Metahumour in Faulkner's "Spotted Horses"

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IT WOULD SEEM STRANGE if a master of humour such as William Faulkner did not exhibit an awareness that this genre easily lends itself to that reflexive usage by which it becomes its own subject. "Spotted Horses" in particular represents not only a vintage specimen of humour, but a profound analysis of the role that humour plays in our existence. The dialectic of images, the characterization, the authorial comment, and the thematic resolution of the story all suggest how comprehensive and crucial this role is. Humour emerges as a shaper of the story's moral norm, as a powerful weapon on behalf of individual values, as a determinant of character, and ultimately as an agent of redemption in seemingly-futile lives.

The complex relation in this story between generic structure and theme is exhibited by the fact that there are two norms: one that provides humour by throwing aberrant behaviour into perspective, and another that subsumes the first by making this humour normative. The first, more simple norm centres upon a solid, no-nonsense realm of life-sustaining processes, and is embodied principally in Mrs. Littlejohn and Mrs. Armstid, though it is also seen in the commonsense side of such characters as Ratliff and Eck. The imagery that represents this norm suggests all that is prosaic and quotidian, yet fundamental, necessary, and even eternal: Mrs. Littlejohn's "blackened wash pot"[1] and "metal-ridged washboard" (p. 292), for example, as well as her "soap-raw hands" (p. 295). Mrs. Armstid comes off as a fascinating combination of the squalid and the transcendental: a figure in a "shapeless gray garment" (p. 294) and stained canvas

tennis shoes, and resembling "a gray and blasted tree-trunk" who yet belongs to what is timeless, to "the unhurried flow" of cosmic process. These are the sort of people who give existence its anchorage and its endurance, and without whom our enterprise would be threatened with inanition. Their labour is Sisyphean, a perpetual heroic repetition of the same slogging tasks in the face of constant need. A perfect image of both the necessity and the futility of the struggle is contained in the complaint of one of the farmers: "I been grubbing up a clump of willows outen my spring pasture for fifteen years. They are the same size every year. Only difference is, it's just two or three more trees every time" (p. 282).

One alternative to this solid realm of hard work is a nebulous realm of idle fantasies, including "get-rich-quick" schemes. The horses belong to this phantasmagoria, and bring with them an imagery of light-play and general insubstantiality that constantly suggests violation of the norm.[2] They are explicitly associated by Faulkner with circuses, kaleidoscopes, light in various forms, and even with supernatural creatures. This multiplicity suggests a capacity for metamorphosis, and it is precisely this process that underlies the humour of this story. The pretension of this insubstantial realm of flux to be substantial, and the exposure of this pretension as ridiculous constitute the basic machinery of comic irony here. The horses are supposed to be susceptible to conversion from exotic whimsical creatures into trudging farm animals, and the absolute incongruity of the two states of being sets the stage for farce. We are reminded of the metamorphoses of the dog in the Proteus episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* by Faulkner's description of the horses: "larger than rabbits and gaudy as parrots . . . wild as deer, deadly as rattlesnakes, quiet as doves (p. 275). Ratliff anticipates these failed, illusory metamorphoses when he insists that he would not buy either "a tiger or a rattlesnake" from Flem Snopes "for fear that it would turn out to be a painted dog or a piece of garden hose" (p. 283). It is not the mere fact of fraud that is funny, but the unbridgeable gap between dangerous tiger and harmless dog, between writhing snake and inanimate hose, and the absurdity of mistaking shabby illusion for unmistakable reality.

The references to the horses as "circus" performers summon up particularly apt images of humorous pretense, e.g., ponies dressed in garish human clothes, including pink frilly dresses that suggest a sort of equine transvestitism. Again, the comedy results from a ludicrously-failed metamorphosis, like that of clowns who botch the attempt to be normal workmen capable of carrying water, climbing ladders — and catching horses. The humour is heightened when the act leaves the magic play-circle of the tent and attempts to meld with the rough reality of Frenchman's Bend.

