Two American Dreamers in Faulkner's Fiction

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I

When William Faulkner started to write the story of the Sartoris clan and that of the Snopes family at the same time toward the end of 1926 or early in 1927, his imagination grasped the harsh historical transition Southern society had to face, a transition manifested in the rising to power of the poor white who was as low in the social scale as the black, and his mentor Phil Stone insists he gave that idea of the radical social change to the fledging author in the 1920s: "The core of the Snopes legend was [. . .] that the real revolution in the South was not the race situation but the rise of the redneck, who did not have any of the scruples of the old aristocracy, to places of power and wealth" (Brodsky and Hamblin 207).[1)] Concerning the historical background in which the author attempted to create *Father Abraham*, a novella primarily focusing on the rise of Flem Snopes, head of the family, Michael Grimwood makes a more impartial observation:

> Faulkner grew up during the so-called "rise of the rednecks," when poor-white electorates throughout the South transferred political power from aristocratic to plebeian hands. In Mississippi, where the populist trend lasted longer than anywhere else, the first decades of the century saw a shift in leadership from the gentlemanly, oratorical figures of traditional Southern politics to the iconoclastic, demagogic "New Men" who wore galluses and cultivated the idiom of the farmer's market—men like James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. ("The Man") Bilbo. Lafayette County boasted its full share of New Men, including one who succeeded Bilbo as governor. This was Lee M. Russell, a self-made lawyer from a poor farm family in a place called Dallas, a hamlet like Frenchman's Bend in the red-clay hills of its county's southeastern corner. (163)

Witnessing the social upheaval, a kind of usurpation for the aristocratic class, in those days, Faulkner indeed tried to put into fiction the idea of "the rise of the redneck" in *Father Abraham*, a vision which is ultimately shaped into the Snopes trilogy—*The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959).

It is important here to note the simultaneous conception in the author's mind of the tales of the declining patrician and the rising plebeian, a fact that suggests the shape of his antithetical imagination. This antithetical imagination, which can be considered the fundamental compositional principle in his oeuvre, also has a great deal to do with what Donald Kartiganer argues in the following passage: "For Southern writers the competing visions of the Old South and the modern world could become a fresh version of what [Allen] Tate regarded as the most harrowing, yet aesthetically fertile, historical examples of cultural conflict [. . .]" (Kartiganer 10). Indeed Faulkner had in his creative perspective the clashing of the opposing forces, the traditional and the modern, as we understand from not only the parallel conception of the stories of the Sartorises and the Snopeses but also the original story of the Sartorises, *Flags in the Dust*. For in this novel, readers find Byron Snopes working as a bookkeeper at Old Bayard's bank and living temporarily with I. O. Snopes. In addition, Flem Snopes is introduced in the novel as if he were "like Abraham of old," leading "his family piece by piece" into Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, where he serves as a "foothold" (154) for their incoming into town.[2)] Further, in *Father Abraham*, "something of a saga of an extensive family connection of typical 'poor white trash'"(Meriwether, "Introduction" 4), Flem is delineated in the same image at the very beginning of the novella: "He is a living example of the astonishing byblows of man's utopian dreams actually functioning; in this case the dream is Democracy. He will become legendary in time, but he has always been symbolic" (13). In Flem's introduction, we sense Faulkner's calm, objective gaze toward him as a byblow of American Democracy, a pursuer of the American Dream.

Meriwether also explains Faulkner's view as calmly as the author does: "At the time he wrote *Father Abraham*, Faulkner's attitude towards the Snopeses was very near to Stone's, and he probably shared to some extent Stone's aristocratic condescension towards 'rednecks' and 'poor white trash.' But the creator of Will Varner and V. K. Suratt, or even of Eck Snopes, already possessed a much broader, more sympathetic view of human nature and society than did Stone [...]" ("Introduction" 4-5). It is unmistakable that, as a descendant of a once aristocratic family, Faulkner, like Stone, personally felt a deep sorrow and regret about "a transition, the end of one age and the beginning of another," the radical social change he must have witnessed as a child in Oxford, Lafayette County. However, it seems, as a disciple of the high modernism led by T. S. Eliot and James Joyce early in the 1920s, Faulkner learned magnificently by the composition of *The Sound and the Fury* to render as impersonally as possible such a personal feeling as sorrow or regret.

