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Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) occupied for a long time an ambiguous place in the writer's career. Suffering from the author's poor opinion of his own novel, it has too often been seen as the outcome of "a cheap idea, because it was deliberately conceived to make money." [2] Many critics, appealing to Faulkner's unquestionable taste for fabrication but nevertheless taking his assertion at face value,[3] ignored the fact that he revised extensively the first version of his novel "trying to make out of it something which would not shame *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* too much" and that he was eventually satisfied with the result, even calling it "a fair job" ("Introduction" 339)... Nevertheless, the structure of the plot and the variability of tone from black

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[2] "Introduction" to *Sanctuary* written by Faulkner himself in the 1932 Modern Library edition (reproduced 337).

[3] André Bleikasten mentions however, considering Faulkner's economic situation, that "making money was at any rate probably one incentive for writing *Sanctuary*" (214).

humor to climactic terror, let alone the shocking themes woven into the novel, have sometimes led commentators to regret that "it often seems intentionally incapable of bearing the burden of interpretation it calls for . . . [and that] it may never be construed as a great novel. . . [though] it remains thoroughly fascinating . . . because it invites a number of thematic approaches, none of them completely satisfactory" (Sundquist 59).

Beyond the traditional interpretations revolving around the motifs of "the discovery of the nature of reality with the concomitant discovery of evil" (Brooks 116), a growing number of critics have underlined the originality and the achievement of Faulkner's narrative technique in *Sanctuary,* long obliterated by the "scandalous" and apparently frustrating — at least, for the critics — set of themes staged in it. As a consequence, the once so shocking "pot-boiler" eventually found an honorable place in Faulkner's literary career, as "an illuminating transitional work which helps explain the nature of Faulkner's remarkable creative breakthrough" (McHaney 35)

Among those who praise the novel's literary qualities, John T. Matthews underlines that "the figure of ellipsis pervades the rhetorical, psychological, narrative, and thematic structures of *Sanctuary*" (103). Indeed, both Temple's rape and Horace's oedipal complex never appear unveiled in the text, but are only alluded to or conjured up in recurring metonymies and metaphors which only make sense through the filter of interpretation or imaginary reconstruction, thus forcing the reading of *Sanctuary* into a reconstructive process. Highlighting "the radical interpenetration of chaos and order, nature and the law, instinct and custom, innocence and evil" permeating the whole novel, Matthews analyses *Sanctuary* in terms of oppositions "that organize Temple's story . . . and that lead Horace to it" (104), which incites him to interpret the novel's pattern "spatially:" "What preoccupies *Sanctuary* on all fronts is the status of culture's demarcation *within* nature" (110, my emphasis). In this paper, I will try to pursue Matthews' hypothesis to show that the narrative process in *Sanctuary* follows a vortex structure organized around a linguistic vacuum that both inspires and generates the text, promoting Faulkner's work to a fictionalized *mise en abyme* of the very process of writing.

In his long, seminal study of the novel, André Bleikasten noticed the circular organization of *Sanctuary* : "Endlessly circling around that which it refuses to name, Faulkner's text shapes itself . . . around a central gap" (231). According to Matthews, the elliptical nature of that hiatus engenders ruptures in the text corresponding to the disquieting presence of nature within the story,

negatively defined as "a cancellation of the marks of civilization" (107). So, forbidden urges or acts of barbarity belong to blank zones that illustrate the "interiority — rather than the anteriority — of nature to culture" (108). If one merges this spatial pattern with Bleikasten's, nature appears at the very core of the narrative as a central axis around which the novel obstinately revolves.

Corroborating the reader's general sentiment, Matthews suggests that "Temple's brutal deflowering is the sensational pivot of Faulkner's pot-boiler" (114). Indeed, the sordid rape of the Mississippi debutante is no doubt the most striking episode of *Sanctuary* and it contributed largely to make "the most horrific tale [Faulkner] could imagine" [1] a commercial success. However, many critics have failed so far to define adequately what *Sanctuary*'s sensational side actually rested on; for it is not so much the obscenity of the narrative that makes it so eccentric than the fact that it is, strictly speaking, the account of an *impossible* story: the rape of a young girl by an impotent man.[2]

In accordance with the detective story genre, the reader is only given the ignominious answer to the outrageous riddle in the last pages, during the trial at Jefferson:

> The District Attorney . . . lifted the stained corn-cob before [Temple's] eyes. The room sighed, a long hissing breath.
> "Did you ever see this before ?"
> "Yes" (302-303).

