

Faulkner's Tragic Realism and the Impossibility of Theodicy

John Pauley
Simpson College

The details of evil will sink any attempt at theodicy. But details of evil are usually- or even necessarily- lost in the abstract discussions of evil in philosophical texts. Hence this essay looks at the details of tragic fiction, specifically in some stories by Faulkner. The initial analysis endeavors to show that fiction gets us closer to the reality of agency than philosophy and so it then gets us closer to the reality of the evils that haunt both individuals and cultures (the two cannot be adequately separated). Finally, the details of the evil analyzed reveal that human beings are actually capable of a self-destruction that annihilates the very grounds of human agency and identity: Faulkner's tragic fiction reveals that self-destruction is written into the necessary components of agency and identity.

Introduction

Hume, in his relentless discussion of the problem of evil, implies that any theodicy is rendered impotent in the face of an adequate description of evil.¹ Freud implies something similar in many places, although he does not care much for the details of the topic.² There is considerable promise in this approach but philosophical description of the evils of the world generally collapse into a quasi-abstract discussion of the *categories of evil*; in other words, the old saw account of natural and moral evil. Hence, philosophical descriptions of evil in the world tend to lose existential grit and, in the process, that horrifying urgency that real evil engenders.

Hume also implies and then directly states that the poet has a better handle on the details and at least in this case the cliché is right: the devil is in the details.³ It is not surprising that Dostoevsky's bit on child torture from the *Brothers Karamazov* is included in many philosophical anthologies. For the most part, I think its inclusion has more to do with what philosophers would call "providing examples" instead of providing arguments. Hume is right that the poet has a better handle on the details but the poet also might have better arguments in the form of descriptions. In this essay, I will argue that fiction provides better reasons for rejecting any theodicy than does philosophy: this is for the simple reason that great fiction necessarily keeps us closer to human reality in the world than is possible in philosophy.

Hence my purposes here are not directly centered on the traditional problem of evil in relation to traditional forms of theodicy that hope to dissolve the dilemma. My purposes are to reveal details in the kinds of evil that are imbedded in a few great works of fiction; in this case I will be examining some works by William Faulkner. The argument against any theodicy is really the nature of the characters' circumstances in the world that end up revealing intricate and inescapable aspects of human reality. My interpretation of these circumstances will describe evils that make a human endeavor at theodicy psychologically and existentially impossible.

I cannot be merely assuming that fiction writers are the best describers of the human circumstance in the world. Much of my essay is an argument for this view, but a few introductory comments are in order here. It may very well be the case that what is inherent to fiction is inherent to human consciousness and human experience in general. This speculation might be analytically contained in the notion that an adequate imagining of the world is a sort of experiencing of the world. Great writers are those who can imagine the world more real than it is or, more plainly, they make their world resonate with the reality of the actual world in ways that are constitutive of human agency. The very possibility of fiction rests on the absolute imbeddedness of the human agent within a human context (within a world of experience). Imbeddedness is harder than it seems because its creator must eschew- at any and all points- that sort of "abstraction" that Hegel protested against: a character conflated with his or her particulars (qualities).⁴ Fiction cannot be "about" various characters; it must *be those characters*.

We can put the same points in a more mundane way. The characters in fiction exist in a world of relations (an historical world) that makes comprehensible their acts and potentialities. Even in the most shocking and surprising turn of events, the web of relations, that stretch forwards and backwards, allow for the ongoing plausibility of spoken words and events. Stories work or fail, first and foremost, according to the basic ontological truth of the inseparability of agent and world. At the same time, this point must be consistent with or even epistemically bound to relentless ambiguity as a boundary against "absolute comprehension." The world of fiction must also eschew, as in an adequate focus on the actual world, the notion that any life can be fully comprehended: that is, interpreted in such a way that ambiguity just vanishes. The ambiguity of life is more or less the same ontological fact as the ambiguity within fiction. If these points

are correct, and they do demand more detail, then it will follow that the conditions of fiction are also the same as the conditions of human agency. If this conclusion is true then it will have to follow that fiction writers are the “best describers” of the human condition within the world.

Snopes Being Snopes

Contingency is necessarily written into any narrative because it is an inescapable aspect of human reality. Frequently, the notion of contingency is understood as external to the agent: unpredictable events in nature and society. Certainly this is one central component of contingency and it helps to make up any mature version of what it is to be human in the world. Contingency, however, is also internal to the agent; our intentions for ourselves and others are disrupted by aspects hidden from ourselves. Insofar as knowledge of ourselves is opaque we can be driven by psychological features that we do not understand and if we did understand all of those features we would be fundamentally different sorts of beings. Symmetrically, it is impossible to construct any narrative of a human life that proceeds on the basis of a full and transparent self-knowledge. If narrative is the form of self-knowledge, then interpretation is the method of self-knowledge. And since no interpretation can ever be complete, it follows that a full and transparent self-knowledge is impossible in both human life and fiction.

In a narrative, the world and characters unfold in ways both predictable and unpredictable, but what is unpredictable is distinct from what is implausible. Internal aspects of a character that are opaque to that character leave traces in the world. What that character will be led to do on the basis of those hidden internal aspects is related to additional contingencies. The more a narrative synthesizes the unpredictable with the plausible, the more it grinds down into human reality. Abner Snopes in Faulkner’s story *Barn Burning* is an exemplar case to examine in relation to the above points.⁵ There is no question that he is burdened by a resentment and envy that is beyond both his control and his understanding and unfortunately (for himself and others) that resentment and envy are let loose on the world.

