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Jacques Pothier

Black Laughter : Poor White Short Stories Behind *Absalom, Absalom !*and *The Hamlet* .

There is something puzzling about Faulkner's well known statement on the genesis of *The Hamlet,*part of a letter to Malcolm Cowley — « I wrote an induction toward the spotted horse story, which included BARN BURNING and WASH, which I discovered had no place in that book at all »[1]: There is no trace of Wash Jones's story in *The Hamlet*, while of course « Barn Burning » is at least summed up in *The Hamlet,* so what could Faulkner mean when he wrote this ?

He did not have to be claiming that « Wash » was at any time part of the Snopes material, but he could be saying that there was some common material behind *The Hamlet* and *Absalom, Absalom !* in so far as it first surfaced in the same short stories. At the University of Virginia, Faulkner was asked to compare Flem Snopes and Sutpen, and answered that « only Sutpen had a grand design. Snopes's design was pretty base — he just wanted to get rich, he didn't care how. Sutpen wanted to get rich only incidentally. He wanted to take revenge for all the redneck people against the aristocrat who told him to go around to the back door. »[2] In its basic motivations, Sutpen's story is close to that of Wash Jones. A similar identity crisis occurs in « Barn Burning, » a story focused on young Colonel Sartoris Snopes in which the little boy sees his father being barred from entering the big house by a black servant.[3]Unlike Sutpen, the Snopes boy does not decide to become the rich landowner and runs away into the woods, never to be heard of again.

The first page of the manuscript working draft of « Wash » in the Brodsky collection puts this scene of frustration in sharp relief.[4] The time is the end of the Civil War, and the house-slaves laugh at Wash who lives in a shack Sutpen would not let them have, but they defend the back entrance to the big house which the master never let Wash cross when he was at home. In the final version, the passage is moved to the second section of the story, but with more developments on the blacks' laughing : they seem « to surround him still with that black laughing, derisive, evasive, inescapable,

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[1]Joseph L. Blotner, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), 197.

[2]*Faulkner in the University*, Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1959), 97. See also 73: "Sutpen's country was wrecked by the Civil War, but that didn't stop Sutpen, he was still trying to get the son, still trying to establish a dynasty. He was still trying to get even with that man who in his youth had said, Go to the back door." The motif of doors has been noticed in several separate studies of Faulkner novels: see François Pitavy on *Absalom, Absalom!* (*William Faulkner romancier*, Lille: Service de reproduction des thèses, 1981, chapter 5), Karen Aubrey Ellstrom on *Sanctuary* ("Faulkner's Closing of the Doors in *Sanctuary*," *Notes on Misissippi Writers*, 20.2 [1988]: 63-73), Lynn Snyder on *The Hamlet* ("Doors, Windows, and peepholes in *The Hamlet*," *Notes on Mississippi Writers* 21.1 [1989]: 19-30).

[3]This parallelism has been noted before, among others by Max Putzel (*Genius of Place: William Faulkner's Triumphant Beginnings* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985], 249): "that fall of 1938, in what he thought would serve as the first chapter of what became the Snopes trilogy, he used the identity crisis from "The Big Shot" to account for Colonel Sartoris Snopes's running away from his father, who burned barns. The same identity crisis became the source of Sutpen's 'design' in *Absalom*. One can watch two of the stages of its evolution by turning to pages 506 and 538 of the *Uncollected Stories*." Putzel refers to "The Big Shot" and "Dull Tale" in*Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, ed. James L. Blotner, New York: Random House, 1979 (henceforth, *US*)— incidentally the correct page references are 508 and 536.

[4]Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection V: Manuscripts and Documents* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 115-118.

leaving him panting and impotent and raging. . . . he sensed always about him mocking echoes of *black laughter.* »[5]

To study the genesis of this humiliating scene, one needs to turn to the "uncollected" story « The Big Shot. »[6] It is one of the first stories Faulkner mailed when he decided to try and earn a living through his short stories. At the time, he was leaving aside an unfinished project about the rednecks, *Father Abraham*. The central character in « The Big Shot » is a typical former redneck, as the narrator, a journalist, describes him : « Tenant-farmers — you know : barefoot, the whole family, nine months in the year. »[7] These few juxtaposed notes make up the distanced sketch of a typical poor white family :

