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The one doomed desperate hope: narrative as hidden utopia in Faulkner's The Mansion

In a style reminiscent of Faulkner's, Maurice Blanchot wrote that:

> Le souvenir est la liberté du passé. Mais ce qui est sans présent n'accepte pas non plus le présent d'un souvenir. Le souvenir dit de l'événement: cela a été une fois, et maintenant jamais plus. De ce qui n'est même pas là comme ayant été, le caractère irrémédiable dit: cela n'a jamais eu lieu, jamais une première fois, et pourtant cela recommence, à nouveau, à nouveau, infiniment. Cela sans fin, sans commencement. C'est sans avenir." (Blanchot 22)
> [Memory is the freedom of the past. But what has no present will not accept the present of a memory either. Memory says of the event: it once was and now it will never be again. The irremediable character of what has no present, of what is not even there as having been there, says: it never happened, never for a first time, and yet it starts over, again, again and again, infinitely. It is without end, without beginning. It is without a future. (Blanchot 30)].

Blanchot is trying to define the fascination of time's absence which reigns, according to him, in the space of literature. Faulkner too, seems to give in to time's absence in the final page of *The Mansion* (1959), when the narrator describes Mink Snopes' death, or non death, which is also the moment when Faulkner puts an end to his Snopes trilogy, that is to say, to the fictive universe he started writing more than thirty years earlier. In fact, it is tempting to merge Faulkner and Mink, as this representative of the notorious Snopes dynasty, notorious for being poor white Northerners who invaded the defeated South and fed on it like scavengers, actually spent 38 years in Parchman penitentiary, his imprisonment being an apt metaphor to

describe Faulkner's 38 year long stint as writer. That Faulkner would choose a proletarian part of a gigantic family made up almost entirely of lethal opportunists, fascists, thieves, with Flem Snopes at its head, the arch capitalist without principles, in brief the stereotypical antithesis of the Southerner, suggests that some form of redemption is being performed in the Snopes trilogy, and in *The Mansion* in particular. I will come back later to this final Prospero-like moment when a farewell to a written universe becomes an epiphanic death, but perhaps the association Faulkner–Mink Snopes could help explain the underlying hope in my "hopeless" title.

Mink's death amidst triumphant nature is like Ottilie's redemption through death in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, a possible sub-text for *The Mansion*, where marriage, love, adultery, the mythical and the natural, the decay of a golden classical age, abound. Walter Benjamin wrote in a splendid essay on Goethe's novel that "only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope" (Wolin 56). It is this very notion of hope found in hopelessness, the possibility of a future within a nostalgic and traumatised Southern conception of time, of redemption despite and because of an insuperable sense of religious and historical doom which I want to explore in Faulkner's novel. I would suggest that Faulkner's conservative philosophy which prevails in his speeches and later novels actually contains revolutionary elements, or simply misunderstood concepts, better explained in the light of the ideas found in Walter Benjamin ("messianic time" versus "mythical time," "now –time of the dialectical image," "aura," "story telling") and Ernst Bloch (his notion of anticipatory illumination, his "spirit of Utopia" or "principle of hope"). After all, Faulkner decided to use Mink Snopes, who is a murderer, a proletarian/destitute peasant, and sublime irony, a completely illiterate character, as his final incarnation, his final avatar if we exclude *The Reivers* (1962). Of course *The Mansion* is not a Marxist novel, but it seems to contain elements of Utopia hidden in its narrative, a narrative which is as Modernist as those of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), but more universally historical, and perhaps, more scathingly pragmatic and more lucid.

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In his book, *The Messianic Idea of Judaism* (see Wolin 60), Gershom Scholem describes the relation between history and redemption which could encapsulate Faulkner's pessimism towards progress and optimism towards mankind, which appear throughout his later books, from *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) to *The Mansion*: "The apocalyptists have always cherished a pessimistic view of the world. Their optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth, but to that which will arise in its ruin, free at last and undisguised" (Wolin 60).

This form of hope found in the hopelessness of the history of the South is what underpins Faulkner's tragic vision of all those doomed families — Compson, Sartoris, Sutpen, and even Snopes — representing no so much the New South, as the victorious ideology of Capitalism and consumerism which bloomed in post-war America and Europe. In *The Mansion*, progress is found everywhere: new roads, new cars, new houses in newly created suburbia, new home decoration, and New Deal politics then post-war politics, the great public projects and the war industry, and finally the reintegration of American GIs in little houses newly built, on Snopes' land timely bought to this effect with what Faulkner calls "war's blood money." Faulkner, like Baudelaire, despises those illusory forms of hope one finds in progress, but he succeeds in capturing this wind of destruction in order to reflect upon the traces of hope, what he calls "endurance," the act of persisting in hoping despite the absence of hope. Faulkner, throughout his novels, seems to capture the stream of history. He moved from the analysis of the ruins of the ante-bellum South, a fake and doomed paradise he loves to evoke in allegorical form, to the analysis of the new South, no longer the South, but America, Western society. Like Joyce before him, Faulkner casts a very lucid eye on progress, which he criticizes via irony and parody, art's best weapons against ideology. In *The Mansion*, the South is dead, not killed by the Snopes, but by history. Like Mink Snopes, imprisoned for so many years, Faulkner wakes up to a new America, but the new America was already there if we think of Rip Van Winkle re-emerging from a twenty-year sleep. *The Mansion* is like a long protracted moment of awakening, the Benjaminian moment between

sleep and waking up, as if in a permanent state of wakefulness, on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious.