As Snopes sets out one evening to torch Major De Spain’s barn (the Plantation owner, in essence the master), the story pulsates with his incredible determination. The reader cannot help but to get the sense that Snopes literally “could not do otherwise.” For Snopes to stop, sit

down and think to himself, “perhaps what I am doing is grotesquely self-destructive and ruinous for my children” would be for Snopes to be someone other than Snopes. He would not be out of character; he would be an altogether different character. Someone with the self-knowledge that made for an awareness of self-destructive acts for exactly what they are (which has to be conditional or hypothetical) would never have arrived in this circumstance. In every character, within every narrative, both in fiction and in reality, there are necessarily parameters to what we can expect from that character (although we cannot always see these parameters). At some point we reach the limit: we cannot expect or even think that x could do y because that would require x not to be x. That Snopes is enraged with violent and negative emotions, some of which are opaque to himself, just means that we can expect some set of violent acts within various idiosyncratic dimensions. And these points lead us directly to the sheer ambiguity of responsibility. In “real life” we generally want to blame arsonists, but in Faulkner’s story we cannot do this.

Society, however, needs unambiguous praise and blame: it needs a naïve version of “free-will” for legal and moral conventions to function. The ambiguity of responsibility gets worse when we realize that Snopes’ horrifying emotions and attitudes have been formed by the social world he inhabits. Major De Spain, the object of Snopes’ envy and resentment is precisely the sort of person that Snopes would like to be. In short, the cause of Snopes’ violent emotions is what also forms the core of his orientation to reality. It is hard to think of any case of envy or resentment where this is not the case or it is hard to think of any emotions that do not find their cause at least partially in their object. A person who seeks to retain the unambiguous sense of free-will and responsibility might claim that Snopes could have become a different sort of person than the one he became. But the point is that we do not really know this. In fact, in becoming any sort of person it is a tautology to say that no one can opt out of the constraints of context (which involve all sorts of elements outside of our control and knowledge). Snopes’ context is clearly quite contained. The point is not that Snopes bears no responsibility for burning barns; the point is, instead, that whatever *degree of responsibility we assign him is grossly ambiguous and underdetermined by the narrative.*

To argue that any agents’ actions have been formed by the social world he inhabits is really nothing more than a banality and so we need to advance the discussion. To go back to Snopes, his emotions are seething,

and heavily seasoned, it appears, with hatred and this is the result of an ongoing cultural *meta-story*. Everyone in this culture (more or less) has a place and not just due to some series of historical accidents or causes. Meta-stories provide the ultimate and transcendent explanation for why the world is as it ought to be. No one can tell the meta-story exactly or all it once because it has too many branched versions. But one crucial aspect of all meta-stories is that they cannot withstand much in the way of existential pressure. The aspect of vulnerability is due to the fact that meta-stories are constructed from lived narrative and have absolutely no connection to any other reality because there is no other reality (besides the one we live). In other words, human beings know very well that historical accident explains a lot about social roles and limits and that the meta-story merely excuses the arbitrary nature of the roles and limits. At some level, not too far away from our better selves, is the knowledge that the meta-story is a story that we are telling ourselves. Symmetrically, the naïve version of free will and responsibility is told out of a need to cover for our desperate lack of self-knowledge: this is one way that the meta-story of free will functions. At least, however, the meta-story works on the surface of things and, in the meta-story under consideration here, Snopes is at the very bottom of the social world because he ought to be: he is white trash. Snopes is not supposed to prosper; it is antithetical to the right order of reality. Hatred can then be layered on top of envy due to impotence in the face of what is accepted as a meta-norm.

Faulkner is not just vividly aware of the existence of the meta-story; he is vividly aware of the way it distorts human life and, at the same time, can be easily punctured. When punctured the response is an immense violence and horror because to puncture the meta-story is to reveal the ambiguity and uncertainty at the heart of sacred moral truths and codified ontologically based social orders.

The truly unforgettable scene where Snopes wipes the shit off his boots onto Major De Spain's white French rug contains all that is needed to create serious damage to the meta-story. On the one side the meta-story has no ground whatsoever and on the other side it is very nearly impossible to overcome (in day to day life). Symmetrically, Snopes is both doomed and a serious danger to the social order (an element of the meta-story). To be in the same room as De Spain's wife-bursting in on a domestic scene that is presupposed to be distant from *his* reality-is enough to make every inherited truth precarious. Snopes' presence is a moment in time

when things are just not the way that they ought to be but it did not take much to produce this state of affairs. All that was needed was one near lunatic straying from the path and this just opens the door to a myriad of possibilities in how the slender meta-reality can be punctured. The fact that this reality is slender and slight is what ironically explains the violent reactions when it is threatened and given that it is threatened easily we can expect violence often.

Meta-Story as Anti-Story

The way I am describing it, the meta-story is the anti-story. It imposes an enormous force on the socio-historical development of human agency and, in the process, distorts it. The anti-story is a ground and component of tragedy in Faulkner's work; we have already seen some of this with Snopes. We come to know that Snopes has, in a way, seen through the meta-story, but we can also see that he has to act out the meta-story (as the role he has to play).