Yet at the same time, we should listen to Faulkner's rather explicit personal feelings expressed in one of the two versions of the introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* that he wrote during the summer of 1933 for an edition of the work Random House tentatively planned and then cancelled, a longer version published in the *Mississippi Quarterly*, 26 (Summer 1973): "the South, as Chicago is the Middlewest and New York the East, is dead, killed by the Civil War. There is a thing known whimsically as the New South to be sure, but it is not the south. It is a land of Immigrants who are rebuilding the towns and cities into replicas of towns and cities in Kansas and Iowa and Illinois [. . .]"(157). The author's idea of the authenticity of Southern society on the basis of homogeneity is recognized even in his 1952 interview with a French graduate student, Loic Bouvard: "It's the only really authentic region in the United States, because a deep indestructible bond still exists between man and his environment. In the South, above all, there is still a common acceptance of the world, a common view of life, and a common morality" (*LG* 72). Faulkner's pride and faith in and preoccupation with the authentic South as conveyed by intrinsic essential elements of a region is more candidly manifested in his treatment of the two most typical American Dreamers in the whole of his fiction, Thomas Sutpen and Flem Snopes.

In the following discussion, we will first examine the difference in what those two American Dreamers seek for, then analyze the two facets of the author, Faulkner the traditional regionalist and Faulkner the modernist, and finally explore the nature and direction of his imagination in the creation of those dreamers.

II

Instigated by his traumatic experience at the plantation owner's mansion, an insult he feels at the black servant's order "never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (232), Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* formulates a design, instead of a direct retaliation, that would turn out to be the American Dream, a pursuit of "land and niggers and a fine house to combat them [the planters] with" (238). These three basic materialistic features Sutpen desires are what is necessary for the planter class in the slave economy: they are the traditional indispensable possessions for the rich upper class specifically in the agrarian Southern society. In this sense, Sutpen is so typical a traditionalist that his wish to acquire "land and niggers and a fine house" can be subsumed in the conventional framework of the social order in that his grand design serves in no way as a subversive factor in relation to the society but rather embodies the agrarian version of the American Dream. As Noel Polk

observes, "He comes to understand that in order to beat the system he must join it. He is thus the American Dream embodied [. . .]" (Polk, "Force" 53).

It is true that Sutpen was marginalized as an enemy and outsider in Jefferson at first when he arrived with "his band of wild niggers" (8) in Yoknapatawpha County in 1833, acquired a hundred square miles of land from Indians, and married Ellen Coldfield, the daughter of "a man of uncompromising moral strength" (82) and Methodist steward, in 1838. Gradually, however, he becomes a respectable member of the society and finally rises up to the top of the social hierarchy as "the biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county" (72) about 1858, just before the Civil War. Thus he can be considered to have realized the American Dream at least at this time of constructing the Sutpen dynasty.

Of course he is ruthless in pursuing his design, as is shown in his repudiating his former wife and child in Haiti because he "found that she was not and could never be [. . .] adjunctive or incremental to the design" (240) because of her black blood; in his marrying Ellen in order to obtain, so it seems to Mr. Compson, one of the narrators, "the two names, the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law, on the license, the patent" (51)—as it were, nuptial assets which Sutpen calculates help to enhance his "respectability" (15) in the antebellum community bound by rigid class distinctions; and in suggesting to Rosa Coldfield, Ellen's sister, that their marriage be conditional upon her bearing a male heir. His treatment of the people close to him is indeed so ruthless and inhuman that it seems natural that Rosa "in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now" (7) should call him "demon" (13, et al.), continuing to hate and curse him as a medium of the main cause of her misery and of the collapse of the Coldfield family, and as a damnable vehicle of "the current of retribution and fatality" (269) for the entire South.

