QUENTIN COMPSON: TRAPPED IN *ILLO TEMPORE*

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Abstract: This article focuses on Quentin Compson's split personality, a representative Faulknerian character of the new Southern generation, and tries to explore the Southern code seen through the eyes of this generation. Such characters are "ghosts" of the South, as Quentin expresses himself, who cannot life neither in the past – because it is dead - , nor in the motionless present, because it is filled with stories, mirrors and myths of yesterdays.

Keywords: Southern code, tragic modern character, "history-as-ritual", William Faulkner.

We cannot be without a Past. We would not have a history – be it social or personal - , a memory, or a self. We would simply be *walking shadows*, without identities. What does it happen when this Past swallows the present and the future, and makes from them motionless states?

"If the "South" is a cultural entity, then "Faulkner" is its official language." (Kreyling, 127) William Faulkner's genius is represented by his mingling of the ancestral past, of tradition, with modernity. In the story told by Quentin Compson, the reader does not only find the essence of the Deep South, but he or she can also discover, between the lines, the tragedies that characterises the man of today. Sutpen's fall does not represent only the myth of the fall of the Old South, but also his innocence which is "peculiarly the innocence of modern man" (193), as Cleanth Brooks remarks in his essay, "History and the Sense of Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom"*.

In his discourse at the Nobel Prize, William Faulkner affirms:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat. He must learn them again.

Time plays an important role both in the history of the South, where the past was gloriously described and it haunts the present, and also in Faulkner's stories; this modernist writer reconstructs time, according to Günter Blöcker, not as Proust does, in order "to capture and to preserve it", or like James Joyce, whose reconstruction represents "an intense act of will" (124), but by destroying time, Falukner's prose being characterised by the **nonexistence of time**, through a style that on the one hand plays with modern techniques – stream of consciousness, for instance, mirror analogies, multiple perspectives -, and on the other hand, it uses several concepts from the Greek theatre, such as *Moira, diki, hybris, adikia, fronisis.* The tragic hero is reborn in a society of paradoxes: **modern** if we look at its chronology and if we compare it with the Ancient theatre, but **archetypical**, lacking the notion of "future", where all the events are related to the past, the only sequence of time that is real. As Sartre puts it, "*everything was."*(89)

Moreover, the tragic vision that we encounter in Faulkner's prose is typical to all Southern writers, Katherine Anne Porter referring to the "tragic feeling about the South" (Robert O. Stephens, 171) The past continues into the present, and the tradition, the code, or

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the community, gives to the characters not only an acute sense of their limitation, but also a high-degree of self-awareness.

Quentin Compson is the tragic modern character, who glorifies that Southern *illo tempore*, with its traditions, mentality, and **honour**. He was raised in a frozen community, isolated from the present, full of stories that influenced his way of thinking. **The moral code** of the South is for him essential, because through it, he can bring the *sacrality* of the past, of that illo tempore, into the present that became profane; in here, the code plays the role of a ritual, being the one that annihilates time.

However, as Sorin Alexandrescu shows it, in Faulkner's prose, unlike other fictions that focus on myth, the time that is abolished is not the profane one, but the sacred one, and this abolishment leads to the beginning of History, which, in its turn, can be split, according to Robert Penn Warren into *history-as-action*, and *history-as-ritual*, the latter one being the quintessential of Quentin's thinking:

"Conversation turned to the question of what could be done to <<change>> things, even if for some people the desired change was, paradoxically enough, to change things back to their old unchangeableness; to escape, to phrase it another way, from *history-as-lived* back to *history-as-contemplated;* from *history-as-action* to *history-as-ritual.* But even to change back to unchangeableness would be a kind of change. There was, then, no way to avoid the notion of change; you had to take a bite, willy-nilly, of the apple from the mysterious tree that had sprung up in the Confederate garden." (Robert Penn Warren, 5)

The story narrated by Quentin Compson, in *Absalom, Absalom*, reveals the essence of the Old South. Although Quentin did not participate in the events presented in the novel, did not personally know the characters he is talking about, he is completely involved in the way he tells and analyses the story. His choice of this peculiar one to share with his roommate, and his own history that we know from *The Sound and the Fury*, reveals his futile attempts to cope with this "history-as-action", and to keep in his life, at the same time, the other one, the "history-as-ritual".

At the end of *Absalom, Absalom*, Shreve asks Quentin the following question: "**Why do you hate the South?**", at which Quentin says and thinks the followings:

"I don't hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. "I don't hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" (*Absalom, Absalom*, 378)

Why is Quentin so interested in the story of Sutpen, of Henry, and of Judith? Why did he go with Miss Rosa at Sutpen's Hundred? He is here the mediator between the writer and the reader. And, why does he show, in his retellings, so much passion? And from all the stories of the South, why did he choose this one?