If Faulkner does not relinquish the racism which was inherent in the South and which still continued after the war, despite economic progress, he does not hesitate to place a woman, Linda Snopes, at the centre of his novel, who is very much a utopian Communist (she wants to abolish segregation in schools, she had married a communist who was also Jewish, and they fought together in the Spanish War). Faulkner despised McCarthyism, as much as he despised demagogues such as Bilbo and Vardaman, ridiculed in the grotesque shape of Clarence Eggleston Snopes:

> — the ones right here at home: the organisations with the fine names confederated in unison in the name of God against the impure in morals and politics and with the wrong skin colour and ethnology and religion; K.K.K. and Silver Shirts; not to mention the indigenous local champions like Long in Louisiana and our own Bilbo in Mississippi, not to mention our very own Senator Clarence Eggleston Snopes. (Faulkner 153)

Linda Snopes embodies the utopian Socialist spirit evoked in the novel, but this utopian spirit is shown to be as deceptive in the long run as Capitalism. Linda Snopes, who is only a Snopes by name, being the adulterine daughter of Eula Snopes, born Waner, and of a transient lover, is also symbolically deaf and uses a writing pad to communicate:

> We didn't even try to use the ivory tablet on occasions of moment and crisis like this. It was a bijou, a gewgaw, a bangle, feminine; really almost useless: thin ivory sheets bound with gold and ringed together with more of it, each sheet about the size of a playing card so that it wouldn't really contain more than about three words at a time, like an anagram, an acrostic at the level of children— a puzzle say or maybe a continued story ravished from a primer [...] so that she could read the words as my hand formed them, like speech, almost like hearing. (Faulkner 221)

This strange object, where writing seems to take precedence over speech, is also a silent recording device, a trace, where words

are written and then effaced, perhaps a symbol of differance *avant la lettre*. We will have to come back to this notion of a narrative which oscillates between speech and writing, as if none were satisfactory. Speech and writing are both marred by history, and the oscillation between the two constitutes the narrative voice, as a constant toing and froing between spoken and written words, where each is the ghostly echo of the other, but also a utopian marriage of speaking and hearing. If Linda lives in her own silent utopian world, cut off from the wind of progress, having been deafened by invidious history so to speak, she also represents action and will become the instrument of her father's death, who is the new Lord of Jefferson, Mississippi, His Majesty Flem Snopes.

Linda represents Faulkner's rejection of Communist utopia, but she also represents Faulkner's rejection of the Capitalistic ideology of progress. In fact, like all the important characters in *The Mansion*, she is an allegory of utopian democracy, using the law (embodied by Gavin Stevens, a gentleman lawyer), and Mink Snopes, the allegory of endurance, to act and punish what she sees as the cause of evil in society, the indifferent amorality of Flem Snopes. Even if Faulkner somewhat remains a misogynist, as Linda has no real voice of her own in the novel, she is all the more present and active as she is absent as a narrative voice. For absence and allegory are the key elements of Faulkner's thoroughly Modernist aesthetics, and we can only interpret each narrative voice, each narrated event, as figures of absence, as traces, as empty voices, such as the strange quack duck's voice of Linda. This is why Faulkner needs to be differentiated both from the authorial voice and the characters' voices. Faulkner has hollowed himself out of the novel, Joyce-like or Flaubert-like, which does not prevent the reader from trying to interpret his conflicting messages of hope and hopelessness, from deciphering the multiple allegories which are mainly allegories of the act of writing, of the creative act.