Still, strangely enough, Sutpen's ruthlessness and inhumanity seems to be wholly subsumed into the idea that "Sutpen's trouble was innocence" (220), and this idea has the miraculous effect of minimizing Sutpen's moral faults which mirror the moral defects of Southern society, and even absolving him of them. Like that of the society, his own pursuit of an agrarian version of the American Success Dream is directed by "the one-drop-rule" (Williamson, *New People* 73) which Joel Williamson explores as a systematized prohibition of miscegenation in the South, and which is a reflection of "colorphobia"(Meier 181), an obsession with the color line. Further, Sutpen is a faithful follower of patriarchal values—the importance of a male heir for the sustenance of genealogy and the blind faith in the hierarchized structure of the plantation society, which would not doubt the social justification

of the planter's sexual exploitation of women, white and black, in a lower social scale, exploitations as inscribed in the bodies of Clytie whom Sutpen fathers with a black slave and of a newborn girl of Milly Jones, the granddaugher of a poor white, Wash Jones, who, seduced by Sutpen and giving birth to a daughter, is treated indifferently as if she were a mare. As Faulkner explains in an interview, Sutpen "violated all the rules of decency and honor and pity and compassion" (*FU* 35) to establish and maintain a dynasty.

In spite of these ruthless treatments of the people close to him, Sutpen seems to be not so much the object of the narrators' and readers' contempt or antagonism as that of their pity or sympathy partly because his "innocence" is emphasized with repeated references to the "mistake" he insists he made during the course of pursuing his design. Thus his innocence, signifying blindness, is revealed as a sheer ignorance of his moral faults and of his place in the historical, social situation: "With only a minimal sense of history, he believes not only that he can escape his past but that he can control his future" (Polk, "Force" 54). In addition, partly because the rise and fall of the Sutpen family is shown to project the epitomized general history of Southern society, he is free to a great extent, though not entirely, of the reader's as well as the narrators' condemnation.

Miss Rosa, who, experiencing a "psychological rape" (Wadlington 211) by Sutpen, keeps on calling him a demon, still cannot but admit that he possessed "the stature and shape of a hero" (19) deserving the "heroic poetry" (68) she writes about Confederate greys "as the town's and the county's poetess laureate" (11). Mr. Compson regards Sutpen as a protagonist playing on the stage of the tragic drama of fate, as we know from the narrator's explanation of him as a figure fooled by fate: "he was unaware that his flowering was a forced blooming too and that while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager, call him what you will—was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one" (72-73). Such a gaze as Mr. Compson's, though cool and cynical, serves to give the impression that Sutpen's inhumanity can be dissolved in his heroic fight against fate. Both Quentin Compson and his Canadian roommate at Harvard, Shreve McCannon, are primarily concerned with the psychological, triangular relationship of Henry and Judith Sutpen and their half brother Charles Bon. The young narrators' romantic concern helps, in the latter half of the novel starting from Chapter VI, to shift the story's emphasis from Sutpen to his children as tragic victims of his monomaniacally egocentric pursuit of his dream.

III

"Fashioning for himself an identity that is the precise opposite of the old planter ideal" (Singal 247), Flem Snopes in contrast to Sutpen is no doubt shown to stand at the vanguard of modernism which can often be a subversive force in relation to social tradition, and which Robert Penn Warren defines "as the enemy of the human, as abstraction, as mechanism, as irresponsible power, as the cipher on the ledger or the curve on a graph" (Warren 79). It is true that, as Faulkner observes in an interview, Flem "had a certain aim which he intended to attain. He would use whatever tools necessary with complete ruthlessness to gain that end, and if he had to use respectability, he would use that" (*FU* 130). In this sense, his marriage with Eula Varner, the daughter of Will Varner, the boss of Frenchman's Bend, is intended just like Sutpen's to gain respectability to form a scaffold for his social advancement. Further we may concede that there is some truth in Polk's cool, sympathetic analysis: "We probably know many people who have done what Flem did, perhaps by being more dishonest than Flem ever was [...]. Yet how many of them deserve to die by an assassin's bullet? Flem, I would insist, has done nothing to make him deserve his execution" (Polk, "Idealism" 117). His execution by his cousin Mink's bullet in *The Mansion*, to be sure, may be out of proportion to what he did at least on the surface.