The Southern world is built from different typologies, as Sorin Alexandrescu explains in his chapter dedicated to the structures of the characters, in his well-known book, *William Faulkner:* the aristocrat, the intellectual, the metis, the Negro, the Chickasaw Indian, the white trash, the Yankee, and the businessman. Quentin has never seen Sutpen, but the sense of **guilt** is the feeling that unites him with Thomas Sutpen and Henry – guilt towards breaking the code, or being unable to respect it, towards themselves or their families, towards the sins they committed. Their guilt is like Hemingway's iceberg: not at the surface, easily to be seen or understood by the people around them, and sometimes hidden so deep into themselves, that their own persons are incapable to grasp it - indirect, unconscious, often seen as self-pity than remorse, influencing their actions.

Quentin Compson, the one who narrates the events to his Canadian roommate, is somewhere between the image of the aristocrat, and the intellectual one. Although the writer himself affirms that none of the characters from *Absalom, Absalom* can understand completely Thomas Sutpen, because

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"The old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr.Compson to see all at once. It would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him as he was." (Fred Hobson, 190)

Quentin identifies in Sutpen his origins, and this character reminds him of the Old South, of the code, and of respectability, utopian ideas in which he blindly believes:

The aristocratic life of the leading Southern families established itself as a myth, a way of life that was seen as ideal, based on manners, culture, ceremony, but burdened with sin – that of slavery. It is this sin that creates a feeling of guilt in Southerners and consequently a feeling of guilt and a preoccupation with moral issues in Southern fictions. (Irina Burlui, 172)

As we have seen in *The Sound and the Fury*, he is obsessed with time and with the Southern puritan idealism, and in Sutpen's story he may indirectly see and search for his own loss of identity. As any aristocrat, Sutpen and Quentin are both characterised through conflicts of consciousness, through an old identity which is destroyed by the new world, and through a search of tradition, of respectability, of a way of ensuring the survival of the Code into the present. Although their plans were different, one of them (Quentin) trying to reach the innocence and the perfection that he thought he had in his childhood, and the other one (Sutpen) wanting to form a dynasty out of nothing, both of them had a peculiar design in their minds:

You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate. I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife. (*Absalom, Absalom!*, 263)

On the other hand, Quentin is a shifted mirror of Sutpen himself: if Sutpen has no past, no fortune, and has to build everything out of nothing, Quentin had a past that is now haunting him, a prestigious name, a fortune in the remote past, and now, he does not have anything from the things that he used to have.

Moreover, Sutpen has to repress his personality, his impulses in order to create his dynasty; at the core of his self we discover the passion for hunting, the fights with the slaves, actions that characterise his "primordial lifestyle" (Sorin Alexandrescu, 197). Quentin's innocence is different from Sutpen's, but is still there: he wants to have the perfection of the South, he creates the image of an idyllic past, and he cannot bear the image of the present, the fall of Caddy, the decay of his family. By looking into Sutpen's history and flaws, he tries to depict and to understand the new way of thinking, the changes brought by the Civil War, the meaning of what happened to his country. Therefore, until one point, Sutpen represents for Quentin a reversed mirror; if one of them had nothing and struggled to achieve the perfection of the Old South – slaves, plantation, family -, the other one had all these things, but lost everything and has nothing. Both of them are searching for respect, for the old code, in different manners, having extremely different personalities, and neither of them can achieve their utopian goals.

Quentin Compson represents all that is left from the Sartois tradition. His family isolated itself from reality in various ways: Uncle Maury chooses liquor, as Quentin's father does, Mrs. Compson takes refuge in religion and invalidism, Benjy is isolated by nature in his idiocy, and Mr.Compson, before he completely declines in alcoholism, seeks forgetfulness in philosophy.

George Marion O'Donnell, in "Faulkner's Mythology", claims that

His world [Quentin's] is peopled with 'baffled, outraged, ghosts'; and although Quentin himself is 'still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost', he is one of them. (25)

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From being a mediator, to a witness in Sutpen's story, Quentin searches on the one hand an explanation for the Southern history: is the Civil War and its loss God's punishment for people like Sutpen, as Miss Rosa says, or does History mean nothing, and nobody has control over destiny, which at the end will destroy everybody, as his father's nihilism points out? On the other hand, Quentin wants to understand this precise story in his struggle not to let his family share the fate of the Sutpens.

It was the world of these 'diffused and scattered creatures' in which Quentin Compson lived; and it was the effort not to be 'diffused and scattered' – to transform his own family's doom into the proportions of the world of Sutpen and Sartoris – that led to his death. But it is significant that it should be Quentin through whose gradual understanding the story of Sutpen is told, and that it should be Quentin who watches the final destruction of Sutpen's house. For Sutpen's tradition was defective, but it was not formalized as Quentin's was; and his story approaches tragedy." (George Marion O'Donnell, 26-27)

