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Imagery and the Making of *The Hamlet*: Of Snopeses and Cows

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In 1962 at West Point Faulkner makes a rare comment on his process of writing. He is answering the question of a student about how he "goes about writing": "The stories with me begin with an anecdote or a sentence or an expression, and I'll start from there and sometimes I write the thing backwards — I myself don't know where any story is going. I write — I'm dealing simply with people who suddenly have got up and have gotten into motion — men and women who are moving, who are involved in the universal dilemmas of the human heart." (*Faulkner at West Point* 80-81) After giving away that a story stems from a textual fragment, from language, Faulkner cuts himself off, corrects what he was starting to say and falls back on the bland familiar humanistic rhetoric of the late career.¹ He goes on to say: "Then when I have a lot of it down, the policeman has got to come in and say, 'Now look here, you've got to give this some sort of unity and coherence and emphasis,' the old grammatical rules — and then the hard work begins." *The old grammatical rules*: the work on the text is described in terms of the basic organization of language: grammar, style, rules. But what generates the work is what disrupts codes and overturns boundaries.

In this paper I can only outline how this process can be seen to be at work in the development of the Snopes material, down to its major achievement, *The Hamlet*.²

¹In a related earlier occurrence, Faulkner is reported as telling the students of the University of Virginia that the idea of a novel "begins with the thought, the image of a character, or with an anecdote . . ." (*Faulkner in the University*, 48-49).

²Research for this paper started with my dissertation on the development of the Snopes trilogy ("Faulkner, The Hamlet et la trilogie des Snopes: développement d'une problématique de la communauté", Université Paris 7 -

The plot of *The Hamlet* is largely made up of the short stories that Faulkner had told in the preceding decade, illustrating the constant feud between the Snopeses and a country community. The realistic rendering of everyday life in the rural backcountry is vivid, even movingly realistic. It has been common enough to see *The Hamlet* as a loosely connected chronicle of a backcountry village, with a lot of local color thrown in. It is that. But it is also a highly rhetorical creation, and the engine of its development, as I shall argue here, is largely the expansion of matricial fragments of language — "expressions," to use Faulkner's very words. The whole book sticks together because of the florid imagery with which every page is pervaded. The web of imagery that holds the sociological mimesis together therefore stylizes the realistic depiction.

Joseph Blotner notes that "The Hill" reveals "the central fact about [Faulkner's] style as a fiction writer": "he thought and wrote in poetic terms within a realistic framework which provided sufficient room for symbolist techniques." (Blotner 332) Lothar Hönnighausen concludes his book on Faulkner's early work saying that "the most interesting texts of the mid-twenties are . . . those like "Nympholepsy" where the idealized forms from *The Marionettes* are used to structure "Realistic" material . . . the tensions between stylization and mimesis develop into the chief organizing force of Faulkner's mature prose." (Hönnighausen 180) It is this development that I am interested in here, with a few examples of how Faulkner's imagery developed and multiplied between the early drafts of *Father Abraham* and the completed typescript of *The Hamlet*.

The titles of Faulkner's drafts and early short story versions of the Snopes project are often cryptic, emphasizing reference to earlier, generically determined material rather than rural subject matter: biblical stories in *Father Abraham* and "Abraham's Children," Greek tragedy in "As I Lay Dying," choral music in "Aria con Amore," symbolist poetry in "Afternoon of a

Denis Diderot, 1984) and was continued for the Pléiade edition of the French translation of The Hamlet, with Michel Gresset and Didier Coupaye.

Cow," Persian poetry in "Omar's Eighteenth Quatrain," otherwise renamed "Lizard's in Jamshyd's Courtyard," a title which only pretends to be less esoteric. Fewer titles are mimetic, like "Spotted Horses," "Fool About a Horse," "The Hound" and eventually "Barn Burning".³ "The Peasants," the tentative title to the novel *The Hamlet*, is only apparently referential, as it also refers to a generic literary model, Balzac's novel with the same title.

