On Faulkner

The Best from American Literature

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Series Introduction

From Vol. 1, no. 1, in March 1929 to the latest issue, the front cover of American Literature has proclaimed that it is published "with the Cooperation of the American Literature Section [earlier Group] of the Modern Language Association." Though not easy to explain simply, the facts behind that statement have deeply influenced the conduct and contents of the journal for five decades and more. The journal has never been the "official" or "authorized" organ of any professional organization. Neither, however, has it been an independent expression of the tastes or ideas of Jay B. Hubbell, Clarence Gohdes, or Arlin Turner, for example. Historically, it was first in its field, designedly so. But its character has been unique, too.

Part of the tradition of the journal says that Hubbell in founding it intended a journal that should "hold the mirror up to the profession"—reflecting steadily its current interests and (ideally) at least sampling the best work being done by historians, critics, and bibliographers of American literature during any given year. Such remains the intent of the editors based at Duke University; such also through the decades has been the intent of the Board of Editors elected by the vote of members of the professional association—"Group" or "Section."

The operative point lies in the provisions of the constitutional "Agreements" between the now "Section" and the journal. One of these provides that the journal shall publish no article not approved by two readers from the elected Board. Another provides that the Chairman of the Board or, if one has been appointed and is acting in the editorial capacity at Duke, the Managing Editor need publish no article not judged worthy of the journal. Historically, again, the members of the successive Boards and the Duke editor have seen eye-to-eye. The Board has tended to approve fewer than one out of every ten submissions. The tradition of the journal dictates that it keep a slim back-log. With however much revision, therefore, the journal publishes practically everything the Board approves.

Founder Hubbell set an example from the start by achieving the

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almost total participation of the profession in the first five numbers of American Literature. Cairns, Murdock, Pattee, and Rusk were involved in Vol. 1, no. 1, along with Boynton, Killis Campbell, Foerster, George Philip Krapp, Leisy, Mabbott, Parrington, Bliss Perry, Louise Pound, Quinn, Spiller, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Stanley Williams on the editorial side. Spiller, Tremaine McDowell, Gohdes, and George B. Stewart contributed essays. Canby, George McLean Harper, Gregory Paine, and Howard Mumford Jones appeared as reviewers. Harry Hayden Clark and Allan Gilbert entered in Vol. 1, no. 2. Frederic I. Carpenter, Napier Wilt, Merle Curti, and Grant C. Knight in Vol. 1, no. 3; Clarence Faust, Granville Hicks, and Robert Morss Lovett in Vol. 1, no. 4; Walter Fuller Taylor, Orians, and Paul Shorey in Vol. 2, no. 1.

Who, among the founders of the profession, was missing? On the other hand, if the reader belongs to the profession and does not know those present, she or he probably does not know enough. With very few notable exceptions, the movers and shakers of the profession have since the beginning joined in cooperating to create

and sustain the journal.

The foregoing facts lend a special distinction to the best articles in American Literature. They represent the many, often tumultuous winds of doctrine which have blown from the beginnings through the years of the decade next to last in this century. Those articles often became the firm footings upon which present structures of understanding rest. Looking backward, one finds that the argonauts were doughty. Though we know a great deal more than they, they are a great deal of what we know. Typically, the old best authors wrote well—better than most of us. Conceptually, even ideologically, we still wrestle with ideas they created. And every now and again one finds of course that certain of the latest work has reinvented the wheel one time more. Every now and again one finds a sunburst idea which present scholarship has forgotten. Then it appears that we have receded into mist or darkness by comparison.

Historical change, not always for the better, also shows itself in methods (and their implied theories) of how to present evidence, structure an argument, craft a scholarly article. The old masters were far from agreed—much to the contrary—about these matters.

But they are worth knowing in their own variety as well as in their instructive differences from us.

On the other hand, the majority of American Literature's authors of the best remain among us, working, teaching, writing. One testimony to the quality of their masterliness is the frequency with which the journal gets requests from the makers of textbooks or collections of commentary to reprint from its pages. Now the opportunity presents itself to select without concern for permissions fees what seems the best about a number of authors and topics from the whole sweep of American Literature.

The fundamental reason for this series, in other words, lies in the intrinsic, enduring value of articles that have appeared in *American Literature* since 1929. The compilers, with humility, have accepted the challenge of choosing the best from well over a thousand articles and notes. By "best" is meant original yet sound, interesting, and useful for the study and teaching of an author, intellectual move-

ment, motif, or genre.

The articles chosen for each volume of this series are given simply in the order of their first publication, thus speaking for themselves and entirely making their own points rather than serving the compilers' view of literary or philosophical or historical patterns. Happily, a chronological order has the virtues of displaying both the development of insight into a particular author, text, or motif and the shifts of scholarly and critical emphasis since 1929. But comparisons or trend-watching or a genetic approach should not blur the individual excellence of the articles reprinted. Each has opened a fresh line of inquiry, established a major perspective on a familiar problem, or settled a question that had bedeviled the experts. The compilers aim neither to demonstrate nor undermine any orthodoxy, still less to justify a preference for research over explication, for instance. In the original and still current subtitle, American Literature honors literary history and criticism equally-along with bibliography. To the compilers this series does demonstrate that any worthwhile author or text or problem can generate a variety of challenging perspectives. Collectively, the articles in its volumes have helped to raise contemporary standards of scholarship and criticism.

This series is planned to serve as a live resource, not as a homage

to once vibrant but petrifying achievements in the past. For several sound reasons, its volumes prove to be weighted toward the more recent articles, but none of those reasons includes a presumed superiority of insight or of guiding doctrine among the most recent generations. Some of the older articles could benefit now from a minor revision, but the compilers have decided to reprint all of them exactly as they first appeared. In their time they met fully the standards of first-class research and judgment. Today's scholar and critic, their fortunate heir, should hope that rising generations will esteem his or her work so highly.

Many of the articles published in *American Literature* have actually come (and continue to come) from younger, even new members of the profession. Because many of those authors climb on to prominence in the field, the fact is worth emphasizing. Brief notes on the contributors in the volumes of their series may help readers to discover other biographical or cultural patterns.

