supported us ever since 1865. We had plenty of time to write.*<sup>25</sup>

This casual treatment of the theme of history and literature should be taken seriously. The South, which used to live in the economic and imaginary doldrums of its past because of faulting fathers, fights the North in a process of catharsis. As the North is much stronger, because it knows what history is about, the South is defeated. Then like Major Weddel, the Indian confederate officer in the short story "Mountain Victory", the Southerner can go home again. Major Weddel has decided that he does not have to come to terms with the words which make history, that he is free of the burden of meaning, as he thinks:

*Our lives are summed up in sounds and made significant. Victory. Defeat. Peace. Home. That's why we must do so much to invent meanings for the sounds, so damned much. Especially if you are unfortunate enough to be victorious... It's nice to be whipped; quiet to be whipped. To be whipped and to lie under a broken roof, thinking of home.*<sup>26</sup>

This last sentence seems to be a peaceful echo of "Carcassonne", the earlier story where an aspiring poet struggled between his dream and his skeleton. But the officer is going to get killed, and the story ends with the

25. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 280.

26. "Mountain Victory", in *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 766. On the burden of meaning, compare with note 21. The "broken roof" is reminiscent of "Carcassonne", *ibid.*, p. 895: "He lay beneath an unrolled strip of tarred roofing..."



image of the rifle which is about to shoot him becoming "a round spot... like a period on a page". Defeated by time and refusing to come to terms with the meaning of words, Major Weddel is virtually dead and it is logical that the period should come before one line was written: fiction is reduced to the "dying fall"! As M. Millgate puts it, to Faulkner, "it was even truer in temporal than in geographical terms that one could not go home again".<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the Civil War was potentially creative, it seems, according to Linda's experience, that the Spanish Civil War was not: mentioning the intellectuals who went there to fight, such as Hemingway or Malraux, she explains that however hard the experience may have been, "they hadn't been whipped and hadn't lost anything at all" (*Mansion* p. 217). To people like her or them, writing is useless. In her words, "What line or paragraph or even page can you compose and write to match giving your life to say No to people like Hitler and Mussolini?" (p. 218).

To come back to *Absalom, Absalom!*, Charles Bon's last letter to Judith provides another variation on the theme of creative defeat (pp. 129-132). Unexpectedly, more than half this letter is devoted to a detached, humorous meditation on the paper and stove polish which are its material components. The sheet of paper bears "the best of French watermarks dated seventy years ago, salvaged... from the gutted mansion of a ruined aristocrat": it is obviously a relic of the dead past. The stove polish is brand-new, made less than one year ago, in the North, symbolizing a faith in the future of civilization. The piece of writing is a symbolic instance of what the South can do: Bon's environment consists of a father who does not acknowledge him, a lawyer —i. e. a professional man of law, not a symbolic one: a father— who manipulates him, a mother he would like to avenge but he does not quite know how, a half-brother who continuously elaborates on his dream of reconciliation of the opposites. Bon, who has remained silent on all important issues so far, who seemed to have escaped into history, finds here the way of proposing to Judith while appropriating the history of the South and the absurd household goods which symbolise the society of progress that the North will promote, to which he gives a new use, a new meaning. These mere one thousand words are enough for the narrators in the novel to try to reconstruct the truth of this story so that it becomes far more meaningful to them than the facts of history could ever be. Judith, who had not treasured Bon's earlier letters, senses the value of this one and gives it to Quentin's grandmother with the wish that she could communicate it to "someone, the stranger the better". The letter sets off the narrators' interpretative activity. Mr. Compson's narrative,

27. Millgate, "Faulkner and History", p. 28.

though less remote from the facts or the protagonists of Sutpen's story than Quentin and Shreve's, fails in its interpretation: "It just does not explain" (p. 100). In the second half of the book, Quentin and Shreve take over, assuming the role of the father: "Maybe we are both Father"... (p. 261). As Robert Con Davis notes, "they recognize and seize... an interpretative authority that mediates between facts, morality, and imagination—the authoritative voice of fiction making".<sup>28</sup>

The sons have a way of making up for the failure of the fathers through fiction. In the longer draft for an introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner wrote that the Southern artist was "forced to choose... between being an artist and being a man"<sup>29</sup>. Major Weddel has the intuition of this choice and declines to make it. Charles Bon writes: and his writing is more meaningful to the reader than any history; Bon's letter is an example of the process of "distillation" to which the artist submits man's predicament to turn it into "the firmament of man's history instead of the mere rubble of his past".<sup>30</sup>