I need to emphasize here the manner in which the meta-story is the anti-story. Narrative is, at the very least, a description and interpretation of agency and agency is always imbedded in social and historical reality (which is itself a narrative). The roles that are inevitably created through society and history- that is, through relations and subtle forms of causality- are reified in the meta-story: so we have an addition to the considerable pressure that already exists in the social/historical world for persons to take up some role. Meta-stories always say or claim something about how this world can be explained in relation to some other reality. Consequently, the meta-story is not open for question. Insofar as narrative and so human reality are shaped and constituted by directly lived reality, the "world of appearances", the meta-story destroys, inhibits, or distorts agency necessarily.

As I remarked previously, we can feel Snopes' resentment and envy; if we add the idea of the meta-story as anti-story and if it is reasonable to claim that Snopes has glimpsed the sheer made-up quality of the meta-story, then we can conclude that he has a kind of meta-envy and meta-resentment. He is caught in the absurd human trap of hating what he wants to become. Another way of saying this is to realize that Snopes sees through the meta-story as false but at the same time it has already formed the center of his orientation. He has resentment concerning the necessity

of his resentment. There is perhaps no better combination for radical emotion and self-destruction. In fact, the very possibility of this extreme envy and resentment is premised on the fact that the meta-story has formed the center of Snopes' orientation to reality (his own self-concept). He is envious because he is white trash but to be white trash is to take up a role in lived reality that is supported by the meta-story (some people are simply not meant to succeed).

And yet, we are presented with a profound puzzle. How does the meta-story survive when it literally cannot be grounded? (Actually, its groundlessness is its strength.) Given that I am presupposing the philosophical view that no meta-story can ever be reasonably grounded or finally defended in any sense, the nature of the previous question becomes starkly psychological. (Once we make this turn, all tragedy is bound to become a matter of psychology; at the very bottom- instead of good versus evil, or man against the cosmos, we get man against himself.) I think Faulkner has an answer to this question or at least he portrays characters and narratives that provide an answer. We must, however, go deeper into the nature of human agency and consciousness before we can arrive at a satisfying account of why Faulkner's tragedy seems so astonishingly real.

It seems that we awaken, very slowly, to the fact that the meta-story is an ineradicable aspect of the human condition. The nature of our own form of consciousness dangles the very dangerous bait of the meta-story right in front of us. As we make ourselves into the objects of our own consciousness, which is what it means to be a "self" in the western tradition, at the same time we *seem* to free ourselves of the social/historical world. We become objects or entities separate from the world and this is nothing more than a proto meta-story. In fact, given that we are objects of our own consciousness we seem to free ourselves in many ways; the most obvious is "free will," the gross abstraction that flies in the face of the real possibility of self-knowledge.

An awareness of awareness, our selves as the objects of our own consciousness, is already a meta-move and a new form of "self-interest." At the social and collective level, the notion that the roles and orders of society would be reified and ontologically bound is a result of a self-justifying present in self-consciousness. Self-justification, in turn, implies a *way* of justifying and there is no stronger move than to justify from another level of reality (and we already seem to have a third person view of our selves). This form of justification is far better, that is, much more

psychologically defensive, than revealing self-justification as nothing but an element of self-awareness. The worst possibility, for psychological defensiveness, is the move to make our justifications existential; this is to make a justification from nothing but the meaning and interpretation of lived reality and experience. In fact, some might see this as the edge of nihilism.

Nietzsche, as is well known, attacked the notion of truth with a vengeance and what he really had in mind is justification from the standpoint of the meta-story.⁶ Instead, Nietzsche turns to art as the anecdote, the expression of the will to power, which always and everywhere welcomes the world of appearances, and so stands in opposition to Platonic and Christian truth. In other words, art depends on the immediate and sensuous world of appearance: a world that does not succumb to “redemption.” A theodicy on Nietzsche’s view is anti-art because a theodicy always has to deny the immediate world. An “explanation” of suffering and evil assumes some other reality behind this one and so the explanation is necessarily external to this world: it is for these reasons that Nietzsche dismisses “Christian Tragedy” as an oxymoron. Clearly, on Nietzsche’s view the Christian or Platonic meta-story precludes or destroys art and so precludes or destroys tragic fiction.

What this truly great contribution to aesthetics misses or obscures is the problem noted in the above. The meta-story, the tendency to the thesis of an external and ultimate meaning, is written into the nature of human consciousness. And this fact, a fact that is social and historical as well as ontological, creates the possibility of a kind of deep human tragedy. I have already discussed the tenuous nature of the meta-story and Nietzsche’s points also illuminate why this is the case: under bright light-in Snopes’ case no more than the desire to be a fully human agent-the meta-aspect of the story collapses into a pure social order controlled with force and violence. Given that the social order is underwritten in every case by a meta-story, the characters who challenge it are bound to its essential center of orientation. Snopes desires an economic share. In this case, the economic share is what it means for him to acquire agency, but the economic share comes with a very pervasive meta-story that precludes him. Hence, Snopes hates what he wants to become. This is one of the ways we can describe Faulkner’s notion of the “human heart in conflict with itself.” And, as we will soon see, the world of Joe Christmas takes us deeper into this bitter reality.

Bitchery and Abomination

There may not be a more harrowing tale in all of literature than the story of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's magnificent *Light in August*.⁷ The narrative reveals human reality on several levels but for the most part it goes deep into the nature of self-destruction as written into the nature of human agency and human society. Once again, this complex insight relies on both the ambiguity and inevitability of the meta-story and its penetration into the narrative of lived reality.

