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**IKE AND THE COW: A READING OF AN EPISODE
IN FAULKNER'S *THE HAMLET***

Absalom, Absalom!, first published in 1936, contains a map of the mythical Yoknapatawpha County drawn by its creator and signed "William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor". It was the uniqueness, the originality of his fictional landscapes that endowed, with a demiurgic gesture of which Faulkner liked to speak, the local and the temporal design of his literary works with the transcultural and transhistorical dimension.

Down south on Faulkner's map, below the pasture which was sold so that Quentin Compson could go to Harvard and a short distance from the bridge which was flooded so that Addie Bundren could not cross it on her outrageously slow progress towards the Jefferson cemetery – there rises, like a cow shaped solid amid the golden mist of the morning sun, an elevated, chosen land that did not evolve, did not develop into economies and trashy transactions but sought to deliberately regress into poetic essence: there we read of the dew drops holding "in miniature magnification the dawn's rosy miniatures", "the flowing immemorial female", the "spring's concentrated climax", the "nest-form of sleep", "the well of days", "the complete all of light". This land rising under the spell of Faulkner's dense and troubled rhetoric (like "the thick, warm, heavy, milk-laden breath") from the flatness of the everyday ("the rich, broad, flat river-bottom country") to a universal, cosmic dimension ("the final ridge" and "the womb-dimension") belongs to Ike Snopes in Book 3 of *The Hamlet*¹. It can become Ike's sole property in recognition of his being ignorant of the very notion of property and by virtue of his being identified with the myth of the redemptive overcoming of self-consciousness, that is, insofar as, graced by idiocy, he can *know* of its value and of its significance no more

¹ All quotations from W. Faulkner's, *The Hamlet* come from the Vintage Books Edition, New York 1964.

than the object of his love – Houston’s cow. From the very moment of opening that familiar narrative territory to perspectives of the cyclical (“As winter became spring and the spring itself advanced...”), Faulkner’s text beckons, ostentatiously one might say, to the reader who knows that some stories, running parallel to the seasonal ebb and flow in nature, are not to be exhausted by repetition and who takes pleasure in that knowledge itself as some refined a reflection of the imaginary, childish, bestial or idiotic ecstasy of the actual experience of nature. If you want to read again, Faulkner’s text tells us, it is because the same old story is told over and over again as if it had never been told, precisely because its roots, like the roots of the freshly green grass on which the spring-garlanded cow grazes, are lost in darkness and in death. From the silence of the dawn back to the silence of the “subterrene slumber”, on its circular journey of linguistic commerce, the “prosaic business of feeding” the text with allusions, associations, cross-references, the sun over the extreme part of the Yoknapatawpha county has the nostalgic aura of D. H. Lawrence’s *Apocalypse*:

Our sun is quite a different thing from the cosmic sun of the ancients, so much more trivial. We may see what we call the sun, but we have lost Helios forever, and the great orb of the Chaldeans still more. We have lost the cosmos, by coming out of responsive connection with it, and this is our chief tragedy. What is our petty little love of nature – Nature!! – compared to the ancient magnificent living with the cosmos, and being honored by the cosmos! [...] When I can strip myself of the trash of personal feelings and ideas, and get down to my naked sun-self, then the sun and I can commune by the hour, the blazing interchange, and he gives me life, sun-life, and I send him a little new brightness from the world of the bright blood...²

Ike’s is the story of ascent towards the sunset. This version of the imperative, tragic “Rise and be free” does not partake of Icarus’ apotheosized human pride but of the elegized acceptance of animality, reminiscent, despite all its “sound and fury”, of Lawrence’s: “Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen”. What is happening to Ike Snopes and what the reader is metaphorically, pleasurably placed within by this section’s carefully sustained artificiality (the “thin depthless suspension of false dawn itself”) is, above all, the presence of the cow. She would *be* there out the dark and the unformed, “the uncohered all-sentience of fluid and nerve-springing terror”. Will Ike name her and recognize her riddle and his in the name he chooses? Speechless, he can hear, smell and then see the cow but not know her. It is the poet’s, more and more distinctly visible hand that puts on both the identical golden mask of the sun’s saddened image. Faulkner’s art situates Ike and the cow, as earlier Eula