It seems that all the allegories of hope hidden in the narrative also imply a mortification of any utopian dream carried by progress, which appear everywhere in the novel. We just need to look at the occurrences of the word hope in the novel to see that it is almost synonymous with hopelessness:

> not even breaking stride to coalesce again to wreck the one doomed desperate *hope* (152)
> talking of *hope*, millennium, dream: of the emancipation of man from his tragedy, the liberation at last and forever from pain and hunger and injustice" (207)
> and not just shock and horror, but dread and fear too of the man who had just used the Ku Klux Klan while he needed it and then used their innocence to wreck the Klan when he no longer did, who was using the Baptist Church as long as he believed it would serve him; who had used W.P.A and N.R.A and A.A.A and C.C.C. and all the other agencies created in the dream or *hope* that people should not suffer... (282)
> Fate, and destiny, and luck, and *hope* [...] all mixed up in the same luck and destiny and fate and *hope* until can't none of us tell where it stops and we begin. Especially the *hope*. (343, our emphasis)

I would suggest that hope irrigates Faulkner's later works, often deemed irrevocably nostalgic, conservative, and simply out of step with the modern world, in a manner which evokes the film maker Jean Renoir, Faulkner's French counterpart, who was also perceived as an artist who had lost all his talents and political edge when he had returned from America. On the contrary, behind Faulkner's *persona* as a conservative, by today's standards racist and misogynist writer, lies the invisible author of his novels, whom we find in a scathing analysis of history and politics, as a dispeller of false hopes for the sake of more genuine hopes, for the sake of an almost impossible redemption. As Adorno said in his *Minima Moralia*,

> Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light" (Adorno 247), "in the end hope, wrested from reality by negating it, is the only form in which truth appears. (Adorno 98)

Faulkner chose Japan to make speeches about hope, a country plunged into despair after its defeat, as if Faulkner made a point of seeing analogies between Japan and the South, to spread the word

and bring hope to others so to speak. More than mere propaganda for the American way of life, Faulkner juxtaposes hope with anti-utopian rhetoric:

> I agree that democracy as we talk about it in my country is a very clumsy inefficient way for people to govern themselves, but so far I don't know a better one [...] man's hope is man's freedom. Only in liberty can hope exist" [...] I do believe that man still wishes, desires, wants to do better than he knows he can...that man is tough, that nothing, war, grief, hopelessness, despair can last as long as man himself can last, that man will prevail provided he will make the effort to believe in hope, to seek not for a mere crutch to lean on, but to stand erect on his own feet by believing in hope. (quoted in Claridge 634; 635)

Which calls to mind the comical way Ratliff forces Clarence Snopes to retire early, because he was dangerous and was selling easy dreams of comfort to the majority (286)...

What is often seen as the rambling of an old conservative contains in fact a severe criticism of fake hope of an easy and comfortable utopian way of life, true hope being only in the act of resisting, enduring, and self criticism: "injustice must exist but you can't just accept it [...] we have got to take along with us the rubbish of our mistakes and our errors [...] disaster seems to be good for people [...] if they are too successful too long, something dies, it dries up [...] disaster is good for man for people are the toughest things in creation" (quoted in Claridge 635). What it not truly apparent in those speeches, which do not talk about racism but could be applied to it, is that Faulkner sees hope as the most effective trope to dispel illusions created by dominant ideology. Ernst Bloch says that it is "in the darkness of the lived moment" that traces, sparks of hope can be found: the work of art is what fans those sparks, indicating the right-direction, the light, something always to be found in Faulkner's novels, and never more so than at their darkest moments, such as Joe Christmas's or Mink's death.

The paradox acted out by the narrative is that hope is criticized as a deceptive and redemptive trope. A lesson he might have learnt from *Ulysses* (Wicht), in which Bloomusalem turns into pre

1929 consumerist American society, fridges and cars and modern public transport included, as well as the development of the Irish streak of Snopism, pre-Flem and crypto-Flem so to speak. In any case, besides ideological and literary intertextuality, the "hope" in trope is also to be found in the Snopes family! It is within the figures of destructive history such as progress, represented by the Snopes family, that hope is present, not in some revived Southern hero. History which produces Flem Snopes also produces Mink, and then later on, Wallstreet Panic Snopes, Admiral Dewey Snopes, Linda Snopes, the carriers of true hope. Hope is not to be found in any fixed form, in any utopian past or future, but in what Ernst Bloch calls "anticipatory illuminations," what appears in Faulkner's novels as negative epiphanies and redemptive deaths. Hope appears in concrete forms, in traces, advertisements, but mainly in works of art, however dark they may be. However, hope is never the deceptive trope of political rhetoric, a quick-fix recipe for happiness. Bloch writes that:

> Even deception, if it is to be effective, must work with flatteringly and corruptly aroused hope. Which is also why hope is preached from every pulpit, but is confined to [...] empty promises of the other world. All this means that man is essentially determined by the future, but with the cynically self–interested inference, hypostasised from its own class position, that the future is the sign outside the No Future night club, and the destiny of man nothingness. Well: let the dead bury the dead [...] the beginning day is listening to something other than [...] the hollowly nihilistic death-knell. As long as man is in a bad way, both private and public existence are pervaded by daydreams; dreams of a better life [...] fraudulent hope is one of the great malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most powerfully benefactors. (Bloch 5)

For Bloch, the sparks of hope illumine the "darkness of the lived moment," they remain the proof that something better has not yet happened, that the "world is full of propensity towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfilment of intending" (Bloch 18). This fulfilment of intending is perhaps what we find in the narrative of *The Mansion*, in which all the characters are waiting for something, someone, waiting being what

constitutes the plot, the very action of the novel. And the ultimate waiting is Mink waiting for death to take him, to deliver him and to deliver the narrative of the hopelessness it was carrying. Narrative is not so much, as Jean Verrier says "to tell a story to represent a series of events, to represent time" (quoted in Messent 44), but more of a "divorce between different times, an exploration according to Ricoeur of the divorce between worldviews and their irreconcilable perspectives on time, a divorce that undermines public time" (46).