First of all, and as we all know, the deck is stacked against Christmas. From the standpoint of sheer contingency, he is not exactly lucky: orphaned, hounded from the start by a sadistic/fanatic grandfather (Doc Hines), suspected of being black in a radically racist social world, and sexually involved with the most problematic (for himself) person and so on (and it should be noted that these contingencies *become* interrelated). One might say that these are mostly "misfortunes" but what is not a misfortune is the nature of his tragedy. It is not just that Christmas is unlucky or that he is finally destroyed; it is not just that "bad things" happen to him (this would be a relief). The elements of his tragedy consist in that which would destroy any human being, and not just some particular human being, according to the normative/ontological dimensions of human existence; in other words, what is constitutive of human existence is turned against itself. Perhaps the most terrible element of the novel is the apparent fact that our nature might be turned against itself is an aspect of our nature.

I am assuming that the reader is acquainted with *Light in August*. What follows is an endeavor to properly analyze the above points and not so much by pursuing the story event by event but by arriving at a hypothesis concerning how the tragedy of Joe Christmas is even possible as a piece of narrative.

Each and every one of the "misfortunes" mentioned above graze the surface of the meta-story and some actually threaten its core truths. Consequently, Christmas is radically dangerous to the existing social reality and we can conclude from this that many others would present the same dangers. The rules and ways of the racist culture are fitted and contoured with the support of multiple meta-stories; these tie together even where they overtly conflict (through acts of self-deception and denial). Racial segregation is the way the world ought to be and not just the way the world happens to be. Complete with its violent horrors, racism is part of

the right order of the world. Christmas, as he is suspected of being black while appearing white is walking ambiguity and this eats away at the thin tissue of the meta-story; that there could be such a walking ambiguity threatens to reveal reality as opaque and not responsive to the mythically clear meta-story. Christmas is ontologically and epistemically corrosive in his very being.

On Faulkner's account of human reality, Christmas cannot form a self-concept that is somehow entirely outside the scope of the dominant cultural meta-stories and social realities. It is impossible to argue against Faulkner here because everything we know, in our most sober and mature accounts of human circumstances, plays this truth back to us. We confirm it over and over again in every narrative. Christmas' accelerated tragedy is really his own self-image, his own self-concept, as they are shaped by the elements he is trying to escape. Given the social realities, and the meta-stories penetrating into them or being constructed out of them, Christmas then must be self-destructive. It is not simply that he does not like himself (which is usually drivel); he suffers from a self-hatred of the worst kind, an ontologically bound self-hatred. The very forces that are actually destroying him and pursuing him with a nearly incomprehensible violence are the same forces that make up his center of orientation. Hence, at the end of the story, at the end of his life, Christmas is *tragically exhausted; that is, he is surrounded by reality as an enemy to that reality while at the same time being shaped by that reality*. And perhaps, by the end of his life, Christmas has even come to believe that he gets what he deserves. Such a self-hatred is only possible as it is deeply social and supported by meta-stories; no purely "personal" dysfunction could cut down this deep. To be saved, Christmas does not need help from others, he needs a different world.

Christmas's agency-his capacity for ratiocination and rational action-is more or less obliterated by the above dialectic. He might be able to represent an opposition to the meta-stories if he had any social or cultural levers to pull. But then he is not just powerless, he is inevitably pursued to be destroyed. He is not destroyed in the way or for the reasons that we might destroy a wild animal (which is bad enough, but banal). Instead he is pursued out of all the dark ambiguities that cannot be overtly tolerated in his social world. His mere existence challenges the pure reality of various moral truths and ontological orders that are suspected, even by those who hold them, to be opaque and deeply flawed. But these themes are even darker than they seem.

Christmas's actual death in the novel has a profound power as the narrative works to show how human beings both reveal and conceal reality or the components of their own narratives. The murder is also hauntingly odd as the astounding beauty of the prose conflicts with the ugliness and horror of the scene. Percy Grimm murders Christmas as a kind of symbolic and religious act; he is standing up for and performing a ritual which re-orient us back to the meta-story and away from the ambiguities. Grimm is another representation of the manner in which the meta-story has such incredible power over action and thought even as it is groundless, ambiguous, and shabby. For Grimm, the killing seems to be a kind of ritual purification; the religious component is not hard to see as he butchers Christmas. But Grimm is also a gross pretense, the extent and noise of his violence conflicts with the possibility of true conviction. His act, the murder and castration of Christmas, is the most desperate act of the novel (and that is saying a great deal). The sheer effort of denying reality through the meta-story surrounds the reader with a profound sadness not just for Christmas, but for our selves as human beings. The "sacrifice" of the outsider, the person with no power, a stilted and ruined identity, and who "gets what he deserves," is the story of human society renewing itself while at the same time destroying itself.

Clearly, the most problematic meta-story in *Light in August* is Christianity. What is revealed here is nothing short of horrifying, although there is some dark comic relief in the fanaticism (which is, by its very nature both comic and incredibly dangerous at the same time). When Doc Hines appears toward the end of the novel, the reader starts to put together his relentlessly sadistic and so perverse role in Christmas' life. In combination with the obstinate violence of McEachern, Christmas is surrounded by what looks like the total perversion of religion. But there is a strong possibility here that what we have is not a perversion of religion; instead we might have just another *version* of a meta-story as it attempts, desperately, to fill in the real human world of contingency, accident, history, and ambiguity.