This shows that it is not so much the rape itself which makes the audience react, but the way it was perpetrated. Beyond the horrible, sordid dimension of the crime, it is no doubt this particular aspect that scandalizes the spectators and the reader as well. What was supposedly impracticable has indeed been accomplished by the impotent rapist who eventually achieves his ends despite his sexual inadequacy. Here lies the true root of the scandal, not only in the savage deflowering of a young girl, but above all in the squalid *tour-de-force* completed by a man who was supposed to be congenitally incapable of accomplishing it: "he will never be a man, properly speaking, [the doctor said.]" (323) By doing so,

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[1] ("Introduction" 338). It is now well-known that Faulkner borrowed his story from real life characters of his time. For further details on Faulkner's other sources of inspiration, see, for example, McHaney or Sunquist (44-47).

[2] Bleikasten redefines the nature of the transgression, moving it from a moral one to a structural one: "The scandal of scandals is that in the last resort Popeye is not the cause and agent of evil he was assumed to be but only the catalyst of its enactment and exposure" (264).

Popeye breaks the law twice: first, by committing a repugnant, intolerable crime, then by questioning ordinary logic when he takes in his own filthy way what nature, medical science, common sense, and public opinion have refused him in advance. In *Sanctuary*, Faulkner shifts the signification of evil beyond a mere question of morality by redefining it in terms of logic and predestination: what Popeye's violation of the law challenges is nothing less than nature itself, *i.e.* the established order of the world.

Given the fundamental character of the transgression, one may assume here that what constitutes the ultimate pivot of the text is not only the rape itself, but what makes it both virtually impossible and fictionally effective. Bleikasten has underlined the paradoxical essence of the narrative and has suggested its structure: "The figure of the *vortex* is perhaps the one that best describes its self-contradictory, self-defeating character: motion turned upon itself, wasted in endless and pointless spinning" (243). Being the *locus* of the crime around which the whole texts revolves, Temple embodies emblematically the axis of that maelstrom. She is recurrently described as a mechanical body rotating around itself: "In the hall she *whirled* and ran . . . then without a break she *whirled* and ran to the house" (69); or "[she] *whirled* and run back . . . and *whirl* and run again" (96); or else "then she *whirled* and ran toward him . . . she *whirled* and leaped back into the crib" (104, my emphasis). Temple's body is the funnel [1] of the maelstrom.

Although the source of the story is a matter of sex, sexual organs are never directly mentioned; they appear however in symbolic body appendixes such as Popeye's inevitable cigarettes, often described as "slanting" (3, 46) or "curling" (9, 11, 46) from his mouth, significantly reminiscent of his improbable erections. As to Temple's genitals, they are repeatedly evoked through metonymies, which contributes to the conjuring up of the motifs of gaping holes or cavities. Temple's violated femininity unveils itself when she is depicted, often enough to be significant, with "her mouth open" (71, 106, 147, 148, 150, 247); or "her mouth round and open like a small empty cave" (144); or else: "I felt cold, like the inside of your mouth when you hold it open" (231). Under the spell of terror, she opens her mouth as if to scream (167, 253), most of the time emitting no sound: "she looked at him and opened her mouth again" (145). The intensity of her emotions when she literally assails Red sexually makes the expression of

[1] The term is borrowed from Edgar A. Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841).

her face verge on obscenity: "her mouth gaped like that of a dying fish" (252). But one of the most striking occurrences appears when Popeye bullies her in the car:

> Again, the bitten sandwich in her hand, she ceased chewing and opened her mouth in that round, hopeless expression of a child; again his hand left the wheel and gripped the back of her neck and she sat motionless, gazing straight at him, her mouth open and the half chewed mass of bread and meat lying upon her tongue (148).

There are several similar scenes during which Popeye performs the same violent gestures, triggering off identical reactions on Temple's part (144, 145, 147, 167). One of them is clearly reminiscent of the rape:

> She ceased struggling, but she continued to twist her head from side to side, tugging at his hand. One finger, ringed with a thick ring, held her lips apart, his finger-tips digging into her cheek. . . . The ring was like a dentist's instrument; she could not regurgitate. When he removed it she could feel the imprint of his fingers on her jaw. She lifted her hand to it.
>
> "You hurt my mouth," she whimpered (244).