² D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, New York 1932, The Viking Press, p. 42.

of whom it is said that "there was nothing in books here and anywhere else that she would need to know, who had been completely equipped", in the mythical *sun*-light of self-sufficiency, which gradually reveals the thickening contours of some ready patterns, the frames to contain the "rich over-fertile weight" of imaginary layouts and tricky mechanisms in the entrancing machinery of stage setting. The nostalgic spectacle of Ike's section bears features of Faulkner's apprenticeship work from the time of *The Marionettes*: the failed graphic artist's preference for the silhouette effect, symmetrical design, stylized ornamentation and arabesque line; the failed playwright's sense of stage movement, the pantomime, the costume and the role playing; the failed poet's longing for some ideal, self-supporting and self-justified *l'azur* of purity and perfection ("It's got to be absolutely impeccable, absolutely perfect"³), combined with a never-altogether-abandoned posture of the solitary, protean and narcissistic, word-intoxicated Pierrot. The artist's indebtedness to the works of other artists and his reliance on symbolic patterns are, Faulkner repeatedly said, necessary, incidental and natural in the sense of their all falling into a matrix of universal relatedness, a cultural continuum where names, border-lines and claims for property become liberated from any particular meaning. With their spring-like, jubilant and at the same time sad expression, Faulkner's masks of artistic vocation seek to create an illusion of an authority both younger and more ancient than that of the artist's hand; their origin, the source of their splendor, is believed to be "not in man's knowledge but in his inheritance of his old dreams, in his blood, perhaps his bones, rather than in the storehouse of his memory, his intellect"⁴. Entrapped, infinitely reflected in the "inscrutable abstraction" of the cow's eyes, the illuminated image of Ike Snopes mirrors art's instinctive (we may call it naive, Rousseauistic, neo-romantic, regressive, childish or mad) fascination with the forms of animality. What Guattari and Deleuze wrote about the "acts of becoming-animal" and Franz Kafka's notes on the "happy moments" of "freedom of movement" achieved in the course of the writer's alienating and redemptive work, could possibly be said of Ike's relation to the cow in *The Hamlet*: "To become animal is to participate in movement... to reach a continuum of intensities ... to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs"⁵. From under the same sign (can there be one of greater fertility?) comes, the imaginative design of the

³ *Faulkner in the University*, eds F. L. Gwynn, J. L. Blotner, Charlottesville 1959, The University of Virginia Press, p. 107.

⁴ *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. R. A. Jelliffe, Tokyo 1956, Kenkyusha, p. 68.

⁵ F. Guattari, G. Deleuze, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis 1986, The University of Minnesota Press, p. 13.

Eighth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: there the mourned Sun assumes the poetic form of the death-free, form-free "Open" into which only the animal can gaze, so that "when it moves, it moves into eternity, like a running spring", while "...*We* have never, not for a single day, that pure space before us into which the flowers endlessly open". And yet:

... upon this wakeful warm creature
 is laid the weight and care of great sadness.
 For always there clings to him as well, what often
 overwhelms us, – the memory
 that what we now press after
 once might have been much truer, and
 its attachment infinitely tender. Here all is distance,
 there it was breath. After the first homeland
 this second is a drafty, hybrid place⁶.

Even the animals, once they enter the sphere of visibility (the image appearing so persistently in Ike's section) are already memory-burdened, for in the eyes of the beholder, instinct – the memory of the body, of reproduced form – does not cease to be a reminder of the contaminated, fallen, that is *historical* world and of the apocalyptic desire to do away with it. The Polish reader may here recall Bruno Schulz's evocation of what he called (with a sense of wonder at word roots so characteristic of his poetic prose) "the Age of Genius", when towards the end of winter the "exploding" sky placed a concentrated, window-framed patch of fiery brightness upon the floor of Joseph's room and he, in his own body experiencing an explosive enhancement of creative powers, "stood transfixed, legs astride and barked short, hard curses at it with an alien voice". "As in Noah's day", at this time of heavenly, dazzling and destructive inspiration, Joseph's room became the "frontier" and the "tollgate" (the "final ridge" of "the final blue and dying echo of the Appalachian Mountains" following the scene of a "breaking" sky comes to mind) for colorful processions of animals, mooing mournfully and carrying on their heads the "stigma of their sin with sadness and resignation". Under the gesture of the artist's sky-inspired hand, the animals appear under the burden of a *horn* – "An *idée fixe*, transgressing the limits of their being, reaching high above their heads and emerging suddenly into light, frozen into matter palpable and hard"⁷. Schulz's animal, too, has to wear the mask of the lost sun, of the dreamy blessedness of the womb, of formlessness and nonsignification. That this kind of vision has a transferential power making us, as it were, look

⁶ R. M. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. S. Garmey, J. Wilson, New York 1987, The Petrarch Press, p. 58.