What I would like to emphasize here concerns two essential points. The first is that Faulkner seems to be presenting the strong possibility that there is no such thing as Christianity. The second concerns the vicious possibility that, at the same time, Christianity is part of the causal background that forms Christmas's self-hatred.

Let us examine the first point. That there is really no such thing as

Christianity is nothing more than the reversal of the causal arrow with respect to how this meta-story is supposed to have originated and continues to get new life. According to the champions of the meta-story, the causal origin is in some supernatural event, the meaning of which gets transmitted through history and yet somehow remains over and above history (included are explanations for why some suffer). The possibility presented in *Light in August* is that Christianity – in any and all its forms- is nothing more than a reification of various and dominant social wants and patterns. Hence, once again we can expect that from certain perspectives the meta-story is going to look ridiculous and indefensible: this is for the simple reason that it so overtly supports the social realities in question.

The obvious objection to the possibility here raised is the one that goes: “yes, that episode in Christian history is unfortunate (all that racism and violence!), but it has nothing to do with the *essence of the religion*. *Gradually, Christianity would have to emerge from bigotry, dogmatism and outrageous violence.*” This is an unfortunate response if only for the reason that no one can possibly untangle “Christianity” from its social history anymore than we can untangle the “essence” of a person from that person’s social history. One would like to say: Christianity is whatever it appears to be and what it appears to be is strictly empirical/historical. This view concerning how to understand the reality of Christianity is perfectly symmetrical to Faulkner’s historical/social account of the human person. And these points cut down to what I have been calling the “center of orientation.” Christianity, as a meta-story, necessarily works against humanity-*even as it exerts positive moral influence*- because it pretends to transcend history. But the transcendence of history, as Faulkner always knows through the construction of his characters, is the destruction of narrative and so human agency. A world in which the notion of a transcendent order was never even questioned would be an insane and perverse world.

An even not so careful reader of *Light in August* is bound to notice that Christmas does seem to overtly reject Christianity and this sets up the conclusion that Christianity cannot make up any part of the center of his orientation. This conclusion does not follow from the premise. First, what we end up “rejecting” might have already formed various features of our thinking and experiencing, especially if what we reject is socially pervasive. In fact, Christianity as a meta-story would be impotent and useless if it really did transcend history (because inconceivable and so vacuous). Only as it is taken up into social and historical life does it become anything at

all and then the categories that are formed from its social and historical life can go everywhere. Given that Christianity is the “worldview” we can expect that it has found its way deep into the very manner in which we experience the world and our selves.

Truthfully, there is no way for Christmas to really separate out Christianity from the racism that has determined his self-hatred: the very beginning and end of his existence. Doc Hines and Percy Grimm are acting out the dictates of the meta-story and all of it is related, in one way or another, to Christianity. Certainly God *is* white and there is then no way to escape the suffocating pervasiveness of the shadow of this God: an ironic version of the awful saying that “God is everywhere.” So, wherever Christmas looks he has to see himself as the object of suspicion, and the enemy of the whole plan and pattern of reality. To join in with this plan is to voluntarily destroy himself. There is no other way to make peace with the burden of his enemies. In other words, that he is an enemy of reality is written into reality and this is a result of the meta-story. As always with Faulkner, it is the sheer fact that he has made it this long that is astonishing. And, what seems even more astonishing, is that Christmas never turns himself completely over to hatred; what is consistently the object of hatred- in the ways described above- can never hate as much or as deeply.

Finally, with respect to the tragic story of Joe Christmas, there is a ubiquitous element of all meta-stories: individuals “get what they deserve.” Clearly, Faulkner is turning this notion on its head, but the novel is drenched with this awful background theme and belief. Opposite views, say that some people *never* get what they deserve or that what people actually get has *nothing* to do with what they deserve, or finally that we have *no idea* what it means for anyone to get what she deserves, are all contradictory to the notion that the world is as it ought to be. As Faulkner sees agency and identity so closely tied to history, the same will be true with respect to whatever form of “justice” that is dished out. On this view, what happens to people is always burdened by time and history. To be a person who is, by definition, an enemy of all social reality (part of the meta-story) in combination with the aspect of the meta-story that claims that “all people ultimately get what they deserve” is a nightmare that cannot be fully comprehended as a nightmare; that is, Christmas must think within the same categories even as he suspects that such categories badly misrepresent his own circumstance.

Sutpen Creating Sutpen ⁸

There is a strong sense in which Snopes orbits Sutpen. All things considered, Sutpen is a consolidation of multiple themes in the ongoing cultural meta-story in which Snopes also participates in around the edges. Perhaps most importantly, they share the original experience of their own radical inferiority in this social world. Sutpen describes to General Compson his humiliation, as a child, in being sent around to the back of the plantation home. The social world is, however, underwritten by a meta-story and the one prevalent theme, already seen with Snopes, is the reification of roles. These roles have a cosmic stamp even as they are ambiguous. Hence to reach his design Sutpen must take on the task of self-creation and this includes both a magnificent will to power and core elements of self-annihilation.