The manuscript and typescript versions of *Father Abraham* are both interrupted at different points, but in both cases Faulkner's writing seems to stumble on a chunk of imagery too big for the Snopes reality to swallow. The manuscript ends with a last page full of false starts and cancelled passages which sets Suratt's buggy on the stage of *Marionettes*:

But supper over, you emerged into a different world. A world of lilac peace, in which Varner's store and the blacksmith shop were like sunken derelicts in the motionless and forgotten caverns of the sea. No sound, no movement; no tide to knock their sleeping bones together. And yet it was not quite night. The west was green and tall and without depth, like a pane of glass; through it a substance that was not light seeped in sourceless diffusion, like the sound of an organ.

Suratt's buckboard stood at the hitching rail.⁴

In the last lines of the interrupted typescript, the text tries to compare Mrs Armstid's dogged shyness to Agamemnon as he lay dying, slain by Clytemnestra:

. . . and they stood excruciatingly and watched Mrs. Littlejohn, and presently Henry's wife entered with her desolate dog's eyes and stood at the foot of the bed with her

³*Father Abraham* was published as a book by James B. Meriwether; volume 2 of *the William Faulkner Manuscripts* series (henceforth, *WFM* in the text) makes available the manuscripts of *Father Abraham* and "Abraham's Children." Except for "Barn Burning", which was the first short story in Faulkner's *Collected Stories* volume (henceforth, *CS* in the text), the magazine versions of the published stories are available in Blotner's *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner* (118-183; 424-434; henceforth, *US* in the text); earlier drafts of "As I Lay Dying," "The Peasants," "Aria Con Amore" (like *Father Abraham*, early versions of "Spotted Horses"), "Omar's Eighteenth Quatrain" ("Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard"), "Fool About a Horse," "Afternoon of a Cow," "Barn Burning" are in volume 15.1 of the *William Faulkner Manuscripts*.

⁴*Father Abraham* 71. See *WFM* 2: 25 for the discarded material.

worn quiet hands clasped across her middle and her face in shadow.⁵

The failure to complete the *Father Abraham* text suggests that Faulkner endows his Snopes material with life when he proceeds from imagery to plot, not when he tries to force imagery into plot.

The tentative titles to the Snopes story as well as the famous two opening paragraphs of *Father Abraham* witness to Faulkner's attempt to account for the irreducible otherness of the Snopeses through a wealth of distorting imagery: turning away from the realistic agenda that the rise of the unpoetic Snopeses would seem to suggest, Faulkner compares his characters to inanimate objects, animals or literary or historical types. In *Father Abraham* the narrative starts with two paragraphs of cultural comparisons between Flem, the archetypal Snopes, and various figures from mythology or the Bible; conversely, in the completed novel, the story is introduced by an apparently strictly historical introduction to the world of Frenchman's Bend. A study of the genetic material reveals that Faulkner lets this apparently realistic description drift and expand out of the original material along lines which are inspired by metonymy and lexical puns. In the Rowan Oak Papers at the University of Mississippi, there is a one-page manuscript portrait of Flem Snopes behind the plate-glass window of his bank which could well be a draft of the famous opening section of *Father Abraham*:

It can begin here, with Flem himself sitting in a new Mission oak chair, behind the new plate glass window of his recently remodeled bank, while his opaque expressionless gaze contemplates with complete inscrutability the buxom and still

⁵Father Abraham carbon typescript (University of Virginia accession number 9817-a.15; WFM 2: 135). The corresponding passage in the manuscript reads: ". . . and then Henry's wife came into the room with her desolate dog's eyes and stood at the foot of the bed with her worn hands clasped across her shapeless lank garment and her face in shadow." (*Father Abraham* 60, *WFM* 2: 19-20) After he gave up the typescript of *Father Abraham* but before he wrote the novel *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner drafted two versions of the spotted horses episode entitled "As I Lay Dying." The source of this title, according to Joseph Blotner, is a fragment of an unidentified translation of *The Odyssey* which Faulkner quoted from memory as "As I lay dying the woman with the dog's eyes would not close my eyelids for me as I descended into Hades." (Blotner 634-5, 91). An italicized passage of "Carcassonne" seems to corroborate this association, if it is remembered that Agamemnon is the head of the Greek coalition of kings in Homer's epic: "*where fell where I was King of Kings but the woman with the woman with the dog's eyes to knock my bones together and together*" (*CS* 898).