The process of clarification which is at the source of Southern fiction is made easier by the necessary leap from natural father to symbolic father figure: that leap entails a more mature use of the most important attribute of the Symbolic: a system of signifiers so independent from the actual world that it is fiction. But that signifier is not as isolated as its self-contained wholeness makes it seem; rather, it invites each reader to develop his own signification from his experience to attain his truth. The personal assumption of history is eventually closer to the truth than the fidelity to facts, just as telling the plain facts of a story in the rational, chronological order misses the point. Even if the narrator always reveals more about himself than about his subject, Faulkner tells us that "when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of the blackbird which I would like to think is the truth".<sup>31</sup>

At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner includes a Chronology, a Genealogy, and a map of Yoknapatawpha County, signed "William Faulkner, sole owner & proprietor". He seems to invite the reader to com-

28. Robert Con Davis, p. 45.

29. "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*", in *A Faulkner Miscellany*, ed. James B. Meriwether (University Press of Mississippi, 1974), pp. 156-161. In the first three pages, Faulkner defines the position of the Southern artist and to what extent his heritage "unconsciously" haunts him.

30. Millgate, p. 38 and *A Fable* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 161.

31. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 274.

pare his own achievement in creating his world to Sutpen's attempt with Sutpen's Hundred. Sutpen had tried—and failed—to build Sutpen's Hundred in spite of the social and historical environment which excluded such initiative. He wanted to be the absolute master of his domain, to use everybody as he wished. Like Sutpen's Hundred, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is a marginal appendix to the History of the South. He often referred to it as his "apocryphal county", as if he was writing an apocryphal appendix to the Bible of his native Israel<sup>32</sup>. As the failing fathers of the South had lost the command of reality to Yankee law, the Southerner was master only in the apocryphal world of his fiction. So Sutpen's Hundred may be a failure in the sense that Faulkner often referred to his best novel as his "most splendid failure". Literature was basically, organically related to failure, being, in Bon's words, "the voice of the defeated", that "puny inexhaustible voice" Faulkner referred to in the Nobel Prize Address.

Even if he claimed that "we aren't specifically concerned with [history]"<sup>33</sup>, history was first, a reason why fiction writing was so important to people like him, and second, one of the important devices he used to turn his stories into myth. He once acknowledged his debt to the pre-Elizabethans and the morality plays for his use of suggestive names<sup>34</sup>. There is of course something extremely modern in the central part the individual is called to play in his novels. But through the evocation of history, the distinct predicament of each man struggling to make his puny voice heard among the "sound and fury" of time manages to assume mythical dimensions: the macrocosm of history is submitted to the microcosm, and history becomes the myth of the common man.

This vision of history is not political; if it was, it would run against the marxist vision of man as a minor element in the interplay of economic forces which write history for him. The issue for the writer of fiction is not whether he should respect historical facts, but to what extent history should or can be used in fiction so that it reinforces its truth without threatening to crush it. Faulkner paved the way for novelists in other countries which had been defeated in the past, and many writers in countries which had undergone the domination of dictatorships or foreign powers took his cue. García Márquez turns historical events into elements in epic novels<sup>35</sup>. In a novel by the late Manuel Scorza, a living leader of the Peruvian left, Genaro Ledesma, lives alongside personified rivers which stop

32. Cowley, p. 25.

33. *Lion in the Garden*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Migllate (1968; rpt University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 280.

34. *Faulkner in the University*, p. 97.

35. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* could be an alternative title for both *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and *The Mansion*.

flowing in silent support of despoiled peasants<sup>36</sup>. The epic modern novel is now so strong a current that Indian born novelist Salman Rushdie—another great humorous story-teller like Faulkner—can afford to make fun of it. In *Midnight's Children*, the narrator says it is quite normal that his personal family story should alter the history of India, as they were born on the same day. The mythical treatment of simple stories through the contrapuntal use of history may be one of the most vivid parts of Faulkner's heritage today.

36. Manuel Scorza, *Garabombo el invisible* (Barcelona: Editorial Plaza y Janés, 1984). Genaro Ledesma becomes a central character in another novel of Scorza's epic cycle, *La guerra silenciosa: La tumba del relámpago* (México: Siglo XXI, Editores S.A., 1979).