Self-creation is another aspect of an emerging meta-story but it needs two sorts of explanation. The first concerns how it is possible in any sense. The second concerns how it can be achieved by an individual human being in a particular circumstance. The answers to both questions are haunting and finally empty. There really is no sense in which self-creation is possible and so the identity of the person who endeavors to this feat is bound to be haunting and empty (in some ways, profoundly inscrutable). Or, even worse, the emptiness of the endeavor is necessarily perverse and radically self-defeating.

In a previous section, I argued that meta-stories are written into the nature of human consciousness. Self-creation is the greatest of the self-defeating endeavors of consciousness and it also sits at the pinnacle of meta-stories. Insofar as the self can become an object of consciousness, insofar as we can “see ourselves” as distinct from others, we can also see ourselves as entirely free from history and society (this is all a matter of “seeming”). An answer to our first question is then self-creation is possible (merely as a self-deceived endeavor) through the very nature of self-consciousness. And there exist certain social/historical conditions that can make the endeavor urgent. In Sutpen’s case, the urgency hangs on and around the idea of flourishing in the only way a person could flourish in his culture: to be a member of the plantation class. A radical division in forms of life, within societies, is often the ground of the envy/hatred complex and so finally the ground of the urgent need for self-creation. The alternative for Sutpen is a Snopes like existence. While there may be other possible alternatives, there are no clear reasons for thinking that Sutpen sees these as possibilities and there are no reasons for thinking that the range of possibilities are other

than what is overtly present in social reality.

I have claimed in the above that self-creation is a form of meta-story. I now need to specify the precise nature of Sutpen's self-creation and how it is an aspect of a meta-story (the anti-story). We should take it as an axiom that the very possibility of narrative presupposes an individual history in synthetic unity with a social history. By "synthetic unity" I am alluding to the Kantian notion of a proposition that combines two distinct elements but still contains necessity. Here I mean to say that individual history is incoherent without a socio/historical world (the condition for meaning at all) and yet there remain various aspects in which an individual can be understood as an individual. If my reasoning is correct here, then it must follow that self-creation is a meta-story or at least an aspect of a meta-story. To put it bluntly: self-creation defies the synthesis of individual with history and this is to defy the conditions of meaning. To defy the conditions of meaning is ultimately to defy what we call, most confidently, "human reality." Persons who defy reality will be crushed, which is not to say that their endeavors are uninteresting. But what needs more discussion is the manner in which Sutpen self-creates, the precise form of his self-creation. It is not so radical as to assert a total, across the board disconnection from everyone else; if this were the case then the self-creator would literally become a non-entity. For even to use someone is to admit to some connection to her and it is to admit to a connectedness to a world. Sutpen, I think, tragically self-creates in that he believes he can cut ties with anyone or make ties with anyone and select only the consequences of those ties that are consistent with *his plan*. Self-creation of this sort starts the entire spiral downward into tragedy.

Sutpen's self-creation as meta-story is also easily punctured existentially. Even from the standpoint of the first person, the doubt surrounding self-creation has to be immense. "Seeing oneself" as free from others is a surface aspect or what we might call a mere claim or assertion; hence the connection between self-creation and the will to power. On the other hand, imagining precisely *what it is or what it means* to be in some sense outside the range of possible (unwanted) consequences is finally impossible. One would have to be able to see oneself as outside of the temporal causal chain and then we run out of imaginative space. The meta-story of self-creation resembles the Christian story as it starts and ends as mere assertion. No one really comprehends it and so when seen in an awkward moment the elements of the meta-story are revealed as absurd.

All of the above points can be seen as Sutpen tells his story, in parts, to General Compson. As most people will do, Sutpen tells his story with an authority that subtly dismisses the fact that all narrative is interpretation. Sutpen differs from others according to the force and deliberateness in which he asserts and then acts. The tidal wave of disaster that awaits him is already present in his narrative. His attempts to deny the possible consequences of his past are the result of already realized consequences of his past that he is in the process of dismissing. In short, he has to deny his identity to achieve his identity and this is the self-defeating truth of all self-creation. "I am entirely in control of what I am and what I become" is nothing more than the result of some historical circumstance where the meta-story and one's place in it are exaggerated (a social, cultural, or economic urgency bearing down on the human person). Sutpen's own undoing is ultimately the endeavor to deny the very possibility of having an identity at all; he is, in the endeavor to self-create, a self annihilator.

In the above, I mentioned that the endeavor of self-creation is tied closely to, or depends on, the will to power. The fact that human identity necessarily depends on having a history and being, more or less, conscious of that history also presents- at the same time- the possibility of flatly denying that history shapes or determines anything at all. One might say that this assertion is easily made; in fact, everyone makes it in some sense, but only the Sutpens of the world act and behave as if it is really true. And this requires an enormous will to power. Sutpen shoulders on into the future with only his clean notion of the future as motive. His life comes to resemble and finally encompass a venture of great proportions and given that his possibility is already tied into the components of human consciousness and hence human identity, his venture is also our ever possible venture. Finally, however, Sutpen is a beautifully wrought tragic figure who must meet a violent death due to his outrageous and all too human recalcitrance to let go of his clean and shiny future. As he obliterates connections to others, and so their humanity, he also obliterates his own humanity and agency. His demise mirrors the demise of his tattered, tired, and shabby culture.