disturbing image of his silk clad wife [talking for a moment *struck out*] apparently passing the [casual *marginal addition*] time of day with Colonel Hoxey in front of the post office. If there is either lust or alarm in his gaze, it does not show as, a little obese now from sedentation, a little flabby, his flesh harmless and in color and texture (one would almost add, in temperature) like stale and still unovened dough become a little soiled in the interval, chewing tobacco with a slow, deliberate, almost cowlike motion of his lower jaw [; ruminant, unwinking, and timeless, <and apparently ageless *canceled*> *written in*] he is as symbolic of his <time *canceled*> age and place as his predecessor, a portly man [in a tail coat *written in*] with a sweeping moustache and a strawberry tie and broad soft hat, was of his time and place.⁶

Much of the material in *The Hamlet* is in germ here: Flem's unblinking gaze, his face the color of uncooked dough and his chewing:

One moment the road had been empty, the next moment the man stood beside it, at the edge of a small copse — the same cloth cap, the same rhythmically chewing jaw materialised apparently out of nothing . . . His face was as blank as a pan of uncooked dough.⁷

*

Let's start with Flem's mouth: at first tobacco-chewing would be a tell-tale feature connotating his poor white origin — Faulkner was getting ready to write a novel of warning against the rise of the redneck, as Balzac had done with *The Peasantry*. The second paragraph of the seminal Rowan Oak papers fragment outlined the changes in the sociology of a little town in the twenties — the changes in the new South which Phil Stone and his younger

⁶Before the "Rowan Oak papers" were acquired by the University of Mississippi, Michel Gresset called my attention to this holograph fragment, which was then listed as item 9817-5 in the Faulkner collections at the University of Virginia and erroneously described as "Sartoris: description of Flem Snopes sitting in the window of his bank." The fragment is listed, but not reproduced in *WFM* 2.

friend were so worried about. Flem is the redneck come to town and taking over economy and politics. He embodies the nightmare of the Southern gentry and the desecration of the Southern dream. In Faulkner's "The Hill" or "Nympholepsy" also tobacco signifies the decline of the old South: "he could not see that the sonorous simplicity of the court house columns was discolored and stained with casual tobacco" ("The Hill," *Early Prose and Poetry* 91); "you could not see that pale Ionic columns were stained with casual tobacco." ("Nympholepsy," *US* 332) But as Faulkner rewrites his portrait of Flem from draft to draft Flem's tobacco chewing, the attribute of the hated redneck, a metonymy, becomes metaphoric: Flem becomes his mouth.

If we shift our attention to *Father Abraham*, we can see that in the two-paragraph opening Faulkner mentions Flem's mouth three times, as if insistence could reinforce meaning: "Thus he comes into the picture, thus he goes out of it, ruminant and unwinking and timeless." — the cowlike feature of the redneck is one of three adjectives. Faulkner goes on (note the neutral possessive): "its mouth like one of those patent tobacco pouches that you open and close by ripping a metal ring along the seam" makes him look like the tobacco he chews as the redneck he will always be. A marginal addition in the holograph manuscript drives the nail home: "He chews tobacco constantly and steadily and slowly with a slow thrusting motion", which is toned down to "He chews tobacco constantly with a slow thrusting motion" in the typescript (*WFM* 2: 1, 27-8, 81-2). Incidentally, except for the reference to tobacco, this is the expression by which Faulkner mentions the first apparition of Flem in *The Hamlet*: "[Jody] saw suddenly in one of the sashless windows and without knowing when it had come there, a face beneath a gray cloth cap, the lower jaw moving steadily and rhythmically with a curious sidewise thrust" (*H* 21).