Gaudy illusion and light play come together in the kaleidoscope image, which Faulkner uses in direct contrast to the formidably solid image of Mrs. Littlejohn: "[the horses] were moving now — a kaleidoscope of inextricable in incredible violence on the periphery of which the metal clasps of the Texan's suspenders sun-glinted in ceaseless orbit with terrific slowness across the lot" (p. 293). A child's toy, composed of a cylinder and bits of coloured glass that make beautiful but meaningless patterns, is the perfect symbol for the flamboyant superficiality that the horses represent. And that the slightest twisting of the cylinder produces metamorphosis completes the picture of an easy fluxion that can only counterfeit solidity. The humorous discrepancy is finally that between bright toy and drab tool.

The traditional equation between moonlight and a magical realm of imagination is modified here by Faulkner to emphasize the pejorative sense of "imaginary," and the semantic commonality of "lunar" and "lunacy." The first sight that prospective purchasers have of the horses occurs in "the dreaming lambence of the moonlight" (p. 281), an ambience in which the horses appear as "transmogrified hallucinations" (p. 277) and the observers themselves are no more substantial than "black silhouettes" (p. 281). The progression of the moon toward the full brings with it a "translation" from the "lapidary" definition and solidity of realistic day to "the treacherous and silver receptivity in which the horses huddled in mazy camouflage, or singly or in pairs rushed, fluid, phantom, and unceasing, to huddle again in mirage-like clumps" (p. 280). The association of the moonlit landscape with treachery and camouflage underlines the danger

of attempting to make in such a setting those decisions that properly belong to the day. One of Yeats's comic visions is apropos here — the drunken farmers of his poem "The Tower," who set out to verify their "fancies" of a woman's beauty by the actual "sight" of her:

> But they mistook the brightness of the moon
> For the prosaic light of day —
> Music had driven their wits astray —
> And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.[3]

Similarly, it will be the moonlight of the next night through which the men chase their wild horses at considerable risk to life and limb, but lunar lunacy is also responsible for their first interest in the horses — those dappled phantasms that correspond so well to the men's own fantasies of labour-saving bargains. The second time that one of the men recalls Anse McCallum's success in taming similar horses, Faulkner mentions the "idiot reiteration" (p. 283) of a mockingbird from the moonlit pear tree. Mockery is indeed in order, forcing into a properly humorous perspective the attempt to change the fantastic into the solid and dependable.

It is precisely in these failed metamorphoses, and not in illusion *qua* illusion, that Faulkner locates the source of comic absurdity. We yield ourselves to the worlds of *The Iliad* or the Nibelungen only by voluntary acts of idealization and of reality-suspension. If we choose to substitute for these acts a cynical scrutiny of the machinery of illusion, we are left with a comic vision of shabby trickery exposed; thus the appearance of Eula Varner Snopes, "full in the moon," to observers below: "what Brunhilde, what Rhinemaiden on what spurious river-rock of papier-mâché, what Helen returned to what topless and shoddy Argos, waiting for no one."[4] Eula is seen here as a sort of goddess manquée, and as such is the perfect figure to preside over the farcical chase below — a chase that is itself a ridiculous parody of the epic quest.

The climax of this confrontation between the solid and the phantasmal is, as we might expect, also the high point of the story's humour. This point occurs when one of the horses, de-

scribed as "gaudy" and "like a pinwheel" (p. 307), dares to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* of everyday reality, Mrs. Littlejohn's house. The horse is first repulsed by a "varnished yellow melodeon," with which it collides. The "resonant and grave" bass note that the melodeon gives forth reflects its "deep and sober" astonishment" — a solid bourgeois reaction to an apparition with a "monstrous and antic shadow." The horse, however, is too much for the menfolk in the house, perhaps because they have been weakened by their own trafficking with the phantasmal. Even Ratliff exits from a window, holding a sock in his hand, and wearing only the other one and his underclothes. It remains for the defender of the faith, Mrs. Littlejohn, to vanquish the intruder with a wash board — never seen at Troy or Agincourt — and with a truly epic war cry: "Get out of here, you son of a bitch" (p. 308). Get out he does, reverting to the phantasmagoria whence he came, "hobgoblin and floating, in the moon." As in Crane's comic story "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," the ordered, sensible lares have triumphed over the forces of wildness and formlessness.