⁷ *The Fictions of Bruno Schulz*, trans. C. Wieniewska, London 1988, Picador, p. 144.

through Coppola's (sun)glasses finds confirmation in our readiness to be carried over into a textual, metaphoric realm in which we recognize the universality of the principle of repetition, substitution and replacement. We can multiply examples of literary texts which run parallel to Ike's story seeking to generate in the reader an awareness, perhaps ecstatic and trancelike, of an inexhaustible, fluid linking capacity of language. As Franz Kafka wrote in his *Diary*, in contrast to "a cat warming itself by the stove", writing is in constant need of metaphors (cats warming themselves by the stoves!); writing "lacks independence"⁸. We tend to view the story of Ike's love for the cow and our interest in it – an invitation to and an acceptance of a situation of intimacy – as issuing from that plenteous lineage of thought which defies every attempt to confine it historically and which Jacques Derrida, recognizing in the desire for commentary, no less than in the desire for poetic substitution, "the very form of exiled speech", set out to methodically uncover in its multiform, luring, logocentric, mythical, necessary, "animal-like" configurations⁹.

Because she seems to be enclosed entirely in the precision, infallibility and self-sufficiency of her body, the cow can become (with the always surprising certitude of the rising sun at "the moment which birds and animals know") a new, yet ancient promise of breaking out from the boundaries of any definite place or category one might claim her to belong to. "Amid the abstract earth", Faulkner's cow turns toward what Derrida called "the lost and impossible presence of the absent origin"¹⁰. Emerging out of the dream of redeemed, recaptured earliness and freshness ("the drenched myriad waking life of grasses") and sinking back "into the nest-form of sleep", Ike and the cow owe their splendor to the wandering, allusive, repetitious, insatiable and bemoaning quality of Faulkner's language. "We must be separated from life and communities and must entrust ourselves to traces, must become men of vision because we have ceased hearing the voice from within the immediate proximity of the garden", Derrida wrote in his appreciation of the works of Edmund Jabes. "Writing is displaced on the broken line between lost and promised speech"¹¹. In

⁸ Quoted after H. Politzer, "Franz Kafka's Language", [in:] *Franz Kafka's The Trial: Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. H. Bloom, New York 1987, Chelsea House Publishers, pp. 35–36.

⁹ For the most exhaustive discussion of Faulkner's work in the light of the philosophical thought of Jacques Derrida see J. Matthews, *The Play of Faulkner's Language*, Ithaca 1982, Cornell University Press. Pages 202–206 refer specifically to Ike's episode.

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago 1978, The University of Chicago Press, p. 292.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