The rest of the ten-page initial section of *Father Abraham* recurrently refers to Flem's

⁷ *The Hamlet* 24; henceforth, *H* in the text.

chewing habit, using it to characterize his social background: when he married his wife in Frenchman's Bend "his tobacco pouch seam of a mouth was always stained at the corner with snuff. . . . The only concession he had made to urban life was to substitute chewing tobacco for his snuff." (*WFM* 2: 34, 88, 144). In the last lines of the section, one intermediate typescript fragment shows Faulkner working in a last handwritten reference to tobacco-chewing, making it the characterizing feature of the whole Snopes species: "a month or so after the wedding [there appeared behind the counter in Jody Varner's store a quiet uncommunicative youth with eyes the color of pond water in August and snuff stains at the corner of his mouth; . . . *ms marginal addition*]" (*WFM* 2: 146)

In the 19-page-long typescript of "As I Lay Dying" one of the initial attempts to mine the *Father Abraham* material for short stories, Faulkner has Suratt remark on Flem's constantly closed mouth, which he now associates with his strict business sense, as if picking up for the first time the general consumption implication of the phrase "patent tobacco pouches": "Jest look at him settin ther, whittlin that ere stick, with that ere mouth sewed up tighter'n a pocket-book." (*WFM* 15.1: 5) References to his tobacco addiction are not absent, but it is the spitting that becomes emphasized, a living metaphor of Flem's rejection of social manners and the use of the mouth for speech: "Jest look at him, fellers. After a while he's gwine to open that mouth long enough to spit, maybe." (*WFM* 15.1: 9) In the last sentence of this version he is symbolically on the selling side of the tobacco trade: "I bet Flem could buy that hoss back fum her fer a bottle of snuff too." (*WFM* 15.1: 17)

Before moving on to the further characterization of Flem's mouth, it is worth noting that Faulkner has no other character than Suratt use the phrase "sewed up tighter than a pocket-book." We know that he should know about sewing, because he is a professional. But he has been a professional only since that day when Faulkner corrected the first mention of V K Suratt in pg. 8 of the *Father Abraham* manuscript and canceled "patent medicine drummer"

to replace it with "sewing machine agent." It is as if Suratt and Ratliff had been spawned by Flem and his seam of a mouth, or as if Faulkner had been alerted by the word "patent," also in the phrase describing Flem's mouth, and had found that Suratt's unusual specialty was more fruitful if it echoed the seam of Flem's mouth. This is a good example of the way the vehicle in Faulkner's metaphor gives shape to its tenor: as we shall see, this interest for the tailor or seamstress's art will be put to good thematic use in *The Hamlet*.

The provisional conclusion on this evolution is that when he first appears in *The Hamlet* Flem just chews. It would be easy enough to conclude that Faulkner has worked hard at smoothing down the rough edges of the fantastic imagery which inspired his developments, just as he clipped the rough edges of his peasants' dialect. But here is a new turn of the metaphorical screw: just what Flem chews Faulkner is very careful not to assert. In Flem's first meeting with Jody Varner, at the end of chapter 1 of *The Hamlet* Varner offers him a cigar. Flem declines:

"I dont use them," the other said.

"Just chew, hah?" Varner said.

"I chew up a nickel now and then until the suption is out of it. But I aint never lit a match to one yet." (*H* 26)

This brilliant dialogue is typical of the use of style and imagery in *The Hamlet*. Faulkner is using the image — I chew up *a nickel* as a metonymy for *a nickel's worth* — as the literal tenor at the same time as it is a vehicle. In his pocket book of a mouth, Flem Snopes would naturally be chewing nickels — until the suption was out of them, when, obviously, he would have to find more nickels to chew.⁸

In his early references to the Snopes clan, Faulkner often refers to them as rodents, which is at once a moral and a visual metaphor — or better said, the Snopeses physically embody their

⁸The comparison between food and money may have originated in Faulkner's reading of Balzac's "Monsieur Gobseck": the name of Balzac's usurer sounds like the colloquial "gobe sec," meaning gluttonous.

social position as parasites and pests by visually chewing constantly.

To serve as epilogue to this short natural history of Flem's pouch of a mouth, let us look at what happens to it in the sequels to *The Hamlet*. In *The Town* Flem uses "an old-fashioned snap-mouth wallet." (246). *The Mansion* is prosaic, recapitulative as always. In this late novel Ratliff gives away just what, in his opinion, Flem had been chewing: "that same little mouth-sized chunk of air he had been chewing ever since he quit tobacco when he finally got to Jefferson and heard about chewing gum and then quit chewing gum too when he found out folks considered the vice-president of a bank rich enough not to have to chew anything." (*The Mansion* 155-6) Chick Mallison gathered that he was even more of an ascetic: "Old Snopes neither smoked nor drank nor even chewed tobacco; what his jaws worked stidily on was, as Ratliff put it, the same little chunk of Frenchman's air he had brought in his mouth when he moved to Jefferson thirty years ago." (220) With this concluding report the truth about Flem's chewing has obviously come full circle.