The image of the aristocrat has changed in time; from the paradisiacal depiction of it, before the war, to the heroic one, during the war, and the dramatic one, "evoking a lent, but unavoidable historical disappearance". (Sorin Alexandrescu, 214) Quentin, like Sutpen, is an aristocrat who desperately clings to the first images of this type. Unlike Sutpen, however, who has with people always an "I-it" relation, and never an "I-Thou" one, as Hyatt Waggoner claims in "Past as Present: *Absalom, Absalom!"*, that Quentin obsessively has in his mind his relation with his sister, Caddy. Because of his inner conflict and his feelings of guilt, he pays special attention to the story of Henry Sutpen, the only character from the novel that he has fugitively met and whose words obsess him: "And you are - ?" "Henry Sutpen." "And you have been here - ?" "Four years." "And you came home - ?" "To die. Yes." (*Absalom, Absalom,* 373)

Cleanth Brooks, in "History and the Sense of Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!*" emphasises the importance of Henry for Quentin:

In view of what we learn of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, the problem of incest would have fascinated him and made him peculiarly sensitive to Henry's torment. Aside from his personal problem, however, Sutpen's story had for Quentin a special meaning that it did not have for Shreve." (200)

Quentin's and Henry's actions are bond to their feelings and memories related to their sisters, Caddy, and respectively, Judith. Both of them try to protect the honour of their sisters, so that they could respect the moral code within themselves, and this protection leads sometimes to paradoxical situations: for instance, Henry, as Shreve and Quentin explore the story, has hoped that time would solve his dilemma, hoping that the war would bring a change, or that Charles would change his mind. As it results from the novel, Henry's radical problem was not the incest, but the fact that Charles was an octoroon. For him, as for the Old Southern mentality, as for his father, it was impossible to conceive and to accept the mixture between these two races, white and black. For Quentin, on the other hand, the incest has another role. In order to protect his sister, he falsely confesses to his father that Caddy's child is his, so that he could retrieve their lost innocence: "It was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity." (*The Sound and the Fury,* 150)

Quentin's innocence is represented by his obsession with **honour**, his "vanishing point", as Sorin Alexandrescu puts it, around which everything gravitates. His *blind memories* are represented by the cocoon in which he was raised, where everything had sense, and where he had learnt to respect, more than his own life, the code. In both of the novels, Quentin plays the role of the **observer** and of the **reflector**. He is himself a mirror of what it used to be, multiplying the negative values.

The future for him becomes meaningless, without sense, filled with fatality. As he describes himself in *Absalom, Absalom*, he is a ghost of what he was, of the South, being

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unable to cope with the reality of the present. His gesture of breaking his watch in *The Sound and the Fury*, as Jean Paul Sartre points out, was to have "access to a time without clocks" (88), to the surrealist past. The present without clocks becomes another broken mirror of the perfection of the past. The little Indian girl, for instance, brings into his mind several episodes of him and Caddy, shaping in an indirect way his responsibility for his sister's decline.

Quentin finds himself caught between two worlds: the world with the things that he thought were real, in which he blindly believed, and the world of decay, from which he wishes to escape. He is tormented by the *double blind* – "a situation in which no matter what a person does, he can't win" (201), as Gregory Bateson explains in "Steps to an Ecology of Mind". He is taught to believe in the Southern honour and prestige, to respect, but at the same time, his father claims that: "Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. Its nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity" (*The Sound and the Fury,* 97). Verbally, his father says that what happened to Caddy has no importance, and still, nonverbally, he is destroyed by Caddy's behaviour and he is indirectly killing himself through drinking.

Moreover, apart from being an aristocrat, Quentin, is also, up to a certain point, an intellectual, because of his inner conflict, of the contrast between his intentions: to save his family - and his accomplishments, his limited actions, his search for a code:

The intellectual is in the search of the code because he is convinced of its necessity in the modern world; he debates the existing codes, at integral types or individual survivors, but he easily opts to take over a whole existing code and to attempt to synthetize the existent ones. (Sorin Alexandrescu, 264)

However, is he a real intellectual? Does he study for himself or for his family's prestige? Gary Storhoff, in his essay "Faulkner's Family Crucible: Quentin's Dilemma", talks about the role of family in this character's evolution, stressing the fact that the "real" Quentin shows little interest for study: as a child, he "counts the minutes to the school day's dismissal", he wishes Jason to take his place at Harvard, and he is reprimanded by the dean for his lack of interest in lecture courses. Again, Quentin faces the double blind: on the one hand, his family demands from him academic success, on the other hands, their actions, his mother's love for Jason, preferring the pragmatism of this son, tells him, at the same time, that this success does not really matter.

The hubris of Quentin Compson is his attempt to go back to a blind *illo tempore*, which has never existed in his family. The relation that he has with his sister, although it is essential to this character, is another mirror for the image of the South during and after the Civil War, between appearance and essence.

The Old South's memories have moulded the present so much that for Quentin the only possible present would be a copy of the past, of the history-as-ritual. But Quentin cannot find this lost innocence again, and cannot renounce at it, being thus unable to cope with the meaningless of the new world in which he powerlessly finds himself. As Sorin Alexandrescu puts it, "The man is not the god's slave, but he is the slave either of his inner structure, or of his social status" (315). He becomes a slave of his own memories and his only escape is death.

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