

Mythic Sex in Mississippi: Eula and Ike Snopes

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Faulkner has long ceased to be the naive genius from the rural South. Instead, critics have turned him into an international modernist, inspired by T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, by cubism and vorticism. However, what has perhaps not been fully understood is that it is as a modernist that Faulkner becomes preoccupied with myth. His myth-making, in instances such as the Eula and Ike Snopes episodes in *The Hamlet*, should be seen in the context of the myth-making by modernists such as Eliot, Joyce, Stravinsky, and Picasso. The inverted and grotesque myths of the modernists appear as attempts to affirm certain values in the face of the international and regional dilemmas captured in works such as *The Waste Land* and *The Sound and the Fury*.

Most readers of *The Hamlet* have been bewildered and put off by both the daring thematics as well as the difficult language of the improbable story of a fourteen-year old Mississippi girl featured as a fertility goddess and the embarrassing case of the sodomitic relationship of an idiot with a cow. However, appreciation of the Eula and Ike stories is facilitated when readers conceive of these unlikely stories or “unerhörte Begebenheiten” as redemptive myths and thematic counterpoints to the stories of sexual anxieties projected into the Labove, Houston, and Mink Snopes plots.

The intellectually and emotionally demanding style of the Eula and Ike Snopes plots involves readers in transfer or metaphorizing operations, and, ultimately, in liminal or mythic experiences. At the same time, the intensely metaphorised style alerts us through ironic signals to the tension between the epiphany of the divine and its mundane, grotesque, and even sordid circumstances. The difficulties, caused by the clash between the naturalistic and the stylized elements of description, between

the mythic dimensions of a regional story, are unavoidable and aesthetically justified. Indeed, perceptive readers recognize that the mannerisms and tortured abstractness of the language in the Eula and Ike Snopes episodes are not caused by caprice or a fatal decay of style, but by that specific courage to tackle such ultimate and impossible subjects as the incarnation of mythic sex. It is the kind of courage which Faulkner, as he says in *Selected Letters*, had missed in Hemingway: "to get out on a limb, to risk bad taste, overwriting, dullness etc."¹

At the beginning of Book II, "Eula," Faulkner associates his heroine expressly with the "old Dionysic times" and traditional Dionysian imagery ("honey, grapes, vines, goats"), echoing his earlier use of the faun-motif in the short story "Black Music." However, in *The Hamlet* he affects a new sensuous experience of the venerable contents by overwhelming readers with a crammed pattern of sensuous adjectives and nouns: "honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the writhen bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard rapacious trampling goat-hoof." This effect is enhanced by syntactical units which impact on readers as much through their blend of the metaphoric with the acoustic and the iconic as through their rational content: "listen in sullen bemusement, with a weary wisdom heired of all mammalian maturity."

Although the stylistic devices comprise synaesthetic units and mythological allusion, remote vocabulary ("integer"), and scientific imagery or observation ("teeming vacuum"; "soundproof glass"; "enlarging organs"), their aggregate effect is clearly focussed and serves to suggest the universal, and, in that sense, the transcendental dimension of regional reality. In this context, Eula's curious unwillingness to "move" appears not as a trivial idiosyncrasy but as a kind of mythic immobility ("she already knew there was nowhere she wanted to go, nothing new or novel at the end of progression, only place like another anywhere and everywhere"²). That this is indeed the author's aim is confirmed by such phrases as "suggested some symbology of the old Dionysic times" (817) and "the drowsing maidenhead symbol's self" (836).

Faulkner's continuing fascination with the Dionysian motif and image-clusters indicates his Puritan urge to project a pagan counter-vision. It is therefore not surprising that the Eula-Labove plot is marked by rich metaphoric variations of a central tension between a regressive but

culturally productive male principle and an unconscious but vitalistically superior female principle. To embody this polarity parodically in the frustrated “infatuation” of a redneck student and schoolmaster with a phlegmatic Mississippi schoolgirl was one of Faulkner’s great ironic inventions.

As Faulkner invokes Rabelais in the Varner plot, it comes as no surprise that words such as “buttocks” and “mammalian” with their alliterative echoes are dominant verbal leitmotifs as instanced in the humorous juxtaposition of Eula’s overwhelming femininity and her brother Jody’s frustrated efforts to contain it:

. . . the roan horse bearing the *seething and angry man* and the girl of whom, even at nine and ten and eleven, there was *too much—too much of leg, too much of breast, too much of buttock; too much of mammalian female meat* . . . (821-22, my emphasis)

However, Eula’s “mammalian” superiority, making “a travesty and paradox of the whole idea of education” (822), is also, as the metaphors used to describe her show, of a monstrous and grotesque kind:

the invincible abhorrence of straight lines, jiggling its component boneless curves against his back. (822)