*

Another animal metaphor was implied in the earliest references to Flem's chewing: the ruminant. As one would expect this is another recurring essential motif in *The Hamlet*. Beulah, the cow in the "Afternoon of a Cow" sketch, named after a biblical symbol of plenty, is present through several avatars. We first see the Snopeses' closeness to cattle in the marginal presentation of Flem's sisters in chapter 1: they are compared to "a pair of heifers" (H 15). Ratliff later says that "Flem has grazed up the store and he has grazed up the blacksmith shop ..." (H 77) The cow motif then pervades the central two books of *The Hamlet*: in Book 2 Beulah the cow becomes Eula, the potato-chewing female child, secretly courted by Labove, whose name is destiny; in Book 3 the ruminant that a cousin of the

archetypal chewing Snopes falls in love with confirms that birds of a feather flock together, as the fellow says — as long as the reader accepts to merge literal meanings and the dream-like associations which the text suggests.

To the scholar, the manuscripts of *The Hamlet* are uncommonly difficult to decipher, but there is in general little rewriting, if we leave out the obvious variants in passages that were understandably revised, if only for style, to be published as separate short stories.⁹ The manuscript of the whole last third of the novel is missing, and possibly never existed. But one passage proves daunting — section 2 of Book 3, chapter one — the Ike and cow idyll. As Faulkner often did to keep track of the time spent on an important manuscript, for instance a book, he noted down the date in the margin of the first page of his drafts: February 10, 1939. Ike Snopes's love-story is the play within the play, the literally pastoral idyll setting off the failed, parodic fairy-tale love-story between the frog-like Flem and Eula the queen-bee. The meaning of this famous but difficult passage is enhanced by Faulkner's intratextuality and self-parody.

The manuscripts reveal that Faulkner considered a subtitle, "The Morning and the Evening," as if planning to try for a separate publication of the passage, as he had done for "Barn Burning". Indeed, Ike's love story actually echoes and continues "Barn Burning" in a shared expansion of the material of "The Hill": in the three texts or fragments, a column of smoke calls the subject's attention to a fire; in "Barn Burning" the narrator becomes fascinated by the white columns of a house which he thinks looks like a courthouse, and this beauty leads him to betray his blood and escape to the woods, where he watches the wheeling constellations and walks into the trees. The last sentences of the short story really echo those of "The Hill": "He went on down the hill, toward the dark woods within which the liquid silver voices of the birds called unceasing — the rapid and urgent beating of the urgent and

⁹ See Creighton, *William Faulkner's Craft of Revision*; Pothier, "Note sur le texte" in *Faulkner, Oeuvres romanesques III* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 2000), 1064-1070.

quiring heart of the late spring night. He did not look back." (CS 25) In "The Long Summer" Ike passes the crest of a hill to meet his beloved by the river, and then by the spring, a development which was suggested or dreamed of in "Nympholepsy". In the end of the idyllic day they spend together, he merges with the rhythms of nature and the "marching constellations" as Sarty Snopes does in "Barn Burning." One key word toward the end of the *Hamlet* section anchors it into intratextuality, as Faulkner mentions the "nympholept noon." (H 205)

The manuscripts also reveal an early division of the passage into three sections, a stylistic feature that suggests a prose poem: the morning, the afternoon, the evening. The afternoon points to the earlier "Afternoon of a Cow," and the other two titles can be seen as a mere metatextual expansion of this title, before and after, since they do not refer to anything which is set at a time of the day. "The morning" begins with an analeptic narrative of Ike's first attempts at courting the cow. It goes on to describe the rescue of the princess from the dragon, i.e. the day when Ike saw the smoke and rescued his cow from the grass-fire. In "the afternoon" Houston finds them and takes the cow back to her barn and they escape again; "the evening" is a lyrical description of a full day's picnic that he can now have with his lover, starting before dawn in the barn, enjoying the whole course of the day in a fusion with the forces of nature that she represents. Faulkner goes about writing by expansion and division: the scene of the discovery by Houston is doubled, as an inserted analepsis recounts how Houston first discovered the lovers, three days before the fire. Thus the brief dialogue between Houston, Ike Snopes and the hound comes to be divided by ten pages in *The Hamlet*, a process which may be compared with the reading of Charles Bon's letter to Judith in *Absalom, Absalom!*