> . . .He told me about one day his father sent him up to the big house, the house of the owner, the boss, with a message. He went to the front door in his patched overalls, his bare feet : he had never been there before ; perhaps he knew no better anyway, to whom a house was just where you kept the quilt pallets and the corn meal out of the rain (he said 'outen the rain'). And perhaps the boss didn't know him by sight ; he probably looked exactly like a dozen others on his land and a hundred others in the neighborhood.
>
> Anyway the boss came to the door himself. Suddenly he — the boy — looked up and there within touching distance for the first time was the being who had come to symbolize for him the ease and pleasant ways of the earth : idleness, a horse to ride all day long, shoes all the year round. And you can imagine him when the boss spoke : « Dont you ever come to my front door again. When you come here, you go around to the kitchen door and tell one of the niggers what you want. » That was it, you see. There was a negro servant come to the door behind the boss, his eyeballs white in the gloom, and Martin's people and kind, although they looked upon Republicans and Catholics, having never seen either one, probably, with something of that mystical horror which European peasants of the fifteenth century were taught to regard Democrats and Protestants, the antipathy between them and negroes was an immediate and definite affair, being at once biblical, political, and economic : the three compulsions — the harsh unflagging land broken into sparse intervals by spells of demagoguery and religio-neurotic hysteria — which shaped and coerced their gaunt lives. A mystical justification of the need to feel superior to someone somewhere, you see.
>
> He didn't deliver the message at all. He turned and walked back down the drive, feeling the nigger's teeth too in the gloom of the hall beyong the boss' shoulder, holding his back straight until he was out of sight of the house. Then he ran. He ran down the road and into the woods and hid there all day, lying on his face in a ditch. He told me that now and then he crawled to the edge of the field and he could see his father and his two older sisters and his brother working in the field, chopping cotton, and he told me it was as though he were seeing them for the first time. (*US* 508)

[5]William Faulkner, *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950; henceforth, *CS*), 537, 538.

[6]Michael Millgate seems to have been first tracing the "boy-symbol" to "The Big Shot." See *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1965), 159-161.

[7]*US*, 508. Except for the punctuation, the sentence is identical in "Dull Tale", the later version (*US*, 536).

The contrast between the typical tenant-farmer and the typical rich land-owner « lying in a hammock under the trees » is sketched in broad strokes ; symmetrically, the landowner is summarily characterized by a few expected features : « idleness, a horse to ride all day long, shoes all the year round. » In this first occurrence of the scene, the black man stays in the background while the rich landowner tells the little boy how white people in his condition are expected to behave. The narrator only insists on the sociological contrasts. The redneck family is similar to Ab Snopes's : two daughters, an older brother, and the little boy. Like Sutpen, the boy in « The Big Shot » does not hate the owner : he studies « his gestures and mannerisms » to master the tools necessary for social improvement. The way he goes about it in the following pages foreshadows Flem : the first stage of what is described as a « process » consists in becoming married and the owner of a store, and the later stage (the frozen picture at the beginning of « The Big Shot » and the end of « Dull Tale ») foreshadows Flem in *The Mansion* with his legs propped against the mantelpiece : in « The Big Shot » he sits « behind the desk, his stocking feet propped in an open drawer, » while in « Dull Tale » his daughter finds him « his stock feet propped against the mantel »(*US* 510, 546).

In « Dull Tale, » a revision of « The Big Shot, » the grinning black servant is still silent, but he is the one who is at the door and « bar[s] the door with his body » — a phrase which is also to be found in *Absalom, Absalom !* [8] :

> One day his father sent him up to the big house with a message. He went to the front door. A nigger opened it, one of the few niggers in that country, neighborhood ; one of a race whom his kind hated from birth, through suspicion and economic jealousy and, in this case, envy ; performing, as his people did, work which niggers would not do, eating food which the niggers at the big house would have scorned. The negro barred the door with his body ; while they stood so, the boss himself came up the hall and looked out at the boy in worn overalls. 'Dont you ever come to my front door again,' the boss said. 'When you come here, go to the back door. Dont you ever come to my front door again.' And there was the nigger behind the boss, in the house, grinning behind the boss' back. He — Martin — told me he could feel the nigger's white eyeballs on his back as he returned down the drive, without delivering the message, and the nigger's white teeth cracked with laughing. (*US*, 536)