Edwin H. Cady Louis J. Budd On Faulkner

Faulkner's Wilderness Otis B. Wheeler

America white men have recognized in many ways that theirs was a unique kind of experience with the wilderness. Here was a primeval land, fresh from the hand of God, except for the puny and insignificant inroads made upon it by the aboriginal red man. The newcomers were of a relatively sophisticated race, grown up where the face of the land had for centuries been altered by man's tools and according to his desires. But in the primeval wilderness it was God's will, and none of man's, that was manifest.

Faulkner's is not the first reaction in American literature to this experience. Passing over the diarists and naturalists of the colonial period, we can see it beginning about the time of our national independence with Freneau and Bryant. But this reaction is in terms almost wholly derivative from the well-established tradition of Primitivism in English literature. Specifically, wild nature is the manifestation and locus of a Divine Spirit to which man, jaded and corrupted by civilization, may turn for spiritual refreshment and instruction. This reaction is epitomized in Bryant's "Thanatopsis" and "To a Waterfowl."

Cooper's reaction is more significant and more original. For it is he who defines the terms of a paradox which Faulkner is still working at: if the wilderness is God's work, what is the meaning of man's destruction of it in the name of civilization and culture? And there is a corollary problem: if the wilderness is the locus and manifestation of Divine Spirit, where is man to turn for spiritual renewal when the wilderness is gone?

I

In Faulkner's treatment, the wilderness has two roles, apparently discrete, but eventually harmonized in a pattern that transcends human experience. First, it is the teacher of moral and spiritual

truth; second, it is the victim of the Anglo-Saxon's rapacity. Although Faulkner begins by approaching the two themes separately, he eventually comes to interweave them in the final versions of the Ike McCaslin stories. For instance, the separate stories "Lion" and "Delta Autumn" are primarily concerned with the theme of wilderness as victim. In contrast, "The Old People" and the brief Saturday Evening Post version of "The Bear" deal mainly with the theme of wilderness as teacher. But in the Go Down, Moses version of "The Bear" the two themes are fused, as they are also in the total effect of the stories and transitional commentaries in Big Woods.

The first theme is worked out on both dramatic and symbolic levels as the rites of puberty for young Ike McCaslin.² At one point Faulkner calls the wilderness Ike's "college," and adds, "the old male bear itself was his alma mater." But more often the education is described in religious terms. Under the tutelage of Sam Fathers, his spiritual father and, in more ways than first appear, the priest of a primitive wilderness religion, Ike "entered his novitiate to the true wilderness.... It seemed to him that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth" (p. 195). In this novitiate he undergoes the tests which will mark his transition from boyhood to manhood. Or to put it in abstract terms, he comes step by step to an awareness of the spiritual and moral verities which, says Faulkner, underlie human existence. By watching the dogs who run Old Ben, but stop short of bringing him to bay, he begins to learn what fear is. But in the situation of the one dog who overcomes her fear sufficiently to get close enough to be raked by the bear's claws ("The wilderness had patted lightly once her temerity," p. 199) he begins to learn the meaning of bravery. He personally knows fear as he feels himself watched by the bear; and he learns a little more about bravery as Sam Fathers tells him, "Be scared.... But don't be afraid" (p. 207). After journeying alone into the wilderness without food and finally without the aid of watch or compass, stripped, so to speak, to his fundamental humanity, he is worthy to see the bear, the symbol of

² Go Down, Moses (New York, 1942), p. 210. Subsequent page references to this volume appear in the text.

the essential wilderness, the apotheosis of the wilderness spirit. It is a moment of mystical unity: "They had looked at each other, they had emerged from the wilderness old as earth, synchronized to the instant by something more than the blood that moved the flesh and bones which bore them, and touched, pledged something, affirmed, something more lasting than the frail web of bones and flesh which any accident could obliterate."

But he is not yet a man. There is the test of taking life, how he conducts himself in the face of a death which he has engineered. This test is worked out in "The Old People" where Ike kills his first buck and Sam marks his forehead with the hot blood, and reports, "He done all right" (p. 165). The full meaning of the ceremony is something Ike is able to verbalize only much later. Part of it is a cleansing of futile and irrelevant emotions. He thinks to himself, Sam Fathers had "consecrated and absolved him of weakness and regret...—not from love and pity for all which lived and ran and then ceased to live in a second in the very midst of splendor and speed, but from weakness and regret" (p. 182). But the final meaning is best expressed by Ike as an old man, over eighty, in "Delta Autumn," as he recalls again the sacramental first buck: "I slew you; my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct forever onward must become your death" (p. 351).

What altogether has the wilderness taught? It might be summed up as the code of the hunter: bravery, strength, endurance, honor, pride, dignity, humility, pity, love of life, of justice, and of liberty. These are the qualities that Sam or Ike or Cass Edmonds or the unnamed father of the boy in the short version of "The Bear" talk about at one point or another. They are the virtues that the boy learns in a more or less empirical way. These virtues are enforced by three general insights: the knowledge of death, the sense of the sublime, and the sense of mystic unity. The last of these has already been pointed out in one way in young Ike's triumphant vision of the bear; that is unity on a spiritual level. Corresponding to this spiritual unity is the idea of physical unity stated when Ike comes back to the spot in the forest where Lion and Sam Fathers are buried, along with one of Old Ben's paws. He muses, "There was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth

¹ Faulkner sees rapacity, in fact, as the basis of civilization. See Ursula Brumm, "Wilderness and Civilization: A Note on William Faulkner," *Partisan Review*, XXII, 340-350 (Summer, 1955).

² For a detailed discussion of the parallels with primitive puberty rites, see Kenneth J. LaBudde, "Cultural Primitivism in William Faulkner's "The Bear," American Quarterly, II. 322-328 (Winter, 1950).

^{*}Short version of "The Bear," in Raymond W. Short and Richard B. Sewell, eds., Short Stories for Study (3rd ed.; New York, 1956), p. 326.

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and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part" (p. 328). Yet all life has an equally insistent aspect of mortality, a knowledge of which makes the aspect of immortality more precious. This knowledge of death is expressed in Ike's meeting with the rattlesnake only a few minutes after he has left the graves just mentioned. Calmly he hails the huge old rattler in the Indian language of Sam Fathers: "Chief. . . , Grandfather." And through his mind runs the thought, "the old one, the ancient and accursed about the earth, fatal and solitary." The smell of the snake is for him "evocative of all knowledge and an old weariness and of pariah-hood and of death" (p. 329).