In the second paragraph of the section on Eula's childhood as well as in the section on the cow, Faulkner uses an uncommon word: *integer*. Thus he subtly points out a parallel between

Eula and the cow, as a poet might anchor a metaphor by repeating a key word in two stanzas. The child Eula "seemed to be not an integer of her contemporary scene, but rather to exist in a teeming vacuum in which her days followed one another as though behind sound-proof glass," (*H* 105-6), while as he sweeps Ike Snopes can still see his cow, "integer of spring's concentrated climax, by it crowned, garlanded." (H 186) Coming as it does at the end of a paragraph, the word *garland* directs the reader to the fourth stanza of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer loing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

In turn, this association sends the attentive reader back to the concluding sentence of the Eula paragraph where the word *integer* occurred, in which another procession is shown, also reminiscent of ancient times: "Mrs Varner in her Sunday dress and shawl, followed by the negro man staggering slightly beneath his long, dangling, already indisputable female burden like a bizarre and chaperoned Sabine rape." (*H* 106)

The possibility of a cross reference back to Eula is not provided in the first draft of the section on Ike's love story, which in its shorter initial form is closer to "Afternoon of a Cow": it centers on the fire which Ike Snopes sees from the Littlejohn boarding-house. Both texts have to do with a grass-fire from which cattle has to be rescued, and in both stories a Pegasus-like horse unexpectedly materializes out of the flames to frighten the cow away. This is an instance of an earlier simile materializing into story-matter: "Carcassonne" focussed on the vision of "a buckskin pony with eyes like blue electricity and a mane like tangled fire" while in the longer "As I Lay Dying" draft of "Spotted Horses" Suratt told how he had been attacked by a pony "soarin over that boy's head like a hawk, with its eyes lookin like two of

these hyer colored electric lights and its mane like a grass fire." (CS 895, 899; WFM 15.1: 36)

The simile appeared also in the *Hamlet* version of "Fool About a Horse": "its mane and tail swirling like a grass fire." (H 37)

"Afternoon of a Cow" and *The Hamlet* provide a striking example of the way Faulkner cuts and pastes, keeping but re-arranging the words and expressions of one text as if they were so many blocks to build up other meanings. "Afternoon of a Cow" was a parodic fable like the "Ballade d'une vache perdue" which had been published in *The Mississippian* as a *pastiche* of Faulkner's symbolist poem "Ballade des femmes perdues". But *The Hamlet*, full of rodents, horses and cows, reminds one of the world of the Uncle Remus tales by Joel Chandler Harris. In the two following passages, first from "Afternoon of a Cow," second from *The Hamlet*, the Snopes is face to face in the smoke with the stygian horse which might have been the one that came out of the burning barn in the novel *As I Lay Dying*. The floor suggests the Hell that Flem visits at the end of Book 2 of *The Hamlet*:

[The smoke] covered the entire visible scene, although ahead of us we could see the creeping line of conflagration beyond which the three unfortunate beasts now huddled or rushed in terror of their lives. Or so we thought until, still led by Mr. Faulkner and hastening now across a stygian and desolate floor which almost at once became quite unpleasant to the soles of the feet and promised to become more so, something monstrous and wild of shape rushed out of the smoke. It was the larger horse, Stonewall . . . (US 426)

The smoke lay like a wall before him; beyond it he could hear the steady terrified bellowing of the cow. He ran into the smoke and toward the voice. The earth was now hot to his feet. He began to snatch them quickly up . . . he heard the hooves and as he paused, his breath indrawn, the horse appeared, materialized furiously out of the

smoke, monstrous and distorted, wild-eyed and with tossing mane, bearing down upon him. (*H* 190)