Don Reeves, the conspicuous narrator and interpreter of Martin's story in « The Big Shot » openly reduced it to a case study in « American Tragedy », an illustration of the ideological prejudice of the twenties. In « Dull Tale » tThe social tensions remain prominent, but the sheer weight of the black man's laughter is more palpable, as it will be in « Wash » and *Absalom, Absalom !*. The black man becomes a body inhabiting a house from which the redneck is barred.[9] In « Barn Burning », the landlord is

[8]"the . . . butler kept the door barred with his body." (William Faulkner, *Novels 1936-1940* [New York: Library of America, 1990], 191).

[9]Pearl McHaney draws my attention to Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger," which also shows the relationship between two redneck characters from the hills northeast of Atlanta, an adult and a child. In this text, the poor whites are shown to be equally unfamiliar with black people; in the train which leads them to Atlanta, they are barred from visiting the diner's kitchen by a haughty black waiter. The "artificial nigger" they later encounter at the end of a harrowing walk through the city becomes "some monument to another's victory

absent when Ab Snopes comes, and Lula de Spain is alone under the protection of the black servant.

This black servant finds a counterpart in « A Rose for Emily, » in which Homer Barron is, like Dal Martin in « The Big Shot, » the contractor who paves the streets, and therefore a representative of modern times invading the South.[10] Tobe, Miss Emily's « combined gardener and cook » — a convenient combination of domestic skills — also bars access to Miss Emily's house when her father is dead. Homer Barron does get in and dies for it. The name « Tobe » is symbolic : while the numerous Hamlets of the South — including Quentin Compson of the contemporary *The Sound and the Fury* — wonder whether « to be or not to be », *Tobe* as the paradigmatic black man asserts the formal essence of identity as the incarnation of a message, a pure signifier.[11] The message may be vague, but it is not empty as the father's message young Martin, young Sutpen or young Snopes were supposed to deliver.

that brought them together in their common defeat." (Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*. [New York: Library of America, 1988], 230)

[10]In "The Big Shot," Doctor Blount tells Dal Martin: "I recall seeing your name in the paper associated with the paving of Beauregard avenue" (*US* 517). In "A Rose for Emily," "[t]he town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death they began the work. The construction company came with niggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee" (~~William Faulkner, *Collected Stories* [New York: Random House, 1950. Henceforth,~~ *CS*~~]~~, 124). "That Evening Sun" (see further) is set exactly in the same historical context of dramatic modernization: "The streets are paved now, and the telephone and electric companies are cutting down more and more of the shade trees" (*CS,* 289)

[11]On the imaginary identification with Hamlet in the South, see William R. Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961; Harper, 1969), especially 151-162.

There is a circulation of meaning between Faulkner's short stories and the novels which are not directly related to them ; so that part of the dialogic dimension of both the novels and the short stories is an intertextual discourse which takes on its full meaning only when the short stories and the novels are read side by side. It is mainly in this respect that Malcolm Cowley was right when he compared the Yoknapatawpha cycle to Balzac's *Human Comedy* :[12] the novels can be read as self-contained books ; but they also function as part of a larger metatextual whole in which some articulations of novelistic discourse come to life.

To take an example, let us turn to a passage in *The Sound and the Fury* in which the figure of the black servant I have drawn from a few short stories is echoed : the fascinating sketch of the nigger on a mule, part of Quentin's account of a train trip back home for the Christmas holiday :

> *. . . I raised the shade and looked out . . . there was a nigger on a mule in the middle of the stiff ruts, waiting for the train to move. How long he had been there I didn't know, but he sat straddle of the mule, his head wrapped in a piece of blanket, as if they had been built there with the fence and the road, or with the hill, carved out of the hill itself, like a sign put there saying You are home again. He didn't have a saddle and his feet dangled almost to the ground. The mule looked like a rabbit.*[13]

According to the letter of the text, the figure of the motionless black man is part of the Southern landscape, but the phrasing is contradictory : it is at once « *built* », and « *carved out* » — simultaneously added and subtracted. Although motionless, it is not an object, but a *sign*. It does not carry a message, it *is* a message. The black figure as message has to do with

[12]Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction" to his edition of *The Portable Faulkner* (New York: Viking Press, 1946).