Enforcing all the lessons of the wilderness is the sense of sublimity which Ike feels in contact with it: "the unforgettable sense of the big woods—not a quality dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, dynamic and brooding" (p. 175). If this is not precisely the traditional definition of the sublime, nevertheless it seems to be Faulkner's version of it, his attempt to define the emotional quality of a situation in which we traditionally find the emotion of the sublime.

The situation in which the wilderness teaches, that is, the chase, contains by implication the other role of the wilderness—the role of victim. Yet it is not a simple situation because, since the wilderness has a moral role, its destruction has a moral quality.

In order to understand the complexities of the situation we must begin by understanding that there are two kinds of people involved. Ike and Sam Fathers pre-eminently represent the initiated, though in addition Sam is, like Old Ben, a symbol of the wilderness itself. These people have learned fully what the wilderness has to teach and have thereby become in a sense priests of a wilderness religion. They may attain this status because they are free, either by birth or renunciation, of the taint which marks the other type of person—the Anglo-Saxon heritage of rapacity. Sam, the son of a Chickasaw chief and a Negro slave woman, has never had it. Ike, descended from Carothers McCaslin, one of the most rapacious men in the history of Yoknapatawpha, renounces his heritage, gives his lands to a cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, in whom the traits of Carothers McCaslin have bred truer and who in turn passes on these traits to his descendant— Carothers Edmonds of "Delta Autumn." Such men,

and others of even less sophistication, are the uninitiated. They may joy in the wilderness, in "those fierce instants of heart and brain and courage and wiliness and speed," but they can never become initiates in the manner of Ike and Sam. Boon Hogganbeck is the nearest thing to the pure type. He has "the mind of a child, the heart of a horse and little hard shoe-button eyes without depth or meanness or generosity or viciousness or gentleness or anything else. . ." (p. 227). But even he falls short of the generalized type which Faulkner characterizes in his introduction to Big Woods: "Then came the Anglo-Saxon, the pioneer, the tall man roaring with protestant scripture and boiled whiskey, . . . turbulent because of his over-revved glands . . ., innocent and gullible, without bowels for avarice or compassion or forethought either . . . turning the earth into a howling waste from which he would be the first to vanish . . . because . . . only the wilderness could feed and nourish him."

Rapacity Faulkner finds a peculiarly American way. As he says in A Fable, horse-stealing is an American institution, illustrative of "an invincible way of life..., the old fine strong American tradition of rapine..." To fall before this rapacity, whether expressed by the hunter's gun, the woodsman's axe, the sawmill, or the cotton farm financed by the money-hungry bankers in Jefferson, is the first and obvious way in which the wilderness is victim.

But we must remember that it is not one of the rapacious who engineers the death of the great bear. Although Boon Hogganbeck wields the knife that finds his heart, it is Sam Fathers, the initiated, who finds and trains the dog Lion and who directs the hunt; and he is abetted in all this by his acolyte, Ike. On the face of things it would seem inconsistent, even sacrilegious, for the true believer to destroy the source of his belief. But the motive behind the act gives it a sacramental quality. This motive is the reverent desire to save the wilderness from the worse fate that awaits it at the hands of the uninitiated. As Sam says, "Somebody is going to [shoot Old Ben] some day." And Ike replies, "I know it. That's why it must be one of us. . . . When even he don't want it to last any longer" (p. 212). Thus the other way in which the wilderness falls victim is through the sacrificial act of its devotees. The sacrificial quality is

^{*} *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁶ Big Woods (New York, 1955), pp. [iv-v].

⁷ A Fable (New York, 1954), pp. 167-168.

Faulkner's Wilderness

even further emphasized by the fact that the act is a self-immolation for one of the devotees: Sam is so much a part of the wilderness that at the moment of old Ben's death he too falls, to be carried home to his death bed, though he has no visible wound.

Now, are these devotees true believers if they take it upon themselves to determine the fate of the Great Mother? The answer lies in Ike's statement "... when even he don't want it to last any longer." They do not determine the fate; they act only as instruments to accomplish a design immanent in Nature. And who better than the true believers, the initiated, would know of this immanent design?

The allegations of such design are explicit in nearly all of the wilderness stories. The Big Woods is referred to as that "doomed wilderness." The hunters and dogs and bear are "ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules . . ." (p. 192). As they enter the last stages of the hunt for Old Ben, Ike can play his part with undivided heart and mind because "it seemed to him that there was a fatality in it It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what, except that he would not grieve" (p. 226). As an old man in "Delta Autumn" he is able to verbalize what he could only feel as a boy. "[God] said, 'I will give man his chance. I will give him warning and foreknowledge, too, along with the desire to follow and the power to slay. The woods and the fields he ravages and the game he devastates will be consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and his punishment'" (p. 349). The result of man's rapacity, thinks Uncle Ike, is the moral and social chaos of the world on the brink of World War II: "No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! he thought. The people who destroyed it will accomplish its revenge" (p. 364).

These destructors and the fate they bring upon themselves are presented in three forms in Boon, Lion, and "Roth" Edmonds. At the end of "The Bear" Ike finds Boon sitting beneath a tree full of squirrels frenziedly beating the parts of an old gun together and shouting, "Get out of here! Don't touch them! Don't touch a one of them! They're mine!" (p. 331). He has senselessly played his part in the destruction of the wilderness, has slain the great bear with only a sheath knife, and without knowing it has led himself

into the pathetic and ludicrous situation of trying to patch up an old gun to shoot a squirrel.⁸ And this is the last time Boon appears in any of the stories.

Lion is just a four-legged symbol of the same destructiveness. He embodies "courage and all else that went to make up the will and desire to pursue and kill, . . . endurance, the will and desire to endure beyond all imaginable limits of flesh in order to overtake and slay." And his eyes are in quality just like Boon's: "yellow eyes as depthless as Boon's, as free as Boon's of meanness or generosity or gentleness or viciousness" (pp. 237-238). His fate, of course, is to have his entrails raked out by the bear as he leaps to a death grip on the bear's throat. In a fundamental, physical sense, the end of the wilderness is the end of Boon and of Lion for, as Faulkner says. "only the wilderness could feed and nourish [them]." Moreover. neither has any spiritual dimension.