The phrase "she could not regurgitate" clearly links the two episodes. In both passages, there is something Temple cannot swallow because of Popeye's brutality. The second incident can be read as a pantomime of transparent sexual character which evokes what happened between them in the crib — the phallic ringed finger forcing the feminine opening and inflicting pain. Then, the nature of the half-hidden obscenity of the first passage appears fully as a reenactment of the rape, and the "half chewed mass of bread and meat lying upon her tongue" — something that is not supposed to be shown, according to social standards — can thus be interpreted as a substitute of a more scabrous intimate thing metaphorically represented by the inside of the mouth, namely the female genitals in their crude reality. There is of course nothing erotic in that, but merely the blunt representation of the pornographic real, arousing immediate disgust.

Various other episodes "revolve" around open mouths as so many tokens of the central scene of the rape,[1] borrowing elements from it. Popeye's mother is depicted as "a *young woman* with a wild face, her *mouth open*, looking at the child [Popeye] with a vague air, scouring her loose hair slowly upward from her *temples* with both hands" (323, my emphasis). Miss Reba's hard breathing — a

[1] Let us mention, for example, the recurrent allusions to Temple's red lipstick, calling to mind the red liquid flowing from her.

physiological sign of sexual excitement — is associated with the same array of symbols:

> One *ringed* hand lay on her breast . . . *her open mouth*, studded with *gold-fillings*, gasped upon the harsh labor of her breathing . . . She drew her breath whistling, *her mouth gaped*, shaping the hidden agony of her thwarted lungs, her eyes pale and round with stricken bafflement, *protuberant* (165, my emphasis).

The ring, the open mouth, the protuberant eyes evoking Popeye's name and voyeurism, and even the gold-fillings as a metonymic prolepsis of the "dentist's instrument" image (244),[1] all belong to Faulkner's literary paraphernalia painstakingly sketching *Sanctuary*'s sordid atmosphere. Indeed, with Miss Reba, obscenity is never really absent: "Beyond the wall Miss Reba filled the hall, the house, with a harsh choking uproar of obscene cursing" (167).

Even characters who are not connected with Popeye or Temple reflect in their uncontrolled attitudes the unhealthy, obscene atmosphere of the novel:

> [Horace] followed them into the day coach filled with snoring, with *bodies sprawled* half into the aisle as though in the aftermath of a sudden and *violent destruction*, with dropped heads, *open-mouthed*, their throats turned profoundly upward as though *waiting the stroke of knives* (176, my emphasis).

Here again, the open mouths signal impending violence, sex and murder: the ambiguous posture of the passengers, like so many bodies waiting to be raped; the throats waiting to be cut, reminiscent of the anonymous black prisoner's murderous gesture;[2] and even the implicit stroke of knives, a bloody parody of the rape... The scene encapsulates all the violent elements infesting the novel.

Eyes also play a prominent part in the metaphoric representation of the genitals. The critics have amply commented upon Popeye's "turgescent" gaze as

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[1] If the "dentist's instrument" image is nothing but a mechanical representation of a painful and brutal sexual act, it is no wonder if the former prostitute has her mouth "studded with gold-fillings..." The same image is used by Horace who tried to force Ruby Lamar to collaborate: "That's like paying a dentist to fix your teeth and then refusing to let him look into your mouth" (139). Horace's unconscious desire for another ex-prostitute could not be evoked more suitably.

[2] "There was a negro murderer in the jail, who had killed his wife; slashed her throat with a razor" (118).

a substitute for his defective virility.[1] Temple's eyes offer a complementary symbolic surrogate. Like her mouth, they are generally widened by fright and horror, and, in full contrast to Popeye's, they accordingly evoke bottomless pits. Temple's eyes are "wide and black" (80, 154); "quite black" (71); or "calm and empty as two holes" (74). But the most stunning description of Temple's eyes makes them fit exactly Popeye's burning desire, as they are "like holes burned with a cigar" (97), the exact matching pieces to Popeye's cigarettes, symbols of his impotency.