Narrative in *The Mansion* creates discontinuities, moments of rupture, inconsistencies (cunningly, Faulkner takes full responsibility for those in the preface to the novel). Narrative revolves around absence, gaps: we think of the hole in the text, to represent the "f..." word, of the constant self-allegorising of writing, the moment when the narrative hovers above speech and writing as represented by the almost carnal/erotic/mystic writing pad carried by Linda, which looks like a fragile jewel: "'But you can me' she said [...] 'Don't use any word then.' I wrote *Do you mean you want to* " (222).

The narrative — and its accounts of destruction and hopelessness — is pushed towards the future, cannot be stopped. The narrative of *The Mansion* is genuinely utopian as it intimates a possible future, however dark the present or the past may be. I would suggest that in *The Mansion*, the narrative is utopian because it accepts its own deficiencies, its ideological weight, that of the past it carries with it, a sense of doom and of hopelessness, a sense of a break in tradition and of the impossibility of transmitting anything other than itself. The narrative carries the death of the South, which can be, — which must be — extended to any form of despair, beyond race and culture.

It has often been said that Faulkner is using tall-tale tricks in his narratives, and Ratliff, one of the three main narrative voices in *The Mansion* embodies such a tradition. This is true, but only if Ratliff is understood as the voice which tells of its own demise, which is not the voice of tradition, the tradition of the South being re-enacted or kept alive, but the voice which bears testimony to the death of tradition, the breakdown of story-telling as it is described by Walter Benjamin in his *Illuminations*. Story-telling is defined as the back-

bone of community, and is opposed to the novel which portrays what Lukács called "the bourgeois world of transcendental homelessness." For Benjamin, the story teller is a type of secularised medieval chronicler, the story being devoid of psychological intentions, thus permitting the material richness of life to step forth unprocessed, in all its fullness (Wolin 223).

Ratliff is like the journeymen of middle ages, in his function as a sewing machine salesman, a good metaphor for someone who tries to sew up the rifts and crevices brought about by modernity on the community, in the wake of Flem Snopes. In the *Story-teller,* Benjamin writes that "the artisan class was its university, in him was combined the lore of faraway places, with lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to the natives of a place." But if story-telling represents the continuity and the flow of experience, the novel can only tell of fragmentation and discontinuity. In fact, Benjamin uses an image which eerily recalls Mink Snopes, awakening to the modern world after his 38 year-long sleep: "a generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Wolin 219).

But Faulkner, the Modernist novelist, knows that traditional story-telling, with its assumption that meaning is immanent to life and that experience can be transmitted, is defunct, if it really ever existed. In *The Mansion*, Ratliff substitutes radios and televisions for the sewing machines of the past. It is no longer experience that is transmitted, as Ratliff only remains a transmitting agent. But like Bloom in *Ulysses*, a canvasser for advertisement, Ratliff stands for Modernist narrative, no longer capable of plugging the gaps, but able to create gaps himself and to become his own message. The very vessel of transmission becomes what is transmitted. As in the *Old Testament* episode of the death of King David's younger son Absalom, the second messenger arrives first but does not deliver any message or stops short of announcing the news. He has become his own news. Likewise, Faulkner lets his narrative become its own message, an act of transmission, per force orientated towards the future, and

the narrative itself becomes this message of hope we tried to evince in *The Mansion*, as if hope could only come from within.

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In an article called "The Melancholy Angel," the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes that "only the perennially late stubbornness of the messenger whose message is nothing other than the task of transmission can give back to man, who has lost his ability to appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge."

Agamben was reassessing Benjamin's angel of history in the light of Dürer's Melancholy Angel. I believe that *The Mansion* allows for such space to exist, a space where Bloch's concrete hope could find a home. The clausula of *The Mansion* also evokes an angel: "the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and the brave, right on up to the very top itself among the shining phantoms and dreams which are the milestones of the long human recording – Helen and the bishops, the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful an graceless seraphim." Is it not a strange coincidence that Faulkner would end his entire work with the image of an ambiguous, almost earthly and severe angel? In the oxymoron "graceless seraphim," Faulkner was perhaps bringing the melancholy angel of art and the angel of history together, overseeing the whole lot, having already reached the other side of hope.

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