"Roth" Edmonds of "Delta Autumn" is both heir and perpetrator of this destruction on a more sophisticated level. His eclipse is moral rather than physical. Where Boon and Lion are simply amoral, Edmonds is immoral, devious, degenerate. Whereas his cousin Ike is initiated, Roth is never to be initiated because the wilderness that might have been his teacher is no longer a force in the land, is reduced to a pitiful remnant down in the bottom land where the Yazoo and Mississippi meet. The fundamental difference between Ike and Roth is on the question of whether the life of man is underlain by moral verities which make man essentially good or whether men are restrained from unlimited pursuit of anti-social aims only by external forces. Ike contends that "most men are better than their circumstances give them a chance to be" (p. 345). Roth believes that men behave only when someone with the authority and strength to punish is looking at them. So Roth carries on a secret liaison with a part-Negro girl and when she appears at the hunting camp with their child, will not face her to say he is casting her off, but leaves a bundle of money to speak, better than he realizes, his selfish devious materialism. Uncle Ike, as the bearer of the money, has hardly had time to compass entirely the moral horror of Roth's action before he learns of a corresponding enormity, perpetrated this time against the

⁸ This is Faulkner's own explanation of Boon's motives in this scene. See Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., "Faulkner in the University," *College English*, XIX, 1-6 (Oct., 1957).

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sad remnant of the wilderness: Roth has killed a doe with a shotgun. If Ike is unhappy to witness this moral chaos, Roth is even more unhappy to be involved in it. Ike has at least known happiness and serenity, and he still knows the security of convictions about enduring moral values. But Roth is a violent, confused, dissatisfied man, tasting always the bitterness of his decadence, but never comprehending the roots of it.

It is not too much to say, then, that Ike is the last priest of a dving cult, both doomed and avenged by an immanent principle in its source, the wilderness. As for the question of where man is to turn for spiritual renewal when the wilderness is gone, there seems to be no solution: we are apparently to be a race of Roth Edmondses. This is a negative philosophy of history, a prophecy of decline. There is no basis in the wilderness stories for the apparently optimistic belief reflected in Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech that man will "endure" and "prevail." This prophecy of decline will be more meaningful if we return for a moment to Cooper.

At the outset I said that Cooper is the first American writer to formulate the problem that Faulkner is trying to answer. Cooper also offered his solution in the Leatherstocking novels, and there are some striking similarities between these and the Ike McCaslin stories. On the narrative level both use as a central character a woodsman par excellence, a man landless, wifeless, childless, avuncular, proud, humble, dignified, and courageous, a man uncomfortable in the settlements. Both writers treat both youth and old age of the character, though Cooper also treats the middle age of his hero. Both authors at moments of crisis in the chase show a kind of headlong narrative style in which violence and brutality are presented as natural adjuncts of the atavistic muscular frenzy which prevails. As Faulkner puts it, "Those fierce instants of heart and brain and courage and wiliness and speed." Because of changes in conventions of characterization and narrative method over the space of a hundred years, the differences are much more obvious; but at bottom I think more superficial. We no longer have sentimental heroes and heroines to clutter up the action, and in dialog we are spared the rhetoric of sensibility. We are also spared the infinitely repeated pattern of jeopardy and escape, not to mention the tedious auctorial intrusion. But these differences are merely functions of time and place and are far less important than the fundamental likenesses growing out of the choice of theme.

On what we may call the symbolic or philosophical level there are similarities, too, but also some important differences. For both writers the wilderness man is the locus of the most perfect morality, but where Ike's morality has been taught by the wilderness, Natty's has been only nurtured. Cooper could not blink the fact that the noble savage was a myth, that the pure wilderness product was more apt to be a vicious Magua than a noble Natty. Natty's fundamental goodness comes from his white man's "gifts," the product of his early Christian nurture; after the seeds of virtue have been thus planted the wilderness provides a refuge in which they can grow without suffering the contamination that adulthood spent in the settlements would bring. This, in short, is a basically Christian doctrine, whereas Faulkner's is pantheistic.

For Cooper, too, the wilderness is a victim of the white man's rapacity, though he doesn't use that particular term. And for Cooper the destructors are again the authors of their own punishment. In The Prairie Natty says, "Look around you, men; what will the Yankee choppers say, when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters, and find that a hand, which can lay the 'arth bare at a blow, has been here and swept the country, in the very mockery of their wickedness. They will turn on their tracks like a fox that doubles, and then the rank smell of their own footsteps will show them the madness of their waste." But this is not quite the way Faulkner sees it. The difference is that Cooper does not justify the rape of the forest as part of a larger and inevitable pattern. Within the limits of the Leatherstocking tales it is judged a wilful, sinful waste of God's gifts. And the man who so judges it is unquestionably the morally dominant character of the tales—really the one great character. At the same time, the action of the tales is built around the tribulations and eventual successes of upper-class characters whose interests are necessarily identified with civilization. In the ascendancy of these minor characters, the major character must

⁹ Everyman edition, p. 77.

be eclipsed.¹⁰ Within the tales, there is no satisfying explanation of this esthetically perverse arrangement, and we can only conclude that Cooper suffered from a dissociation of sensibility. His heart was with Natty, his head on the side of civilization. This is not the case with Faulkner. As a twentieth-century man, his thinking is no longer conditioned by an implicit faith in the progress of western civilization. If anything, an unconscious assumption of the decline of the west is the conditioning factor. Therefore, his heart and mind are undivided when he contemplates man against the backdrop of the wilderness; and the unity of vision is reflected in the esthetic unity of the work. For this reason, if for no other, Faulkner's treatment of the wilderness theme may have a more lasting value as art than Cooper's.

¹⁰ See Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Leatherstocking Tales Re-examined," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLVI, 524-536 (Oct., 1947).