Again, we know in our more sober moments that all aspects of self-creation are part of a meta-story. The relationships between self-creation as meta-story and Christianity as meta-story are multiple and varied; in fact, the manner in which they intersect and are tied together could present a whole sociological standpoint on America. Obviously, however,

this project cannot be undertaken here but we can determine an essential element in both meta-stories. Both are meta-stories if only because they hold to the claim that the individual human being *somehow* transcends her socio-historical circumstance. To flatly deny this claim is to be purely contentious. It is better to make the point, especially in relation to Faulkner, that the self-conscious endeavor to transcend our circumstance or that there is some agency doing this for us (or will do this for us) is to shred the fabric of narrative.

In conclusion on Sutpen, we once again have a strong sense of psychological and ontological discomfort in determining that he “got what he deserved.” With the truly human figure, imbedded in a tragic circumstance, this entire meta-category is challenged as grotesquely inhuman. We literally do not know how to make it fit with the reality of human life and narrative. Clearly, the clean version of “desert” belongs to some meta-story that was a causal element of the tragedy in the first place.

Quentin Killing Quentin ⁹

The tie between Sutpen, the self-creator, and Quentin Compson, the self-annihilator, is profound and subtle enough so that it is hard to articulate. It seems, however, that the commonality circles around the conditions of narrative and agency: the conditions for being a person at all (and for having a story of any sort). Tragedy can then be seen as movement toward the annihilation of agency.

If, on the surface of things, Sutpen has only a future, then Quentin, on the surface of things, has only a past. But this is on the surface of things because there is no future without a past and there is no past without a future: this is no more than a tautology. To put the point in Kantian terminology: human experience and agency presuppose time as the form of intuition. Neither Quentin nor Sutpen can, in any sense, live outside of time with just a future or just a past, but their peculiar histories and psychologies aim them in the direction of this futile and desperate task. Quentin lives as far out on the edge of agency as any character in literature and this just means that the manner in which he experiences himself and the world is entirely out of joint with the nature of normative human experience.

The tragic figure who seeks the obliteration of the future is, we might confidently say, already dead: suicide is not a radical break with what has

been occurring to and within that character. And it is not just the suicide of an individual. It is the suicide of the species because it is the denial or annihilation of what is constitutive of agency. To dwell in the past, especially one that is in tatters or never really existed (as imagined) or to yearn for the past, always betrays a profound sorrow and misgiving about that past. At its fever pitch it is the recognition, however inchoate, that whatever transpired in the past is already enough to destroy the possibility of a future (from within that peculiar consciousness). What is worth remembering, which is itself a condition for having a memory at all, is inconsistent with a future; clearly, this is Quentin's circumstance. The limits of action are bound by the imaginative conception of what is not just possible but worthy of being actual for that agent. Quentin's idealized past, together with the recognition that it is not an ideal past, creates the ground for a sorrow that leads to self-annihilation. One might say the same is true of his culture, the background and possibility of his own particular past.

Human beings are, of course, agents; that is, our lives are intentional and meaningful in relation to a temporal background (a history). "Agency," as far as we can hope to understand it, is necessarily historical and forward looking. A history is what allows for the creation of agency. What I did yesterday and the day before is the only way to understand what I did at all and those things that I did are what constitute the elements of my current and future self. (One should also be warned concerning the search for the origin of the self: this is meta-nonsense.) The future is also analytically contained in agency as "to do x" is first to have some sense of intentionality and this is to have wants, desires, and so forth, all which presuppose a future. The future is therefore constitutive of being, our normative ontology (as well as a finite limit to that future) and it is also constitutive of the possibility of consciousness. The human agent does not just live through time. The human agent experiences himself or herself as *having a past and having a future as constitutive of having being in the world*.

I said in the above that what is worth remembering is a condition of memory. In other words, "what is worthy of remembering" has to be present for memory to take hold and become formative in consciousness. At the overtly conscious level what and how we remember is structured and conditioned by what we understand as valuable or non-valuable about our history and our possible future states. Quentin can no longer recover what is precisely or unambiguously valuable about his past in relation to

what is possible for his future. Identity is then jeopardized because the connection between past, present, and future is jeopardized. Insofar as what is valuable has come through a social world, a background and context, we come to realize that identity is precariously built on normative relations to others and their histories. This is where the structure of narrative in literature reveals what philosophy treats mostly as an abstraction. Locke found the condition of identity in *memory or the stream of consciousness, a connection between parts of consciousness (memory)*, but what he failed to realize is that memory analytically contains what is worth remembering; in short, it contains character. This is what Faulkner does realize and this is the key component of how one form of tragedy is possible: the tragedy of the walking dead.

But it is not just value and valuing that makes human identity possible. Identity also determines and is determined (back) by the *nature* of memories. And here we can take another step into the depths of Quentin's tragedy. To say that value and valuing make memory possible is too general; we might say that it is the *how and why* of our memories that really allow for memory to even begin. We never "just remember" in any deliberate sense; there is always a how and why to acts of remembering that are as much ingrained in the nature of the person as they are in the nature of society. This how and why of remembering constitutes the character of both persons and societies.

Quentin has come to remember in ways- the how and why of his remembering- that are inconsistent with the possibility of a future. His suicide is then written into his remembering. His suicide is then written into his past. And here we must come face to face with a horrifying reality. Agency can be destroyed from within its own components. The possibility and reality of our sinning, the Christian human nature since "the fall" and the key to unlocking all related theodicies cannot unlock this horrifying reality. Quentin has not gone astray or failed to hear the call of righteousness, nor does he have some "tragic flaw" as some method to tragedy; he has, instead, lost the grounds for being a person.