Gaping mouths; hollow eyes... The narrative spins and is spun around a series of images conjuring up holes[2] and vacuums reflecting the impossibility to put into words the atrocity and the improbability of Temple's rape. Many critics have noticed that the text appears as a truncated narrative that the protagonists fail to complete. Moreover, a comparative study of the original text (1929) with the published version reveals that Faulkner deliberately refocused the story so as to articulate it around the scene of the rape: "in his revisions Faulkner changed the motivating and withheld center of attention from something in the past . . . to something in the middle" (Parker 131). Largely achieved by truncating passages of Horace's past, the revision discloses the author's will to concentrate his novel on Temple's story, and to reshape the narrative around a central vacuum. But as if the accumulation of void symbols and the reorientation of the plot were not enough to circumscribe the pivotal gap around which the novel is woven, Faulkner inserts it in the printed text itself, moving the dramatic effect of his writing from the imaginary level to the symbolic. Indeed, *Sanctuary* is literally stuffed with blanks, unfinished sentences, and truncated dialogues. As soon as anything scabrous, often connected with sex, is about to be mentioned by some protagonist, the text gives way to symbolic gaps, generally transcribed by typographic dashes or series of suspension points. Although not all of them point clearly at Temple's rape, it is easy to trace back their relation with it, especially when they betray Horace's embarrassment to express — or rather *re*press — unconscious desires revolving around the sexual act, as most of the time he "maneuvers voids to construct a narrative about Temple and Popeye" (Matthews, 121). But a considerable number of them are explicit enough, as, for instance, when Tommy naively but cynically explains to Temple that she should better resign herself to

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[1] See in particular, Michel Gresset's *Fascination* in which he analyzes the economy of Popeye's perverse desire.

[2] The same can be said of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, 1930 (see Lecercle).

the inevitable: ". . . . . Lee says it wont hurt you none. All you got to do is lay down. . . . . " (140); or when Temple herself tries to resist Popeye's libidinous urges: "'No, no,' she whispered, 'he said I cant now he said. . . . . '" (167). Even during her private conversations with Popeye, and despite their forced complicity, Temple is at a loss for words to evoke what has been for both of them a disgraceful simulacrum of rape: "'You, a man, a bold bad man, when you cant even — When you had to bring a real man in to — And you hanging over the bed, moaning and slobbering like a — You couldn't fool me but once, could you ? No wonder I bled and blush — '" (245). Temple's inability to say what she really means, to pronounce words corresponding to what both of them experienced in the *real* — in fact, an *impossible* rape —, constitutes Faulkner's ultimate demonstration of the inadequacy of language to convey "the horror" pervading that "irrational, nightmarish universe" (Rosky 23). One thinks of Conrad's confession of the writer's impotency to express the essence of his story:

> Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream — making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams... (Conrad 57).[1]

In *Sanctuary*, the coincidence between the fictional impossible rape and the writer's incapacity to put it into words is striking. The verbal impotence of the protagonists parallels Faulkner's who endeavors to make up for it by repeating ceaselessly the same symbolic sequences, whether they be metaphorical or more concretely expressed by symbolic punctuation marks. This is how the whirling procession of images of gaping mouths or widened eyes, of dashes and suspension points, of pantomimic scenes of corporal submission, weave the text around the central trauma of the impossible rape. By doing so, Faulkner inscribes in his fiction both his basic impotency as a writer and the essential inadequacy of literature to turn the traumatic event into words. The trauma is not only Temple's, but the author's as well, as the impotency is both Popeye's and Faulkner's: in *Sanctuary*, the paradigmatic substitution of the pen for the penis generates the whirling of the words into a literary text, suggesting a definition of fiction writing's

[1] Confronted with the inexpressible, Kurtz can only produce a cry of terror: "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 111).

genesis *around* the impossible. The writing of *Sanctuary* is basically a transgression of order.

The "real" essence of the trauma is well-known to psychoanalysts who see in the never assimilated traumatic event the essential factor that generates repetition. As Jacques Lacan puts it: "What repeats itself is always something that occurs . . . as if accidentally. . . . Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the psychoanalytical experience, the real appears under the form of something that cannot be *assimilated* — as a trauma, determining all that follows it, and imposing its apparently fortuitous origin?" (Lacan 54-55, my translation) *Sanctuary*'s composition emblematically illustrates the functioning of the repetition compulsion. The components of the traumatic event seem indeed both accidental and predetermined. Then, scenes of high phantasmic value, whose latent meanings insistently point at the mock rape, appear recurrently, demonstrating again that "the phantasm functions in connection with the real [for] the real supports the phantasm, as the phantasm protects the real" (Lacan 41). Moreover, the narrative itself mirrors the real's irrepressible command over the subject. It is no wonder then if Temple obstinately "protects" Popeye at the tribunal. Far from being the consequence of her alleged fall and taste for evil, or even of her fear of Popeye's possible reprisals, her refusal to accuse her aggressor is a compulsive phantasmal manifestation of the real, nourishing a fantasy that doubly denies the realness of the trauma: first, Goodwin is no impotent man — he has a son — and then *he* did not rape her. In Temple's unconscious, the traumatic, psychologically unacceptable mock rape is thus "protected" by a phantasm from which Popeye has simply vanished. Logically and as a consequence of the drawing force generated by the symbolic central vacuum of the rape, Horace's repressed complicity with Temple's story leaves him unable to realize what actually commands her behavior; his incapacity to react to Temple's perjury drags him irresistibly, paralyzed with guilt, down into the abyss that the false evidence produced during the trial contributed to deepen. Though he barely escapes the blind vengeance of the crowd, he will never recover nor reappear in Faulkner's novels to come...