[13]William Faulkner*, The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage, 1954), 106-7.

identity and recurrence : it defines the receiver by his home and claims that this identity involves repetition.

A genetic study of the text reveals that the clause « as if they had been built there with the fence . . . like a sign put there saying You are home again » was an addition, which suggests that on second thought this self-confessed *sign* had to be accounted for. By confining its meaning to the possibly reassuring equation of the black man on the mule with the relief of being home again, Quentin (or the author) denies the contradiction of the sign as added and subtracted. But Quentin is not satisfied with this sign made unambiguous. He asks a question which suggests that he ignores the meaning just stated : « 'Hey, Uncle,' I said, 'Is this the way ?' » Thus the issue is rephrased to reassert the sociological situation of racial relations in the South, the reading which was suggested by « The Big Shot »/ »Dull Tale. » As Philip Weinstein suggests we have here « the mutually ratifying verbal/gestural interchange, in which Quentin and the black man enact an older, hierarchical racial economy (the « young marster » offering « Christmas gift » to a thankful darky). »[14] Weinstein reads this figure as « a monument to a certain temporal sanity and a hierarchical mode of social relations that Quentin and his culture used unthinkingly to enjoy. » I suggest to read this encounter as something both familiar and unsettling — an example of Freud's *Unheimliche*[15]) — something the young white man

[14]Philip Weinstein, *A Cosmos No One Owns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46. The Nov. 22, 1918 letter to Faulkner's mother shows that this equation of the « nigger » with home was deeply personal: contemplating his own Christmas furlough from Canada, Faulkner anticipated the encounter of « niggers » as proof that he had reached the South (See James G. Watson, *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner's Letters to his Mother and Father, 1918-1925*, Norton, 1992).

[15]"[T]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." (Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 17, ed. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press, 1955], 217-256).

responds to as a veiled menace. Note that the rabbit-like mule, or rather, as Faulkner refers to it a few lines further down, « the gaunt rabbit of a mule », which detaches the rabbit from the mule, conjures up the image of Uncle Remus's Braer Rabbit on his mule : the supernatural stillness of the figure, intractably present and stable, and secretly shrewd, while the middle-class Hamlet is agitated and on the move (the black man is « *waiting for the train to move* »). The *Sound and the Fury* scene will also reflect on the reader's perception of similar silent confrontations in the short stories : their meaning cannot be plainly related to the issue of sociological or racial identity.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison writes that the black person has long been the hidden central figure in American literature. In Faulkner's short stories the central figure is not fully articulated, not symbolized out of urgency. In pages such as this one it is only imperfectly inserted in the structured grammatical discourse that is — or was — an individual work of fiction.[16] Faulkner uses a unique disruptive fictional grammar, which has nothing to do with the cause and effect structure of traditional western oratory.

When confronted with the short story material, Quentin's rationalization is exposed as denegation of the deeper meaning of the black figure : it might in fact mean that going home is forbidden.[17] The black man bars the

[16]Toni Morrison comments on the stylistic evidence of linguistic response to Africanism in the third section of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), in which she quotes at length James Snead's introduction to his fine studies of *Figures of Divisions: Faulkner's Major Novels* (New York: Methuen, 1986) (Morrison, 66-67).

[17]Such was the message of another contradictory statement, or rather in the contradictory comparison of two sentences in two parallel texts: at the end of "The Hill," the casual (not just another poor white, but probably Faulkner's earliest portrayal of one) forgot "for a space, that he must return," whereas in poem X of *The Green Bough* the subject is shown "[f]orgetting that he cant

door to the Southern home to the redneck, but also to the « rising generation » — as the narrator of « A Rose for Emily » refers to them (*CS* 122). As enduring as the mule he rides, he means the contradictions of the South which, Quentin will tell Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom !,* you have to deny that you hate. He is the oblique bar between the alternative *hate/don't hate*. He is not segregated against : he is segregation itself , a segregation which happens to the whites, turning the family romance of the Southern community into the historical fall of social strife.[18]