Colonel Thomas Sutpen as Existentialist Hero William J. Sowder

Existentialism is a term in search of a definition. As of now this search is far from over. Perhaps the writer who comes closest to ending it is Jean-Paul Sartre. Although Sartre recognizes sharp and deep conflicts among the existentialists, he holds that all of them, both Christians and humanists, "have in common . . . the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence—or, . . . that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards." Unfortunately, man is more often than not swamped in his attempt to define himself, and Sartre gloomily watches him go down for the third time. Nearly all of his characters reveal at one time or another existential failure: Antoine Roquentin, the anguished writer in Nausea; Eve Charlier and Pierre Dumaine, the poisoned wife and the revolutionist in The Chips Are Down; Joseph Garcin, Estelle Rigault, and Inez Serrano, the pacifist, the adulteress, and the Lesbian in No Exit; Orestes and Electra, the ill-fated brother and sister in The Flies; and many of the characters in The Age of Reason.2 At the end of this book, the protagonist Mathieu Delarue expresses the sense of failure that haunts the existentialist hero. For years, he acknowledges, he has savored "minute by minute, like a connoisseur, the failure of a life." Faulkner too has portrayed a legion of failures. They range from the lowly Joe Christmas to the highborn John Sartoris. Perhaps the one that failed most spectacularly and the one most concerned with his failure was Thomas Sutpen. Although Sutpen never had time to savor his failure minute by minute, I believe that his failure, like that of Sartre's characters, lay in his vain attempt to define himself. I also believe that the actions

¹"Existentialism Is a Humanism," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1958), pp. 289, 290.

² Nausea, trans. Lloyd Alexander (Norfolk, Conn., n. d.), pp. 1-234 passim; Les Jeux Sont Faits (Paris, 1947), pp. 166-170 passim, No Exit & The Flies, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1954), pp. 20, 21, 26; The Age of Reason, trans. Eric Sutton (New York, 1959), pp. 1-17 passim, 21, 28, 130-138 passim, 139-150 passim.

The Age of Reason, p. 342.

which led to this attempt were those commonly associated with the existentialist hero. I should like to begin my reasons for saying so by relating Sutpen's actions to the most widely known of all existentialist concepts: free choice.

Ι

When Sutpen realized late in life that he was a failure, he wanted to know why. His approach to the question was existentialist: he tried to discover where he had made the wrong choice. Sartre has made use of the same reasoning in developing a psychoanalysis. Renouncing Freudianism, he explains that "Existential psychoanalysis seeks to determine the original choice. . . . Precisely because the goal of the inquiry must be to discover a choice and not a state, the investigator must recall on every occasion that his object is not a datum buried in the darkness of the unconscious but a free, conscious determination. . . . " Sutpen found that he had made two important choices in connection with his failure: the rejection of his first wife and the repudiation of his son by that wife. He claimed that the second choice devolved out of the first and that the first was forced upon him because he had married without knowledge of his wife's Negro blood.⁵ Later, I shall look more closely at this claim; at present, I suggest that Sutpen did not carry the search far enough. Several years before he married and in great anguish, he had freely determined to make himself into a gentleman planter.6 This was his original choice, the one from which all the others devolved.

The events leading to the crucial decision began a year or so after he and his miserable family had moved from a ramshackle cabin in the Virginia Highlands to a hovel in Tidewater. One day in his early teens, Sutpen went on an errand to a large and elegant plantation house. Tidewater etiquette prescribed that poor whites go to the back door of such establishments, but ignorant of this protocol, Sutpen went to the front. A Negro in livery immediately and rudely ordered him to the rear. Not long before this incident, Sutpen had seen his sister holloed out of the road by an insolent Negro riding high on a fast-moving coach.⁷ And now

even "before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he said ..., [Sutpen] seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years they had lived ... [in Eastern Virginia], rushing back ... and seeing a dozen things that had happened and he hadn't even seen them before. ..."

The rebuff at the front door and the dozen things triggered the first and most important crisis in Sutpen's life: he suddenly found himself on the threshold of self-encounter and free choice. Accompanying this awakening were certain other elements which stamp the existentialist hero: the Look, the situation, abandonment, anguish, and total commitment.

According to Sartre, man "cannot be anything . . . unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself."9 Sartre calls this important aspect of existentialism the "Look" or the "Stare." It was in the monkey nigger's Look that Sutpen obtained knowledge of himself. This knowledge in turn involved shame, an emotion that he had not experienced before. 10 Sartre maintains that the basic emotional reactions of one person to another are shame, pride, and fear. To illustrate shame he depicts a man peeping at others through a keyhole.¹² This man exults in himself as a free human being who has others at his mercy: he sees himself as "... wholly a subject, a center of reference around which the world is organized...."13 Since only the world of objects -not that of human beings-can be so controlled, the Stare of the man at the keyhole turns those inside the room into objects. Suddenly, however, the man glances around and finds someone staring at him. The circumstances are now reversed: he himself has been turned from subject to object.¹⁴ His feeling is one of shame which, writes Sartre, "is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I

Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), pp. 570, 573.

Absalom, Absalom! (New York, 1951), p. 274.

⁶ Ibid., p. 238.

⁷ lbid., p. 231.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 229-230.

[&]quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 303.

¹⁰ Absalom, Absalom! p. 232.

¹¹ Being and Nothingness, p. 291.

¹⁸ lbid., p. 259.

¹⁸ Hazel E. Barnes, The Literature of Possibility (Lincoln, Neb., 1959), p. 59.