If we admit, with the majority of the critics, that, at least in the published version, even Horace's personal story coils up around Temple's — for "everything not leading toward her rape is driven to repeat it" (Parker 143) —, the mechanism that generates the whole text appears clearly as the combination of two forces stemming from the same source, *i. e.* the radical exteriority of the real

to language. One force makes fictional writing circle again and again around a central gap, trying to approach it as closely as possible, and the other is the outcome of the repetition compulsion. The resulting force generates a diachronic circular movement spiraling around the real, the trauma. *Sanctuary* can thus be seen as a *vor*-text revolving around the unattainable real — the impossible — that generates it. The image calls to the mind Poe's tale "A Descent into the Maelström" whose composition parallels Faulkner's novel. Horace, like Poe's narrator, is irresistibly and by accident caught in a whirlpool; and though both of them scrutinize the bottom, the reality of it escapes them, leaving in both cases the writer at a loss for words:

> I could make out nothing distinctly on account of a thick mist in which everything there was enveloped . . . no doubt occasioned by the clashing of the great walls of the funnel, as they met together at the bottom — but the yell that went up to the heavens from out of that mist I dare not attempt to describe (276).

Our reading of *Sanctuary* suggests that, although the real is basically resistant to writing, it is nevertheless the primary source of it, the umbilicus of literary fiction, always exterior to it, like the hollow nucleus of a vortex. Faulkner himself verifies this interpretation in a dazzling metaphor once again focused on Temple's eyes: "Her eyes were quite wide, almost black, the lamplight on her face and two tiny reflections of his face in her pupils like peas in two inkwells" (80-81). Popeye's image caught in Temple's gaze is just another ironical inverted version of the plot, as are her wide black eyes — *she* has the pop eyes of her black tormentor.[1] Imprisoned in his victim's eyes, Popeye is turned into a mere couple of "peas," phonetic counterparts of the two Ps in his name. The linguistic transformation becomes particularly relevant if one links it with Faulkner's comparison of Temple's eyes with *ink*wells, for the metaphor reveals itself another *mise en abyme* of Faulkner's source of inspiration: by reducing his protagonist to a pure symbolic — phonetic — dimension, the author inscribed in his novel the very process of writing caught in the unfathomable well into which his imagination dips ceaselessly. The ink stands here for the real of writing, this material trace on the paper which brings sense to nonsense.[2]

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[1] On the very first page, Popeye is already portrayed in his black suit.

[2] Bleikasten saw a comparable *mise en abyme* in the "black stuff that ran out of Bovary's mouth" (7) which Horace associated with Popeye: "One might then see it as well as a *mise en abyme*, a symbolic reduplication of the book within the book: black stuff, fallen on a white page ; black bile, black humor, distilled into ink; terror and nausea exorcised it the very act of writing" (252). For further interpretation of the original text, see Bleikasten (250-252).

In Poe's short story, the maelstrom eventually subsides and nothing remains of the fury of the elements but the wild account of the narrator. Quite similarly, *Sanctuary*'s last lines testify to an apparent restored tranquillity following the dramatic turmoil. Temple and her father stroll peacefully in the Luxembourg Gardens, among the "dead tranquil queens in stained marble mus[ing]" (333) around the pool "where children and an old man in a shabby brown overcoat [sail] toy boats" (332). The whirlpool has given way to a harmless pool, as if nothing had happened and innocence reigns again over the world, shadowed only by the looming presence of death, the real *par excellence*, significantly the very last word of the novel.

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