From the reader's viewpoint, the very concrete and serious Mrs. Littlejohn has rendered these forces ridiculous, thus laughable, thus easily dismissed. But this humorous demolition arises from the conflict of norm and aberration, not from any consciousness on the part of Mrs. Littlejohn that humour can be a powerful weapon of either offence or defence. Certain other characters, however, do have this consciousness, and it constitutes a crucial aspect of their respective natures. More precisely, we tend to form our ethical judgments about these characters according to the norms of their humour, how they use humour to gain their ends, and their reaction to the humour of others. These norms must in turn be judged according to their relation to the norm represented by Mrs. Littlejohn and Mrs. Armstid. It is this norm of common sense and solidity that the onlookers invoke when one of them asks Flem whether he is "Starting . . . a circus" (p. 275); and when Quick, after the Texan's vest is slashed open by a murderous hoof, observes: "Sho now. . . . But suppose a man don't happen to own a vest" (p. 277). These volleys of humour are fired as defences against a phantasmagoria

that includes fantastic bargains. Those men who eventually succumb thus enter the target area of their own petards, and are thereby hoist.

Ratliff is the chief defender of the norm, and as such the principal satirist in the skirmish against the forces of insubstantiality and fraud. He uses mockery, especially in the form of the *reductio ad absurdum*, in an attempt to enlighten his gullible companions as to the shadowy scheme being set in motion at their expense. We have already seen his exemplum of the Snopesian tiger and snake turning into dog and hose. In another instance, he observes that Flem "has come home again," and then draws a sarcastic corollary: "Well, well, well. Will Varner paid to get him to Texas, so I reckon it aint no more than fair for you fellows to pay the freight on him back" (p. 280). When one of the men eventually engages him in repartee by remarking that Ratliff could avoid buying a pony tomorrow by leaving tonight, the sewing-machine salesman delivers a telling riposte: "That's fact . . . A fellow can dodge a Snopes if he just starts lively enough. In fact, I don't believe he would have to pass more than two folks before he would have another victim intervened betwixt them" (p. 291). And, finally, when the observations of the men make it clear that they are taking Flem's bait, Ratliff's "harsh, sardonic" laughter from the shadows reminds us of Bergson's thesis that laughter is intended to force others back into normal patterns of behaviour.

The humour of the Texan, on the other hand, is really a sort of anti-humour. Since it is in his own economic interests to break down the defences of the norm, and peddle the spotted phantasms, he undertakes to cancel the defensive witticisms of his clientele-to-be. He is a formidable man, with a face capable of instant change into a hard, menacing mask that discourages laughter, and thus blunts resistance to his scheme. From another angle, it would seem that he uses wit to take the force out of wit. Thus, he justifies the "spirit" of the horses with seeming facetiousness by insisting that he "aint selling crowbait." "Besides," he continues, "who'd want Texas crowbait anyway, with Mississippi full of it?" (p. 289). This question, which appears at first to be the sort of cajolery that brings men together, is asked in an

attitude that defeats conciliation: "His stare was still absent and unwinking; there was no mirth or humor in his voice and there was neither mirth nor humor in the single guffaw which came from the rear of the group." Shortly after this, a witticism from the crowd, accompanied by several guffaws, elicits another, sobering question: " 'What about it?' he said. The laughter, if it had been laughter, ceased" (p. 290). The effectiveness of his quenching technique becomes clear when a mocking bid of "four bits" from the crowd brings no laughter from any of the others: "It was the Texan who laughed, harshly, with only his lower face, as if he were reciting a multiplication table" (p. 291). He completes the assertion of his dominance by having the last humorous word: "Fifty cents for the dried mud offen them, he means. . . . Who'll give a dollar more for the genuine Texas cockle-burrs?"