. . . the bare section between dress and stocking top looking as gigantically and profoundly naked as the dome of an observatory. (823)

These “grotesque” effects, deriving in the example of the “observatory dome” or in the following metaphor of the “house,” from the great distance between imagistic tenor and vehicle, mirror Eula’s peculiarly divided nature:

Even while sitting behind her brother on the horse, the inhabitant of that meat seemed to lead *two separate and distinct lives* as infants in the act of nursing do. There was *one Eula Varner* who supplied blood and nourishment to the buttocks and legs and breasts; there was *the other Eula* who merely inhabited them, . . . as you are *in a house which you did not design but where the furniture is all settled and the rent paid up*. (822, my emphasis)

Labove, too, forces together very heterogeneous images in associating, on the one hand, the eleven-year old girl “eating a cold potato” with

a cat in the sun, and on the other, "with the goddesses in his Homer and Thucydides" (834). Moreover, he allows readers to recognize the philosophical purpose of these grotesque metaphors by making the schoolgirl Eula the *coincidentia oppositorum* of myth and religion: "of being at once corrupt and immaculate, at once virgins and the mothers of warriors and of grown men" (834). The same tendency to mythicize the heroine through unorthodox religious metaphor speaks from the metamorphosis of Jody Varner into "a seething eunuch priest" and the "wooden desks and benches" of the Mississippi schoolhouse "into a grove of Venus" (836).

As Eula appears from both the narrator's and Labove's viewpoints metaphorically elevated, it is not surprising to find Ratliff too envisioning her as an "unscalable sierra, the rosy virginal mother of barricades for no man to conquer scot-free" (877). Apparently, there were, in addition to Faulkner's thematic impulse to embody in Eula the paradox of "the virginal mother," more personal reasons, above all his relation to Maud Falkner, as to why he would be fascinated with such an "avatar" of sexual taboo.³ In regard to Faulkner's re-application of the mythic *coincidentia oppositorum*, Varner's sale of his daughter to Flem is a particularly sinister aspect of the property theme, and most readers are inclined to accept that this marriage has an enslaving effect on Eula. However, the overall implications of Faulkner's metaphoric rendering of this theme are that Eula is superior to any such enslaving—which is a typical consequence of Faulkner's belief in a vitalistic myth instead of a socio-economic-political model.

There are instances like the final tableau in which Eula is represented with pathos, where she appears "Olympus-tall" and her "gesture immemorial and female and troubling" (1071), but just as characteristic are Faulkner's intense efforts to curtail the pathos of mythicizing Eula by comedy. Against "the moon-blanching dust in the tremulous April night" with its connotations of moon and spring rituals, Eula appears in a white garment and is blank-eyed like a Greek sculpture, "the heavy gold hair, the mask not tragic and perhaps not even doomed: just damned," but this pathos is then counterbalanced, not devalued, by a parodic allusion to opera settings:

. . . the strong faint lift of breasts beneath marblelike fall of the garment; to those below what Brunhilde, what Rhinemaiden on what spurious river-rock of papier-maché, what Helen returned to what topless and shoddy Argos, waiting for no one. (1017)

The romantic theatricality vanishes straightaway when Ratliff confronts us with regional reality, asking Mrs. Snopes to call her father: "We want Uncle Will. Henry Armstid is hurt at Mrs Littlejohn's" (1017).

In the Ike Snopes episode, too, Faulkner's principal mode of combining myth and reality is through the grotesque. However, there are considerable differences in both the thematic and the stylistic aspects of the Ike and Eula stories. While the Eula plot, through grotesque imagery, establishes an icon of a male ideal of womanhood, the Ike Snopes-plot, blending elaborate rhetoric with travesty, transmits a mythic love story. But the story, in *The Hamlet*, of the love between a human being and an animal is not told in the acceptable style of the love stories of Zeus as bull or swan, Native American stories of the love between bears and humans⁴, or that of fairy tales like "Snow-White and Rose-Red." Instead, Faulkner provokes readers by a diction in which the "poetic" and Thirties' realism are manneristically forced together. However, this grotesque combination of the rarified with the rural, and even with the scatological, corresponds with the equally grotesque fact that the love of the mentally handicapped sodomite is the only "true love" in Frenchman's Bend.