In the second section of *The Sound and The Fury*, we are confronted with the activity of a mind more so than any series of events that would constitute an external narrative. From the internal narrative, we see that Quentin has come to occupy the jagged edges of reality. The reason is not hard to find. His overall desperation has led him to comprehend time as an object instead of a condition of life. As such Quentin does not seem

to be entering time as a normative human agent but he is standing on the outside looking in. One cannot help but to see this mental illness as being related to every word that Quentin speaks in the text. Once Quentin regards the past as representing the impossibility of a future, he is at the end point of agency. Finally, Quentin's tragedy is difficult for any of us to imagine. His suicide or his self-destruction is actually his *self-realization*. It is hard to imagine anything as sorrowful or anything that could cut deeper as a possibility of the human condition.

The last set of points I want to make in this essay concern the connection of the above with what I have been calling the "meta-story." In my view, the meta-story is deeply implicated in the tragic circumstance. In this case the diseased elements of the meta-story can be found in aspects of memory or, if the reader can pardon the expression, the urge for a meta-memory.

In one very important sense all memory is already meta-memory. Our center of orientation to reality while shaped by the social world in all its forms and varieties is still burdened with "the self" as an independent sort of entity that faces the world. Hence, there is a sense in which all memory has to be solipsistic. The notion of the self as an actual entity that stands apart, both ontologically and epistemically, creates the possibility of radical disorientation and also the discouraging psychic see-saw between "the individual" and "the community." There has never been a more grotesquely false dilemma. From the platform of the self Quentin is then able to conceive his own struggle and history as being loaded down with an importance or significance that it just doesn't have. From here we can reach the true nature of nihilism.

Quentin, it seems, wants to attach a meaning to his memories and his history that circles around, however haphazardly, the meta-meanings of his culture: a vision of honor, chivalry, and so forth. These meanings and virtues exist only insofar as someone acts them out; they are, in no sense, written into the fabric of reality. Furthermore, there is nothing going on between Quentin and Caddy except the painful or horrifying incapacity to acquire appropriate intimacy. The meta-dysfunction occurs at precisely the moments where Quentin wants to invest that relationship with something greater, something beyond both of them, something that could only be worked out in death and so on. This desire for the "something more" or "something of greatest significance" is- in the end- nihilism. Consider the following passage from the mouth of Mr. Compson at the very end of the Quentin section.

Someday in very disgust he [man] risks everything on a single blind turn of a card no man ever does that under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement he does it only when he has realized that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman and I temporarily and he it is hard believing to think that a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willy-nilly and is recalled without warning to be replaced by whatever issue the gods happen to be floating at the time no you will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair....¹⁰

This looks like the real article of nihilism and in a sense it is. But there is also a sense in which Quentin has to take his father's "advice" but cannot. He has to take his advice if he is not going to fully renounce the world because once you set out a meta-meaning and then you come to realize, even if in an inchoate fashion, that such a meta-meaning is illusory, the full force of world renunciation becomes a strong possibility. Nihilism depends, for its very possibility, on the meta-story.

Now, to move back to the connection between the meta-story and memory, the proper point to make is that there is none. *Rather, we should say, that the meta-story annihilates memory because it does not construct value out of experience but instead lays it on top of experience as an abstraction.* From within consciousness and life there is not anything to remember and this is to say, finally, that we can destroy our own memory through our temptation for meta-stories and narratives. Quentin has not remembered his past; he has reconstructed it in such a way that it cannot answer to reality.

Conclusion

At the center of meta-stories is, inevitably, the notion that there is *something* that explains everything: the idea that reality, especially human existence, has at least a guide (if not a plan). Such a view is deeply tempting and, in ways I have described, an intrinsic element of human consciousness. But this *something* that explains everything is our undoing as it prompts us to give our lives a kind of significance that experience can neither comprehend nor handle. The very nature of human consciousness

contains its own reason for self-deception and self-destruction.

What Faulkner's stories show us so deeply and permanently is the very precarious nature of the meta-story and so we can see it as an aspect of human consciousness and the human social world and not as an ontological coating to our reality. One wonders: how else, under what other form of delusion, could human beings become so interesting as to be their own worst enemy? Human existence is such that we live to constantly disarm the possibility of self-destruction but without end because the possibility is built into what it is to be a human being.

The danger to the social world- many people might say- is the absence of religion and some corresponding morality. Of course, there is a sense in which this claim is true, but it is only skin deep. As Faulkner has *shown us* -and as irony of the best sort would have it- the meta-story (that wraps up religion and morality in crucial ways) can only sustain us as far as we can manage a self-deception or denial of reality in the face of a Joe Christmas or Abner Snopes. In other words, in narrative fiction of the first order, we come to insights concerning evil in the human world that cannot be "explained" from some external standpoint. In fact, the evil cannot be explained at all except insofar as we recognize its nature as being written into the human condition.

Notes

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 95-107.

² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton&Company, 1961), pp. 22-52.

³ Hume, op. cit., pp. 95-96.

⁴ Hegel, "Who Thinks Abstractly," in *19th Century Philosophy*, edited by Forrest Baird (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 101-104.

⁵ William Faulkner, "Barn Burning" in *The Short Story: 25 Masterpieces* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp. 264-281.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor Press), pp. 82-146.

⁷ William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

⁸ William Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

⁹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 177-178.