The humour of Lump Snopes represents another kind of assault on the norm, an assault that takes the form of espousing an antithetical norm. It is the defeat of justice, not the exposure of fraud, that seems funny to Lump. At the end of the story he will take a serious role in this defeat, but in an earlier episode he is content to find amusement in the chicanery of his master, Flem. After Flem has given Mrs. Armstid five cents' worth of candy in place of her five dollars, Faulkner describes her as embodying all that is best in the norm of solidity "moving, somehow intact and upright, upon an unhurried flood" (p. 322). Lump's reaction follows immediately:

> The clerk in the doorway cackled suddenly, exposively, chortling. He slapped his thigh.
> "By God," he said," "You can't beat him."

The juxtaposition of the eternal feminine and the chortling clerk reveals not only the hollowness of Lump's boast, but the essential sickness of a humour that has lost sight of the fairness and dignity that help us to define humanity.

Summing up Faulkner's characterizations in terms of humour, we may say that Ratliff and his fellow observers laugh in the service of the norm; the Texan and Lump laugh to subvert this norm; and Mrs. Littlejohn, Mrs. Armstid, and Flem do not

laugh at all. If we think of the two women anchoring one end of the moral spectrum, and Flem the other, we have one explanation for this soberness. The pure extremes of the scale do not know the compromise and hypocrisy that produce laughter. Our first view of Flem is in an equation with ultimate things: "Hell fire, . . . it's Flem Snopes!"[5] At the auction Flem stands in "his little island of isolation" (p. 300), an utter separation from humanity that is finally Satanic. Thus, he belongs to that eternal value conflict that imparts to both him and Mrs. Armstid a transcendence of that normal human ambivalence between charity and greed that tends to produce humour.

The equivocal position of the human majority, on the other hand, is symbolized by the name of the character who makes the "hell fire" remark — Freeman, the man free to choose between good and evil, between the solidarity of mutual support and the solitude of blind selfishness. The norm of the story at its simplest would suggest a clear-cut choice in favour of solidarity, but a statement by Varner makes it clear that matters are more complicated than that:

> They are going to come out even on them things, after all . . . They'll get the money back in exercise and relaxation. You take a man that aint got no other relaxation all year long except dodging mule-dung up and down a field furrow. And a night like this one, when a man aint old enough yet to lay still and sleep, and yet he aint young enough to be tomcatting in and out of other folks' back windows, something like this is good for him. (p. 313)

The world of phantasms is, after all, indispensable to men because the hopes by which they animate their lives are phantasms, and the wild, farcical chase after these figments is renewal. The humour of farce is thus seen to provide a corrective to the routine and dullness of the solid world of duty, just as the mockery of Ratliff and others provided a corrective to the pursuit of illusion. In this context, we may recall that Mrs. Littlejohn's name is also parodic in its recollection of the Robin Hood legend. This formidable lady's mock-epical status is further confirmed by her washboard battle, with the result that fierce devotion to a practical, workaday world is itself placed in a humorous

perspective. The point is that this perspective is ultimately a humanizing one, a force encouraging the moderation and flexibility that are necessary if the notion of doing one's duty is not to become as oppressive and tyrannical as the notion of exploiting others. The original norm is thus enlarged and enhanced by the very humour that it produces as it is transgressed. The pretensions of the realms of flux and phantasms to solidity may, under certain circumstances threaten survival; but they also provide the leavening that enriches survival.

NOTES

[1] My analysis is of the version of the story contained in *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1940), pp. 275-338. This quotation is on p. 291. All future citations are to this edition.

[2] Cleanth Brooks notes in the "casual and humorous talk" of this story "a nature that is remote and almost dreamily exotic," and "that is able to turn the half-wild horses into phantoms." See *The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 170.

[3] *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

[4] P. 311. Percy G. Adams deals with the significance of mock-epic aspects of *The Hamlet* in "Humor as Structure and Theme in Faulkner's Trilogy," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature,* V (1964), 205-12. Cf. also Ladell Payne, "The Trilogy: Faulkner's Comic Epic in Prose," *Studies in the Novel* (Spring 1969), 27-37.

[5] Professor Adams discusses Flem-Satan parallels on p. 209 of the article cited above.