Apparently Faulkner, like other artists experiencing the collapse of traditional values (see also John Steinbeck, Djuna Barnes, D. H. Lawrence, and the German Expressionists) felt an urge to *radically* reassess human essence by exploring the liminal, by expressing the humane features of the primitive, the simple-minded and marginalized. As John Steinbeck through Tularecito ("Tularecito," 1932) and Lennie (*Of Mice and Men*, 1937), Faulkner through Benjy (1929) and Ike (1940) explored the anthropological and mythic borderlines of humankind ("the creature" [810]; "pointed faun's ears" [811]) as well as of his art. We should perhaps remind ourselves that these literary assessments of humanity took place at about the same time that Hitler had begun to draw his "borderline" of humankind through his "eugenic mass murders," the

"Vernichtung unwerten Lebens." Part of the greatness of *The Sound and the Fury* and of *The Hamlet*—and this is sometimes ignored in scholarly debate—lies in that both Benjy and Ike are portrayed not as clinical cases but as human beings, feeling affection and receiving human attention.⁵

In contrast to the regressive and antagonistic love-experience of Labove, Houston and Mink, Ike, the idiot, being outside the rationality and morality of societal codes awaits his beloved "indivisible in joy" (883) and at one with nature. In this opening passage of the episode, Faulkner, by carefully orchestrating acoustic and metaphoric effects, has created a nature-setting and a linguistic medium in which realistic features ("smell her," "reeked") and stylizing elements ("malleate hands of mist . . . palpated her pearly barrel") are cautiously balanced. The alliterative expression of morning mist, in particular, suggests the harmony of the human being and the animal as integral parts of nature ("the same malleate hands of mist which drew along his prone drenched flanks palpated her pearly barrel too and shaped them both somewhere in immediate time, already married" [883]). The miniature drawing of natural details proves an especially effective means of communicating Ike's closeness to nature.

He would lie *amid* the waking instant of earth's teeming *minute* life, the *motionless* fronds of water-heavy grasses stooping into the *mist* before his face in black, fixed curves, along each parabola of which the *marching* drops held in *minute magnification* the dawn's rosy *miniatures* . . . (883, my emphasis)

How difficult but also how rewarding such an effort can be is instanced by the experience of the fire-scene and the cubist superimposing and blending of Ike and the cow with the horse. Through distortive metaphors, realistic action here assumes a visionary quality:

For an instant they yelled face to face, the wild eyes, the yellow teeth, the long gullet red with ravaging gleeful triumph . . . His voice and that of the horse became one voice, . . . he ran into and through the fire and burst into air, sun, visibility again, shedding flames . . . The air was filled with furious wings and the four crescent-glints of shod hooves as, still screaming, the horse vanished beyond the ravine's lip, sucking first the cow and then himself after it as though by the violent vacuum of its passing. Earth became perpendicular and fled upward . . . (890-91)

Through carefully crafted transitions readers are led here from realist perception to symbolist “insight,” as is evidenced by the use of the metaphor of mirroring, contemplation, vision, and the allusion to the myth of “cow-eyed” Juno:

She stands as he left her, tethered, chewing. Within the mild enormous moist and pupilless globes he sees himself in twin miniature mirrored by the inscrutable abstraction; one with that which Juno might have looked out with he watches himself contemplating what those who looked at Juno saw. (899)

Similarly, through religiously heightened nature-imagery (“It is now bald and forthright day . . . but the cries [of the birds] are no longer the mystery’s choral strophe and antistrophe rising vertical among the leafed altars” [900]), the times of the day become occasions for metaphorically linking the lovers’ progress with cosmic processes.

. . . they will advance only as the day itself advances, no faster. They have the same destination: sunset. (900)

Ike Snopes’s cow is associated not only with the goddess Juno but through the symbolist imagery from Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* with “Helen and the bishops, the kings and the graceless seraphim” (903); Eula is likened to a filly (820) and her suitors “erupted into her placid orbit like a stampede of wild cattle” (840), she brings into the “harsh functioning of Protestant primary education a moist blast of spring’s liquorish corruption, a pagan triumphal prostration before the supreme primal uterus” (836). Clearly, the author is driven to artistically redefine human essence at the borderlines—or at the base—where animalistic, human and divine features fuse. The sordid and loveless world of an insignificant Mississippi hamlet attains a liminal and mythic dimension, the grotesque figures of a schoolgirl and a sodomitic village idiot come to embody the mysteries of love.

NOTES

¹*Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1977) 251.

²*The Hamlet: William Faulkner, Novels 1936-1940* (New York: The Library of America, 1990) 817. All subsequent references are cited in the text.

³Joel Williamson, "Virginity," *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1993) 393-98.

⁴See also Gary Snyder in "Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Ecological Survival," *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 117-29, especially the paragraph with the provocative title, "Making Love with Animals."

⁵See James G. Watson, *The Snopes Dilemma: Faulkner's Trilogy* (Coral Gables, FL: U of Miami P, 1968) on Ike as "the embodiment of the primordial natural love" (48).