Here we should recall Faulkner's explanation of Flem in *Father Abraham*: "He is a living example of the astonishing byblows of man's utopian dreams actually functioning; in this case the dream is Democracy. He will become legendary in time, but he has always been symbolic" (13). In a democratic regime, one can be as legally shrewd as Flem in outwitting others, as typically manifested in the tale of his deceiving V. K. Ratliff, Henry Armstid, and Odum Bookright at the end of *The Hamlet* by the trick of salting the Old Frenchman Place with buried money. Also, one can be as shrewd, avaricious, and even ruthless as Flem in *The Town*, in which, taking advantage of his wife Eula's long-time affair with the mayor Manfred de Spain, Flem succeeds in ousting de Spain from the bank, installing himself as president, and finally moving into the ex-president's mansion. In addition, he dupes her daughter Linda, by the paternalistic pretension, into agreeing to handing over to him whatever inheritance she would get from her mother. These villainous plots of Flem's would surely be labeled "the Unpardonable Sin," an austere idea Nathaniel Hawthorne presents in his short story, "Ethan Brand" (1850), but still might not be culpable in a society run by the democratic principle of competition: he is, in effect, "a living example of the astonishing byblows of man's utopian dreams actually functioning" in society around us.

Yet we should also heed the discursive implication, "he has always been symbolic" : he is represented as a symbol of his region and age, a hamlet called Frenchman's Bend and primarily the first decade of the twentieth century. At the same time, however, he functions symbolically beyond them, just as Eula is described in the same vein, local and universal, as Lewis Simpson shows in a superb interpretation of the apparently ill-matched couple: "in the context of Faulkner's subtle parody of pastoral, he may be an instance of Pan transformed into the devil" and "Eula is more than a nymph; she is potentially an earth goddess" (Simpson 56, 57). Flem's symbolic role as an embodiment of a radically innovative social drive is shown in an episode of Flem's father Ab's disappearance from the development of the main story of the Snopeses and in turn his son's appearance as a clerk at Will Varner's store in the first volume of the Snopes trilogy : Ab, humiliated by the loss in the horse trading game with Pat Stamper in "Fool About a Horse" (1936),[3] is substantially removed from the trilogy, only reminisced about by Ratliff and other members of the community, while Flem, taking advantage of the greed and fear of Jody, Will's son, outwits him in handling the store, finally becoming Will's son-in-law. This hegemonic alternation between father and son in the rise of the family not only indicates the decline of "the honor and pride of Yoknapatawpha County horse-trading" (*The Hamlet* 36) as personified in Ab, but also predicts the exorbitant pursuit of mammonism by Flem, who is wholly indifferent to such traditional values as honor and pride. Wesley Morris's observation on "a form of trade or barter rapidly being displaced by a system of money exchange" (125) is to the point concerning the different sense of value of Ab and Flem, a typical drama in which occurs the expulsion of the old by the new, a symbolic patricide.