It is impossible to exhaust here what is at stake in the motif of the motionless black watcher and the moving main character ; neither can I solve all the problems of interpretation I have raised. Can't we identify the same frozen picture in a scene from « Red Leaves » which seems, again, completely irrelevant to the plot ? « Red Leaves » belongs to the same cycle of short stories submitted in the early thirties.[19] In « Red Leaves, » both characters are black. ~~:~~ T~~t~~he nameless and motionless negro~~es~~ that the main protagonist comes across does not reveal racial or sociological tensions :-as Issetibeha's black body servant runs away from ritual sacrifice, he meets another Negro :

return."(William Faulkner, *Early Prose and Poetry*, ed. Carvel Collins [Boston: Little, Brown, 1962], 92; *The Marble Faun and A Green Bough* [New York: Random House, 1965], 30)

[18]In *Requiem for a Nun*, Nancy Mannigoe is similarly denied the status of a person by Temple's painful confession in Act II. As Temple puts it, "We didn't come here at two oclock in the morning to save Nancy Mannigoe. Nancy Mannigoe is not even concerned in this . . ." (William Faulkner, *Novels 1942-1954 [*New York, Library of America, 1994], 562)

[19]"Red Leaves" was first submitted on July 24, 1930, to *The Saturday Evening Post (*Blotner, Joseph L. *Faulkner: A Biography*. 2 vols. New York: Random House, 1974, 663).

> [The hound] began to howl. It was still howling at sundown, when the Negro climbed down the back wall of the barn, and entered the spring branch, where it was already dusk. He began to run then ; He could hear the hound howling behind him, and near the spring, already running, he passed another Negro. The two men, the one motionless and the other running, looked for an instant at each other as though across an actual boundary between two different worlds. (*CS* 331)

As in *The Sound and the Fury*, the strange motionless black man is a sign ; and we are made to understand that the fleeing Negro realizes that he has ceased to belong to the world of the living. As in Saussure's intuition about the linguistic sign, the primary function of the black man as sign is arbitrary boundary and division, not recognition.

The howling hound in the passage from « Red Leaves » leads us to a story Faulkner mailed four months after « Red Leaves, » « The Hound. »[20] In the epilogue of this story, after Cotton has been caught, he is detained in the country jail and watches a chain-gang of Negroes, in jail for minor offenses. In this instance, the boundary is the bars of his cell-door, and the contrast is in the voices : the black men's voices are « rich and murmurous, mellow and singsong » while Cotton's is « harsh, whispering » until it fails him altogether.[21] In the last lines of the short story, Cotton can only protest weakly : « 'Are they going to feed them niggers before they feed a white man ?' » (*US*, 164) « The Hound » was much altered for inclusion in *The Hamlet* but this scene was not, and it became the closing page of section 2 of chapter 2 in Book Three.

[20]"The Hound" was mailed on 17 November 1930, again to *The Saturday Evening Post* (Blotner 1974, 673).

[21]The singing black prisoner is another recurring motif in Faulkner: it is the subject of the opening scene in the original text of *Sanctuary* and occurs in the first pages of act three of *Requiem for a Nun.*

In all these examples, the focal white character receives the message of division through the confrontation with the solid black man. Conversely every one could say, like Cotton, « it started coming to pieces on me », assuming that *it* refers to their lives, not the body of the man Cotton has murdered. To all, the black men's eyeballs serve as an ironic mirror revealing their dismembered self. The Southern white obsession is that the blacks might know more about the whites than the whites do about themselves. Black people are the white man's unconscious.They have access to the private lives of white people that they don't even show each other : Miss Emily's secret life, De Spain with his socks off...[22] Because of them, the intimacy of the Southern family is dismembered.

Going home is an impossible attempt at re-membering this dismembered self, — re/membering what has been lost. Wash, Sutpen or Abner Snopes desperately try to remember ; but they can only repeat. Unlike them~~But~~ Martin, Popeye, Flem Snopes are dangerous men because they are detached from desire, which they can see as an instrument to serve their will-power. They can ignore the narcissistic blows of the black man's laughter.