the gratifying symmetry of the idyl's imagery, it is displaced on the meandering line between "the morning's ultimate gold" and the evening's "golden air", between Ike hearing the cow, "serene and one indivisible in joy", and Ike walking with the cow "in single file", "original, in the womb-dimension, the unavoidable first and the inescapable last". Symmetry is nature's containing frame for the ineffable. In the symmetrical space of the section where the opening image of dew drops reflecting the dawn is itself reflected by the closing image of rain drops reflecting "intact and iridescent cosmos", the cow is the earth is Ike is the text itself. With the sweet milky breath of the Open, with the poetic mask of an origin, a ring, a center, a monad, she feeds on the illusion of universal analogy, moves among the drenched myriad life of rhetorical figures ("not toward a destination in space but a destination in time"), repeats familiar gestures in ritualistic affirmation of the Hegelian "there is nothing new under the sun". And then she rises to the sun's "ineffable effulgence" mounting a superstructure of metaphor on the edge of nonsense and self-parody, lightening up momentarily with an inner glow in a splendid apotheosis of the lost, setting sun before they all become "extinguished", effaced from "the day's tedious recording". Faulkner's is here a kind of grotesque picture which we might call after the mythologiser of the Polish southern provincial landscapes, "a still life brought by its intensity to a metaphysical shimmer"¹². The intensity of a fictional body partakes of the *animality* of words, pointing, through their instinctive, necessary tendency for connection, supplementation, integration, completion, toward the myth of a tranlinguistic presence, of a wholeness. Of the many devices that help to evoke the sense of intensity and suppleness we may notice here the preference for images of encapsulation – of the globe, the dome, the drop, the bowl, the well, and an abundance of linking dashes in compound words: "all-sentience", "leaf-shadows", "now-dry", "water-heavy", "dew-pearled", "milk-laden", "sun-contracted", "sun-bellied", "sun-gearred", and others. The theme of the animal (what splendid failures in dealing with its enigma have been acknowledged in the works of American writers only!) seems naturally to invite the posture of showmanship, the costume of the prestidigitator for whom emphasized artificiality of the stage becomes itself an element in the art of miracle working.

I believe the question that readers of the dazzling spectacle in "The Long Summer" are likely to keep asking themselves is: "How seriously are we to take all this?" Perhaps as seriously as we can take our interest in the masterly performance of the modernist artist putting his audience under the spell of illusion by the subversive tactics of exposing the conventionality of the stage and familiar scripts. Ike Snopes, seeing his own image infinitely reflected in the eye-globes of the cow, is like Pierrot staring at himself in

¹² *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz*, ed. J. Ficowski, trans. W. Arndt, V. Nelson, New York 1988, Harper & Row, p. 39.

a mirror from Faulkner's last drawing to *The Marionettes*. We are encouraged to recognize the artist's clownish theatrical costume not because art lacks significance but because it is believed to extend beyond any fixed signification. Faulkner's animal is raised to the status of splendid anonymity by the paradox of the mask which shifts the focus from actualization to potentiality. The symmetrical design of the text on the cow, its dependence on the "in-between" situations (one may be reminded again of the frame of the two candlesticks in the drawing of *The Marionettes*) opens a field of poetic imaginative play and associates it with the experience of the natural and instinctive – the experience of the cow. Ike's loving response to the cow's voice in the scene of the fire illustrates Faulkner's fondness for metaphoric discourse which, loosening the controlling rule of linear movement, gains a continuum of intensity by turning back upon itself in, a dance of substitution: "Each time his feet touched the earth now he gave a short shriek like an ejaculation, trying to snatch his foot back before it could have taken his weight, then turning immediately in aghast amazement to the other foot which he had for the moment forgotten, so that presently he was not progressing at all but merely moving in one spot, like a dance..." [*The Hamlet*, 173]. Ike's love is an invitation to that kind of intimate dance of metaphor. If it can be called after Nietzsche's formulation the "dance of a pen", it is still not altogether from under the same Nietzschean affirmative sign of art as Derrida read it: "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin..."¹³. What we seem to be left with in the moment of the curtain falling upon the darkened scene is rather a breath of melancholy and a sense of gratification coming from the completion and the accuracy of a simple, evocative pattern, a feeling reminiscent of Lawrence's: "We have lost the sun".

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IKE I JEGO KROWA: INTERPRETACJA FRAGMENTU POWIEŚCI
FAULKNERA *ZAŚCIANEK*

Tematem artykułu jest motyw miłości Ike'a Snopes'a do krowy w drugim rozdziale książki trzeciej powieści Williama Faulknera *Zaścianek* (*The Hamlet*). Apoteoza uczucia, jakim umysłowo upośledzony chłopiec darzy zwierzę, postrzegana jest w kontekście ambicji języka metafory do poszukiwania utraconego stanu jedności z naturą. Nostalgicznej wizji towarzyszy świadomość sztuczności i teatralności środków służących jej przywołaniu. Temat idealistycznego przedstawienia zwierzęcia stanowi zaproszenie do gry literackich odniesień i usprawiedliwia odczytanie fragmentu powieści Faulknera jako ilustracji myśli krytycznej Jacquesa Derridy.

¹³ J. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 292.