¹⁴ Being and Nothingness, p. 260.

can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object." Like the man caught at the keyhole, Sutpen was also changed from subject to object by an Other: under the Stare of the Negro, he lost his freedom. In Sutpen's case, however, the Other was a step removed from the immediate observer. What the boy on the front porch saw in the black face was not the Look of the Negro but that of the rich white man inside the big house. This man

looked out from whatever invisible place he (the man) happened to be at the moment, at the boy outside the barred door in his patched garments and splayed bare feet, looking through and beyond the boy, he himself seeing his own father and sisters and brothers as the owner, the rich man (not the nigger) must have been seeing them all the time—as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutely evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cutdown and patched and made-over garments. 16

Sartre has long protested such brutalization of man by man. Central to his protest as well as to his whole philosophy are two concepts: l'être-en-soi and l'être-pour-soi. Sutpen's shame existed in the mode of being in-itself. "Shame," declares Sartre, "reveals to me that I am this being, not in the mode of 'was' or of 'having to be' but in-itself." He explains the in-itself as something "there in the midst of the world, impenetrable and dense, like this tree or this stone. . . ." It lacks possibilities; it "is what it is" and can never be what it is not. Conversely, being for-itself is in the mode of "being what it is not and not being what it is "20: it embodies possibilities. Only human beings can exist in the mode of being for-itself. The Look on the Negro's face, then, denied Sutpen the supreme right to exist as a human being. It turned him into a creature "brutely evacuated" into the world without hope or purpose or possibilities. Transfixed as being in-itself, Sutpen was merely an

object and at the mercy of the world. Or as Sartre would express it, he was "no longer master of the situation."²¹

By situation. Sartre means all of the internal and external pressures that give shape to a man's life. It is that totality of material and even psychoanalytical conditions which describe the specific character of an era.²² The specific social and political character of the mountain society in which Sutpen had been raised was a couple of light years removed from that of Tidewater. In the mountains there prevailed a rugged, democratic individualism where all men were equal and each respected the equality of others, but in Eastern Virginia the rigid class structure of a conservative society was still in force. For two years Sutpen had assumed both societies to be of the same specific character; the Negro's Look revealed his blunder. Outraged, "he knew that something would have to be done about it; he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life. . . . "23 But he was also baffled. He found himself having to do something—make a choice—in a situation that was entirely new to him. He was cut off not only from the old familiar mountain world but also from the present one which he was just beginning to understand. This sudden estrangement left him panic-stricken, and under the Stare he turned and fled.

He didn't even remember leaving. All of a sudden he found himself running and already some distance from the house. . . . He was not crying. . . . He wasn't even mad. He just had to think, so he was going to where he could be quiet and think, and he knew where that place was. He went into the woods.²⁴

There in a cave he became aware of his absolute freedom to choose his own course of action and began to suffer the anguish concomitant with that freedom.

Sartre himself, I should point out here, does not believe that Faulkner's characters are capable of acting freely; therefore he denies the American the highest tribute which he can pay a writer. Reviewing a novel by Mauriac, Sartre discredits completely those characters whose "future actions are determined in advance by

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁶ Absalom, Absalom! p. 235.

¹⁷ Being and Nothingness, p. 262.

¹⁸ lbid., p. 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. lxvi.

so Ibid., p. lxv.

²¹ lbid., p. 265.

²³ L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (Paris, 1957), p. 137. I have translated this

²⁸ Absalom, Absalom! p. 234.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

16

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heredity, social influence or some other mechanism. . . . Do you want your characters to live?" he asks. "See to it that they are free." Although Sartre lists Faulkner along with Hemingway and Dos Passos as having revolutionized the techniques of the novel in France, he also maintains that the very nature of the characters in Sartoris renders them static:

This 'nature'—what else can we call it?—which we grasp in terms of its psychological manifestations, does have a psychological existence. It is not even completely subconscious, since it often seems as if the men impelled by it can look back and contemplate it. But, on the other hand, it is fixed and immutable, like an evil spell. Faulkner's heroes bear it within them from the day of their birth. It is as obstinate as stone or rock.

At another time Sartre has written that Faulkner's characters appear to be riding in a carriage and always looking backwards.28 "You won't recognize in yourself the Faulknerian man," he warns, "a creature deprived of potentiality and explained only by what he was."29 The creatures which Sartre uses to illustrate his comments are the Sartorises, the Compsons, and other aristocrats that Faulkner has deliberately paralyzed with the venom of heredity and environment.30 Thus, whether Sartre realizes it or not, he is paying Faulkner the high compliment of finding in these characters exactly what Faulkner has meant for him and all of us to find. In many of his heroes, however, Faulkner evidently wishes us to find something other than paralysis, for he maintains that he is always hammering at one thesis: "man is indestructible because of his simple will to freedom."31 So far as I know, Sartre has written nothing on Sutpen. The colonel may or may not have been indestructible, but he did will to freedom at least once: he attempted to break out of his heredity and environment. That he was not successful was due not so much to an "evil spell" that haunts the Faulknerian hero but to the evil spell cast over all of humanity. Like men everywhere Sutpen was unable to bear for long the anguish of freedom, as I now hope to show.

"... it is in anguish," Sartre writes, "that man gets the consciousness of his freedom. . . . In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself."32 At the heart of anguish, then. lies the knowledge that man is completely alone and can rely on no one except himself. Sartre calls this condition abandonment. "... when we speak of abandonment ...," he writes, "we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end."33 Actually, Sartre means much more. He not only refuses to look to God for help but he also refuses to rely on such well-known props as empirical psychoanalysis, sociology, or history.34 In addition, he denies that any ethical or moral system is of any use.35 Even man himself is powerless to advise another, for the one advised knows even before he asks what the advice will be.³⁶ Man meets his deepest needs alone. Orestes cries out, "I am alone, alone," and Roquentin groans, "I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing."38 Sutpen shared the loneliness of these existentialist heroes. Although he had a wife and children, he seemed to be alienated from them in much the same way that Orestes is alienated from Electra and Roquentin from his mistress Anny.³⁹ Sutpen never had a friend except General Compson, and he talked with him at length only twice in thirty years. 40 Even from the beginning, he found that he had to depend upon himself.

As Sutpen sat brooding in the cave, he wished for "someone else, some older and smarter person to ask [what he should do]. But there was not, there was only himself..." His mother was dead, his father a drunkard. Furthermore, he had no access to such

²⁵ "François Mauriac and Freedom," Literary and Philosophical Essays, trans. Annette Michelson (New York, 1955), p. 7.

^{36 &}quot;American Novelists in French Eyes," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVIII, 117 (Aug., 1946).

[&]quot;William Faulkner's 'Sartoris,' " Literary and Philosophical Essays, p. 77.

^{28 &}quot;On 'The Sound and the Fury,' " Literary and Philosophical Essays, p. 82.

²⁰ "Time in Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing, 1954), p. 187.

⁸⁰ Literary and Philosophical Essays, pp. 73-88 passim.

^{*&}quot;William Faulkner," Writers at Work, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1958), p. 126.