IV

We have so far examined the difference in the portrayal of two American Dreamers in Faulkner's fiction, Flem Snopes and Thomas Sutpen, and then of Flem and his father. As we may understand from the examination, Faulkner seems to be overwhelmingly sympathetic toward Sutpen and Ab, who both continue to conform to the traditional agrarian framework of values rather than toward Flem, a covertly aggressive encroacher on it. In terms of patricide, however, Sutpen commits this, too, though to a lesser degree, when he leaves his poor white family after the traumatic insult at the plantation mansion exactly as does Flem. If we see them both as patricides in their unflinching endeavor to realize the myth of the American Success Dream, then we can imagine that Faulkner may have had more complex feelings than hatred or antagonism toward Flem, because the author himself once played a similar drama of

patricide on the stage of American literary history. Just as Hemingway composed *The Torrents of Spring* as a satire on Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, so Faulkner wrote a sarcastic introduction, parodying his mentor's "primer-like style" (*ESPL* 6), to *Sherwood Anderson & Other Famous Creoles*, a book of caricatures of New Orleans literary celebrities, on which he collaborated with his New Orleans friend, William Spratling: both Hemingway and Faulkner, acutely aware of the weaknesses of American writers of one generation earlier including Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, tried to overcome their provincialism, "the sense of fumbling and clumsiness" (*FU* 229) in Faulkner's eyes, which was conspicuously highlighted by the cosmopolitan scene, the phenomena of the innovative literary movement which such writers of high modernism as James Joyce or T. S. Eliot had been leading in Europe. In the process of having connection, though not necessarily physical but spiritual, with a modernist movement prevalent in the early 1920s, Faulkner, as well as Hemingway and other American modernists like John Dos Passos or E. E. Cummings, conducted a murder of "the father of my generation of American writers and the tradition of American writing" (*LG* 249), a symbolic ritual of patricide, only to emerge as an avant-garde, a vanguard of modernism in American letters.

We can imagine, then, why Faulkner made strenuous efforts to make Flem "symbolic," not an ordinary character embodying the American Dream at a humble level. Thinking of the characterization of Flem, the author may have imaged himself as a rebel against some part of "the tradition of American writing" and intended to project himself as a thoroughly inverted dark figure into that characterization: by "inverted" I mean that only in terms of the revolt against the traditional, "agents of change" (Singal 245), Faulkner stands in the same position as does Flem, but, needless to say, their creative power is put into practice in the opposite direction. In other words, the higher he can raise the degree of Flem's symbolic function as a villain as with Popeye in *Sanctuary*, the more safely he can distance himself from the villainous Snope and sublimate the disgust he feels personally toward those like him, specifically Joe Parks whom Flem is said to be modeled on and who, as "the leader in the move to squeeze John [W. T. Falkner, the writer's grandfather] out of control of his own bank" in 1920, "represented the avaricious 'redneck' " (Williamson, *Faulkner* 194) in Faulkner's eyes. If Parks, like Flem, is "a living example of the astonishing byblows of man's utopian dreams," an ambitious product of American democracy, then Faulkner as a writer would have no alternative but to take the example for granted and try to make him as symbolic a figure as possible to change his chagrin into creativity. His success in creating the figure indicates a triumph of

such abundant creativity in the author that his antithetical imagination could deploy the conflicting forces, the traditional and the modern, in varied ways in the Yoknapatawpha saga.

Notes:

1) Cf. John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence* (New York: Trident Press, 1963), 270; Robert Cantwell, "The Faulkners: Recollections of a Gifted Family," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1960), 58-59; Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974), 528.
2) It is clear from the following description in *Flags in the Dust* of the outline of Flem's whole career that the author already had in mind the portrait of Flem as a usurper of the aristocratic social hegemony: "Flem himself was presently manager of the city light and water plant, and for the following few years he was a sort of handy-man to the city government; and three years ago, to old Bayard Sartoris' profane surprise and unconcealed disapproval, he became vice-president of the Sartoris bank, where already a relation of his was a book-keeper" (154).
3) In "Fool About a Horse," a short story probably written about 1935 and published in *Scribner's Magazine* (August 1936), both the narrator and his father are not identified, though the narrator is closer to Suratt, the character from whom V. K. Ratliff derives, than to Flem. In *The Hamlet*, however, into which an episode of the trading game between the father and Pat Stamper is inserted, Ratliff as a former neighbor of Ab Snopes narrates the episode which, by Faulkner's imaginative revision, turns out to be the one concerning Ab and Pat.

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