The horse is not named in *The Hamlet*, but the abstract *wall* in his name occurs as the concrete wall of smoke. It may therefore be legitimate to look back at an intriguing detail in the first page of the novel: although Frenchman's Bend has been described in close to half a dozen texts before, only in *The Hamlet* do we learn that the Frenchman's estate was originally a *grant*. However the very sound of "grant" had been associated with it ever since *Father Abraham*, in which it was first noted that "Grant swept through the land on his way to Chickamauga." (*Father Abraham* 15)

"The Hill" and "Nympholepsy" introduce the country scenery and the poor white characters of the Snopes saga in Faulkner's writing: there is the blacksmith's shop, the court-house columns which foreshadow Labove and his fantasies are "a dream dreamed by Thucydides" (US 331). In *The Hamlet* the tieless casual is an idiot, unaware of the day's labor behind him and ahead of him — except as it divides him from his lover: "Because he cannot make one with her through the day's morning and noon and evening" (H 183) when he cannot find intimacy, just as the protagonist of "Nympholepsy" resents the lack of privacy in the work-day. Ike Snopes and the casual both go to meet their strange lovers in a bottom where a creek runs. If we think of these two earlier texts, we understand that it is given to Ike Snopes, who in Ratliff's perception "had been given the wordless passions but not the specious words" (H 217), to make true the merging with the natural elements which the casuals in the earlier stories had all but intuited and eventually missed.

*

Lastly let us come back to the role of clothing in *The Hamlet*, which is linked to Suratt's

occupation. Clothing behaves in fantastic ways in the world of Frenchman's Bend: think of the garments that Jody Varner hands down to his servants so his suits haunt all the roads of the land he owns simultaneously; of the federal officers' uniforms which disappear and reappear worn by hill-billies in the back country; of the cleated shoes that first draw Varner's attention to Labove's family. Ratliff's expert eye can immediately detect that Flem's shirts are new, that the creases show that they have been sitting on the shelves of a store all summer. Flem's tie is also semantically eloquent:

a tiny viciously depthless cryptically balanced splash like an enigmatic punctuation symbol against the expanse of white shirt which gave him Jody Varner's look of ceremonial heterodoxy raised to its tenth power and which postulated to those who had been present on that day that quality of outrageous overstatement of physical displacement which the sound of his father's stiff foot made on the gallery of the store that afternoon in the spring. . . . it was told of him later, after he had been made president of his Jefferson bank, that he had them made for him by the gross. (*H* 64)

Here it is the rumor that turns the metaphor into story: as Flem's personal ambition is to merge with the popular image of the successful businessman, it is only natural that he should turn the most eccentric and personal piece of garment into a signifier of mass depersonification. In *The Town* Gavin Stevens will likewise note that the new furniture he ordered for his house makes him think of a legend in a wholesale furniture catalogue: "*This is neither a Copy nor a Reproduction. It is our own Model scaled to your individual Requirements.*" (*T* 221) The Snopeses do not talk: but the objects they touch or use produce "overstatement" — an overflow of meaning through figurative language which comments on the inadequacy of mouthsounds in the world of mass consumption that they represent. Theirs is the modern world of road signs and billboards. We saw that Flem's chewing mouth pervades *The Hamlet*, but in another avatar he partakes of the raw energy of the flaming

horses of "Carcassonne" — which are both billboards and animals, as Ratliff suggests in this passage from the first paragraph of the short story "Spotted Horses":

". . . Here I was this morning pretty near halfway to town, with the team ambling along and me setting in the buckboard about half asleep, when all of a sudden something come swurging up outen the bushes and jumped the road clean, without touching hoof to it. It flew right over my team, big as a billboard and flying through the air like a hawk." (*US* 165)

The following physical portrait of Flem in chapter 3 of *The Hamlet* as a bunch of uncoordinated signifiers will serve as an open conclusion to this essay:

a thick squat soft man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad still face containing a tight seam of a mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or craftsman and the unfinished job taken over by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning. (*H* 57)

I would like to finish on this implicit portrait of the cubist artist as a "viciously maniacal humorist."

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