Let us go back to « Wash, » to look at two corollaries of the sudden awareness of « the nigger's teeth and eyeballs » and their voices « always on the verge of laughter. » (*US* 513) Considering that « Wash » was published five years after « A Rose for Emily, » we might see these two corollary propositions as later developments on the theme. The first corollary is that the redneck is reduced to cattle : In « Wash, » the seminal scene which breaks the series of sterile and alienating repetitions for the redneck occurs in the first pages ; Sutpen learns that his mistress, Wash's grand-daughter, did not give birth to the son he was expecting, and jokes : « 'Well, Milly, too bad you're not a mare. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable.' » (*CS* 535) In « Barn Burning, »Ab Snopes and his daughters routinely compare their shacks to a pigsty : « 'Likely hit ain't fitten for hawgs' » (*CS* 9)

Even as Sutpen is murdered by Wash Jones when his eyes open up to the real social structure in the post-war South, Flem Snopes will eventually be murdered by Mink Snopes in the long chronicle of a death foretold that is *The Mansion*. In the first part of *The Mansion*, Faulkner refers to Mink's earlier life, and explains his hatred of Jack Houston, whom he killed in *The Hamlet* : Mink resented the fact that Houston's dog ate better than he did and his black servants wore warmer clothing than his family. This made it clear that the redneck did not belong to the Southern family, and therefore that the traditional social vision of social relations was a myth. Mink's extravagantly delayed revenge on Flem springs from the outrage which made him kill his wealthier neighbor Houston : Flem's indifference to his cousin's trial further shows that actual kinship bonds are disappearing. In the ruthless capitalist world of Southern society, modern or ante-bellum, the redneck is mere chattel.

Wash overhears the comparison of his kind with animals, which is uttered in front of the old black woman who looked after the young mother, his daughter. In *Absalom, Absalom !,* Wash eventually remembers, understands and takes revenge on Sutpen who had fooled him by letting him think he was part of the family ; he especially remembers that Clytie, « the one remaining servant, Negro, . . . would forbid him to pass the kitchen door ». Clytie's name is short for Clytemnestra, the queen who laughed over her slaughtered husband's body rather than accomplish the rites of the dead.

This is the second corollary : black laughter is also the women's laughter. In « That Evening Sun, » a short story involving the Compson children of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner tells an apparently unrelated episode in which part-time whore Nancy exposes her client, Stoval, a cashier in the bank and a generally respected member of the Baptist church, for failing to pay her. Stoval beats her up savagely in front of the crowd ; when the marshal stops him Nancy is « lying in the street, laughing. » (*CS*, 291) This strange episode is the only event of the story that Temple Drake

[22]This is an idea Toni Morrison also expresses from the other side of the racial divide: see *Jazz* (London: Picador, 1993), 41.

retells in *Requiem for a Nun,* although « it was before [her] time in Jefferson. »[23] However, any reference to Nancy's laughing has disappeared, in this part of the play within the novel in which Temple is still working out how much of her past she will get away with concealing.

Black plight is secretely linked with female condition, as the children in « That Evening Sun » innocently reflect through their worried inquiries : Caddy asks : « 'Why is Nancy afraid of Jesus ? . . . Are you afraid of father, mother ?' » and Jason : « 'I aint a nigger . . . Am I, Dilsey ?' » (*CS*, 298-9). To Faulkner, woman is definitely « the dark continent » : female laughter is equally disrupting of the white male order, as with the laughter of Minie Cooper in « Dry September » or with Isaac McCaslin's wife's at the end of section IV of « The Bear » in *Go Down Moses*.

In *Absalom, Absalom !* even as a boy Sutpen could see his people in the landlord's eyes

> as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutely evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cut-down and patched and made-over garments bought on exorbitant credit because they were white people, from stores where niggers were given the garments free, with for sole heritage that expression on a balloon face bursting with laughter which had looked out at some unremembered and nameless progenitor who had knocked at a door when he was a little boy and had been told by a nigger to go around to the back. [24]

[23]*Novels 1942-1954*, 554-555.

[24]William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), 194.