⁸² Being and Nothingness, pp. 29, 40.

^{83 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 294.

²⁴ Being and Nothingness, pp. 294, 558, 562, 570.

^{86 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 297.

⁸⁶ L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, pp. 39-43 passim.

¹⁷ The Flies, in No Exit & The Flies, p. 162.

^{**} Nausea, p. 14.

²⁸ The Flies, in No Exit & The Flies, pp. 160-162 passim. Nausea, pp. 182-206 passim.

⁴⁰ Absalom, Absalom! p. 259.

⁴¹ lbid., p. 234.

founts of wisdom as a schoolmaster, a preacher, or a lawyer.42 Like all existentialist heroes, he was condemned to suffer his anguish alone. So great was his suffering that even the woods, which are often a source of comfort in Faulkner, 43 brought no relief; and sick in body, mind, and heart, he went home to evening chores and bed. There he lay feverish and tossing, when "... all of a sudden it was not thinking, it was something shouting it almost loud enough for his sisters ... and his father ... to hear too. ... It was like ... an explosion—a bright glare that vanished and left nothing, no ashes nor refuse; just a limitless flat plain. . . . "44 The bright glare was Sutpen's awakening to freedom. He was no longer bound by heredity or environment or spiritual or philosophical doctrines: he was free to make of his life what he chose. His choice to make himself into a gentleman planter was a disastrous one, but before looking more closely at that choice, let us glance at several other existentialist heroes experiencing the same sudden awakening. Sartre's treatment of these characters, I might add, points up a glaring weakness in much of his fiction: he seems to end where he should be-

"Suddenly," cries Orestes, as he breaks all ties with Zeus, man, and nature, "Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet. . . ." The play ends with Orestes committed to his hard-won freedom, but we have only Sartre's word for it that his hero is able to sustain that freedom. The same observation can be made concerning Roquentin. This existentialist hero listens to a Negress's recording of the old blues, "Some of These Days," and

Suddenly... the music was drawn out, dilated, swelled like a water-spout. It filled the room with its metallic transparency, crushing our miserable time against the walls. I am in the music. Globes of fire turn in the mirrors; encircled by rings of smoke, veiling and unveiling the hard smile of light.⁴⁶

This experience eventually leads Roquentin out of his lethargy, but at this point Nausea ends. Sartre hints that his hero will now be

able to write a novel that will not stop him "from existing" or feeling that he exists.⁴⁷ Maybe so. In any event, Faulkner does not leave the reader guessing as to Sutpen's intentions. Acting immediately and vigorously on his decision, the boy "departed just like he went to bed: by arising from the pallet and tiptoeing out of the house. He never saw any of his family again."⁴⁸

Sutpen's willingness to act forcefully is in complete accord with existentialist doctrine. Under no circumstances, Sartre has often explained in his philosophy but has seldom shown in his fiction. can existentialism be considered quietist. "... there is no reality except in action. . . . What counts is the total commitment. . . . "49 Perhaps the hero best illustrating this conviction is the insurrectionist Dumaine. One of the few attractive existentialist characters, he represents le héros engagé. Dumaine gives his life for the Movement. and even death cannot keep him from taking part in it.⁵⁰ This hero, however, cuts a mild figure beside the enormously energetic and wholly committed Sutpen. From the time that he tiptoed out of the hovel until Wash Jones swung the rusty scythe, he focused his whole life on accomplishing his "design." In order to become a gentleman planter, Sutpen told General Compson, he had had to acquire land, slaves, a fine house, and a suitable wife.⁵¹ He went about this acquisition with the intensity of a Lucifer creating Pandemonium. This "fiend," 52 as Miss Rosa Coldfield called him, let nothing stand in his way: not a first grade education, his neighbor's scorn, or the War between the States.⁵³ Quentin Compson described Sutpen's coming into Jefferson and something of his life there:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphurreek still in hair clothes and beard... His name was Sutpen... Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 223, 231, 242-243 passim.

⁴⁸ Go Down, Moses (New York, 1942), pp. 191-335 passim; Sartoris (New York, 1953), pp. 260-262 passim.

⁴⁴ Absalom, Absalom! pp. 237, 238.

⁴⁵ The Flies, in No Exit & The Flies, p. 158.

⁴⁶ Nausea, pp. 34, 35.

⁴⁷ lbid., p. 238.

⁴⁸ Absalom, Absalom! p. 238.

^{40 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," pp. 300, 302.

Be Les Jeux Sont Faits, pp. 179-184 passim.

⁵¹ Absalom, Absalom! pp. 138, 240.

⁵³ lbid., p. 15.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 243, 38, 278.

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Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died.⁵⁴

Sutpen's frenetic actions reveal yet another important characteristic of the existentialist hero: by committing himself, he was creating himself. According to Sartre, man "is not found readymade"; rather, he "is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."55 He spends his existence projecting that self "towards a future and is aware that it is doing so."56 Sutpen expressed pretty much the same opinion when he told General Compson that "there was something about a man's destiny (or about the man) that caused the destiny to shape itself to him like his clothes did. . . . "57 In 1833 when Sutpen first talked with the general, the cloth of destiny fit almost to perfection. He had acquired a large plantation and was well on his way to filling his big-columned house with a family. But by 1855 the cloth had begun to fray badly, and by 1864 when Sutpen talked to the general for a second time, the cloth was in tatters: the plantation had grown up in weeds, his wife was dead, his daughter set on marrying her half brother, and his second son equally set on killing that brother.⁵⁸ The design was a complete failure: Sutpen had accomplished nothing of permanent value.

II

Both Quentin Compson and Sutpen were deeply interested in this failure. Quentin believed that in finding the answer he would learn why the South itself had failed.⁵⁹ His answer turned on what he believed to be Sutpen's misconception of morality. Sutpen himself maintained that he had been forced by circumstances to act as he did and thus the failure was not his fault. If Sutpen's failure were indeed that of the South, then their answers involve the endless quarrel that began with the abolitionists and the fire-eaters and is now being carried on by the integrationists and the segregationists.