The whole argument of *Absalom, Absalom !* is re/membering. But saying that the trauma of black laughter is seminal to both *Absalom, Absalom !* and *The Hamlet* might raise the serious objection that blacks play a marginal role in *The Hamlet* , or in the rest of the *Snopes* trilogy. However the same material, first used in a short story, is often distilled beyond recognition in the novels. Two processes of distillation lead form « The Big Shot » to *Absalom, Absalom !*, through « Wash » ; and on the other hand to *The Hamlet* through « Barn Burning. » « Barn Burning, » in spite of modern readings which have made Abner Snopes and his elder son the hero of tenant-farmer class-consciousness and rebellion, is about Colonel Sartoris and the dilemma of « *being pulled two ways like between two teams of horses*, » i. e. the dilemma of choosing between two visions of the big house..[25] If he sticks to his father, Sarty has to consider the big house as a fortress to harrass relentlessly, even without hope. If he listens to the destiny inscribed in his name, Colonel Sartoris, he will have to betray his father and stand for the law of the courthouse that the big house resembles ; in the last pages of the short story, Sarty « has reached adolescence amid the 'early summer night' and intuitively recognizes his severed ties in substituting the cry of 'Father' for that of 'Pap'. »[26]Martin, Wash, Sutpen all ran away from the social primal scene, but they concealed in the bush to study what to do in order not to repeat the debilitating experience of having the empty message inherited from their father mocked by the blacks'

[25]The identity crisis in "Barn Burning," in which the poor white character realizes that relationships within the ideological "Southern family" actually involve class struggle, has received much critical attention in the last decade. Among the most notable recent studies are Richard C. Moreland's *Faulkner and Modernism: Rereading and Rewriting*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990 and Oliver Billingslea's "Fathers and Sons: The Spiritual Quest in Faulkner's 'Barn Burning'". *Mississippi Quarterly* 44.3 (Summer 1991): 287-308.The most conspicuous of these interpretation is Richard Moreland's, which makes "Barn Burning" the turning point of Faulkner's career , where the characters get rid of "compulsive repetition" and begin to adopt behaviors of "revisionary repetition."

[26]Billingslea, 291. See *CS* 24.

laughter. Sarty knows his father was morally wrong, but he still values his father's spirit of violent rebellion as a form of self-assertion and self-reliance. In the last paragraph of the short story, he fuses with the rhythms of nature, with the wheeling « slow constellations ». Faced with the burden of deciding between the voice of the blood and the voice of the law, he chooses a third term : « the liquid silver voices of the birds » in « the urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night. »

Sarty is not to be seen again in the *Snopes* trilogy. In a metatextual comment which belongs to the larger Yoknapatawpha human comedy, not *The Hamlet*, Ratliff implies that *The Hamlet* points elsewhere : « there was another one too, a little one : I remember seeing him once somewhere. He wasn't with them. »[27] (*H* 15) This is a rare example of a Faulkner novel referring explicitly to material presented only in a short story context.

Sarty's choice points toward *Go Down, Moses* and Isaac McCaslin. Actually, Faulkner eventually decides that « Barn Burning » should not be the first chapter of the Snopes novel, and he discards it even as half of the typescript for his novel has reached Random House. *The Hamlet* takes a thoroughly original turn, as Flem Snopes is indifferent to the issue of finding one's identity in the South of the dead fathers. Frenchman's Bend turns out to be a community of brothers who have forgotten that they were sons, and so they are not obsessed with the trauma of black laughter. The founding father is mercifully forgotten or rather foreclosed (see *H,* 4), together with the far more threatening issue of the racial divide. The race issue is not absent — several incidents, such as Mink's meeting Houston's black servant « also on a mule, in the woods » (*H*, 212) and ordering him off, help to keep it subliminally present, but it is missing from the forestage. Without a heritage to re/member, the peasants are the unwitting victims of the new world of the Snopeses. The term *foreclosure* refers to the financial destiny of most of the peasants' mortgaged farms, according to the overture of *The Hamlet* (4), but it can also be understood in its psychoanalytical meaning (*Verwerfung*), as opposed to *repression* (*Verdrängung*): unlike repressed material, foreclosed signifiers are not hidden in the subject's unconscious; they return from outside, particularly through the phenomenon of hallucination.[28] In *The Hamlet* the elliptic phrase of the clever, too clever narrator of « The Big Shot » is made significant : « the peasant without past and the black man without future. » (*US* 513) As the sociological issues first considered reveal their complexity, they touch upon many aspects of gender or racial identity, as well as the role of successive generations — all the aspects of social life are affected by the black experience. Through the short stories, Faulkner boldly begins addressing social conflicts which are further developed to reveal the more basic, existential conflicts of the human condition, but these early introductions have the violent boldness of ink sketches. The figure of the grinning black man points beyond race, beyond class, beyond gender.

[27]William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Viking International, 1991), 15.

[28]See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*, 1967; *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London: Hogarth, 1973.