I do not propose here to deal with that quarrel; all I wish to show is that the colonel's failure grew out of what Sartre terms mauvaise foi.⁶⁰ In this paper, I have suggested that the major elements of existentialism—anguish, free choice, possibilities—are closely related. Bad faith is also indissolubly linked with these elements: it is, so to speak, the reverse side of the coin. In examining Sutpen's failure I shall point out, first, how the failure is connected with free choice and bad faith and, secondly, how both Quentin's and Sutpen's reasons for the failure reveal Sutpen's bad faith.

According to Sartre, we are condemned to be free, and one way that we show bad faith is by trying to escape our freedom and the accompanying anguish.⁶¹ We attempt to hide anguish from ourselves by considering our own particular possibility rather than all of the possibilities. 12 In other words, we try to escape anguish by eliminating the conditional; we fly from an anguished freedom, which by its nature postulates contingency, and toward an easy and inflexible security. Sutpen began this flight the moment that he decided upon a lifetime career and a rigid plan by which to effect it. Existentially, he refused to consider an infinite number of economic possibilities in order to accept at once the restricted possibilities of agrarianism. His relief from anguish was immediate. No longer did he suffer the torment inherent in contingency; on the contrary, he enjoyed the comforting security of the planned life. Rather than continuously exercising his freedom to choose, as Sartre demands, 63 he could now merely flip the pages of his design and find the answer.

Sutpen's choice not only reveals his bad faith but is profoundly ironical. He was so resentful of the rich planter's effort to make him into an object that he spent his life trying to prove the planter wrong. If, as Sartre declares, men are the sum of their deeds, then Sutpen himself accomplished what he had so furiously denied the rich planter: he became that conglomerate of objects—the plantation, the slaves, the money—that he called his design. Like Sartre's "serious man" of the world, the colonel made of himself not the

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 8, 9.

^{88 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," pp. 306, 291.

⁵⁶ lbid., p. 291.

BT Absalom, Absalom! p. 245.

⁸⁸ lbid., pp. 267-269 passim, 155, 287, 270, 271, 277, 133.

⁵⁰ lbid., pp. 174, 378.

^{60 &}quot;Self-Deception," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1958), p. 242.

^{61 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 295.

⁶² Being and Nothingness, p. 43.

^{68 &}quot;Existentialism Is a Humanism," pp. 295, 306, 307, 310.

⁶⁴ lbid., p. 300.

human being that he wished to be but a thing inert, opaque, and granitic.⁶⁵

An unsavory by-product of man's commitment to security is snobbery. This pattern of bad faith is inevitably revealed when man rejects an infinite number of social possibilities for those of the particular class which he is imitating. Sartre depicts a classic example in Olivier Blévigne, a low-born Frenchman who yearns for social distinction. As snobs often will do, Blévigne purposefully marries someone adjunctive to his business interests, carefully cultivates the social graces of his betters, and has his portrait painted. He appears in this painting as a tall, well-proportioned, and altogether engaging man. In life Blévigne has been a squeakyvoiced midget of five feet.66 This sort of deception is different from lying and far more destructive, as Sartre has explained. It is a kind of root rot that eats at the very center of man, for it is indicative of a conflict which cannot be resolved: the snob as well as all men of bad faith knows in his "capacity as deceiver" the truth that he is hiding from himself in his "capacity as the one deceived."67 In his own way, Sutpen lived the same self-deluded, snobbish existence as Blévigne; he too revealed his bad faith by setting himself up as something that he was not. In his capacity as the one deceived, Sutpen knew that he had no right by blood or education to the aristocratic tradition; in his capacity as the deceiver, he arrogated to himself that right. Like Blévigne, he carried to completion the first act of bad faith and of the snob: he tried to flee what he could not flee, he tried to flee what he was.68 The result was that he married someone "adjunctive to ... [his] design," put on airs in the presence of his social betters, and displayed great arrogance in the presence of his social inferiors. His portrait could very well hang beside that of Blévigne.

Quentin's solution to the failure involved not security or snobbery but absolutes. Even so, his conclusions lead us eventually into the regions of bad faith and possibilities. As Quentin and Shreve McCannon sat in Cambridge piecing together Sutpen's life, Quentin concluded that the demon failed because of innocence—"that in-

nocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out."70 This kind of innocence, it seems to me, can be called ignorance. Ouentin appears to be saving that Sutpen simply did not know enough and therefore was a bad man. Though Quentin did not mention Socrates, he was making the same distinction between a good man and a bad one that is made in the Apology. A good man, according to Socrates, is one who can think, and a bad man is one who cannot.⁷¹ To Socrates, thinking meant the ability to put a fact into the right perspective, as he proved so often in the syllogistic method. Sutpen had all of the facts, Quentin is telling us, but he was unable to put them into the proper perspective. In this particular instance, the fact was morality, which Sutpen ignorantly placed in the material world rather than in the world of absolutes.

Or, to explain the failure existentially, one can say that Sutpen placed morality in the mode of being in-itself rather than in being for-itself. He treated this absolute as if it were without possibilities. as if it were just another object for exploitation. Morality was like himself or a wife or a slave or a table or a pie-simply a means to an end. Not surprisingly, Sutpen treated the end in the same narrow fashion: it too lacked possibilities. "You see," he told the general. "I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point. . . . "72 Existentialists would flatly deny any such contention. The major portion of Being and Nothingness is, as Sartre maintains, an attempt to establish the proposition that "human reality . . . identifies and defines itself by the ends which it pursues. Sutpen's pursuit of finite, material ends rather than of those offering infinite possibilities helped ruin his effort to define himself and at the same time led him inevitably into a life of bad faith.

Although Sartre was moving toward a humanistic existentialism before World War II, it was while observing his countrymen during the war years that his doctrines began to crystallize. He saw

⁶⁸ Being and Nothingness, p. 580.

Nausea, pp. 124-127 passim.

^{67&}quot;Self-Deception," p. 244-

⁸⁸ Being and Nothingness, p. 70.

^{**} Absalom, Absalom! pp. 240, 15, 16, 47, 48, 263, 230, 238, 256.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 263.

⁷¹ "The Apology," Great Dialogues of Plato, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York, 1956), pp. 423-446 passim, especially pp. 425, 428, 438, 444, 446.

⁷² Absalom, Absalom! p. 263.

Ta Being and Nothingness, p. 557.