Faulkner's *Sanctuary*: Horace Benbow and the Phenomenology of Evil

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William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* has conventionally been read as his most pessimistic novel, one with a vision so bleak and despairing that it leaves the reader with no suggestion of reconciliation or redemption. If, however, the novel is read as Faulkner's exploration of the nature of evil, *Sanctuary* becomes a more complex work, one deserving of the respect and attention usually reserved for *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Faulkner brings us into the novel most directly through encouraging our sympathetic identification with Horace Benbow. He raises the questions that concern him throughout his career by successively exposing Horace to situations which awaken him to the reality of evil. It is in the light of Horace's efforts and ultimate failure that we are forced to question the individual's capacity to maintain the will and strength to resist evil.

The Horace we meet in the opening chapters is an unlikely candidate for our sympathy. He is one of Eliot's "hollow men." He has suffered indignities at the hands of his wife and stepdaughter until he can no longer avoid facing his own absurdity. His answer has been to walk away, to flee the present with which he has been unable to cope for the remembered (or imagined) security and position of home, family, and past. He wants only peace: "I just wanted a hill to lie on, you see. Then I would be all right. I just wanted a hill to lie on for a while" (16). But circumstances and Popeye bring Horace to the Old Frenchman place. There, we see, he wears his ridiculousness like a mantle. He is filled with too many excuses and too much alcohol, always willing to explain but not quite ready to act. He is, as Ruby says, a "poor fool," "a man given to much talk and not much else" (13). Andre Bleikasten identifies him as a "bookish dreamer and garrulous aesthete [who] fails in all he undertakes" (217). Perversely, Horace seems to take pleasure in his unflinching self-assessment, priding himself on facing up to his own failings: "'You see,' he said, 'I lack courage: that was left out of me. The machinery is all here, but it won't run'" (16). He offers this explanation with the confidence of a man who has forced himself to probe the darkest recesses of his character. The movement of the novel is, in part, one of exposing Horace to increasingly less palatable truths than these about what may be hidden in those dark corners.

Initially, then, Horace seems incapable of supporting a treatment of serious themes. But Faulkner counters this initial impression, or at least seems to. After the events at the Old Frenchman place which build up to Tommy's murder and Temple's rape, we acutely feel the need for someone to meet the evil Popeye embodies; the situation demands a hero. Into the breach Faulkner casts Horace. Faulkner succeeds in having us attach our hopes to Horace by drawing upon his knowledge of a stock character of pulp fiction. Horace will be the hero who appears superficially

weak but who, when finally tested, finds unimagined resources within himself that allow him to triumph over great adversity. Against the smug self-righteousness of the Baptist ladies, the cowardice of Gowan Stevens, the self-serving corruption of Clarence Snopes and Eustace Graham, Horace easily assumes the appearance of a crusader in his attempts to defend Lee Goodwin and shelter Ruby and the child. But having prepared us for a cliched resolution, Faulkner confounds our expectations. Horace fails: Lee is lynched, Ruby and her child are abandoned to make their own way. We watch as he is awakened to inhumanities he never suspected, as he shuffles and redefines his assumptions about the world to try to accommodate his expanding awareness. Faulkner focuses less upon the existence of evil than upon Horace's reactions to his experiences with both external and internal evidence of the reality of evil. With his failure comes the collapse of our own hopes—and the recognition that we must reexamine our expectations and the reasons behind Faulkner's methods more closely.

In Horace, Faulkner has given a man who sees his world as ordered by certain noble abstractions. "'You've got the law, justice, civilization,'" Horace tells Lee Goodwin (127). He returns to Jefferson because it offers him a ready-made identity. Needing a haven for his shattered self-esteem, Horace assumes he will find in Jefferson values he can share, a community in which he might participate actively. The defense of Goodwin seems to be a fortunate opportunity to reaffirm himself to that community and to himself as well. He will simply act in accordance with the demands of his abstractions:

> "I cannot sit idly by and see injustice—"
> "You won't ever catch up with injustice,
> Horace," Miss Jenny said.
> "Well, that irony which lurks in events, then." (115)

However, his actions place him outside the community. Values he assumed to be universal among right-thinking men seem curiously in flux. His motivations are misunderstood; his sister, Narcissa, leads the town in assuming he is emotionally or sexually involved with Ruby. The town operates by the rigid standards of propriety. One must maintain appearances above all; these appearances, however, scarcely disguise a casual inhumanity born out by the treatment Ruby receives. To his credit, Horace withstands this first awakening to evil where he did not expect to find it. He recognizes that to be alienated from such a community supports rather than impugns his integrity. He decides he will have to seek another hill to lie on: "'When this is over, I think I'll go to Europe,'" he says. "'I need a change. Either I or Mississippi, one'" (130). He sees himself as taking another step toward reestablishing his identity; still he shares with Narcissa the belief that too much contact with evil should be avoided: "'Dammit, say what you want to, but there's a corruption about even looking upon evil, even by accident; you cannot haggle, traffic, with putrefaction'"(125).

Paul Ricoeur, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, observes that the most primitive representation of evil has been as infection, stain, disease—what Ricoeur calls the symbolic imagery of defilement (12). Horace's words reveal just such a conception of evil as infecting from without; therefore, in the law, justice, and civilization, he posits abstract sanctuaries against these external corruptions. To these, one should

add Horace's Gentleman God who supports the system: "God is foolish at times," he tells Ruby, "but at least he's a gentleman" (273).

Law, justice, civilization, and this gentleman God are pieces of furniture with which he decorates the sanctuary within his mind. But his abstractions dissolve before the test of experience. They, in fact, trap him, blinding him to the need for actions which might more effectively counter evil. Judith Lockyer, in her thought-provoking study of language and narration in Faulkner's novels, echoing Bleikasten, calls Horace a "bookish romantic" and goes on to say:

> Horace believes in the power and truth of words. He... lives within a system he has constructed out of words, and his words often trap him in thought-filled inaction. He also knows that his belief in language's power to create order and meaning can isolate him from the imperfect, unstable, and often uncontrollable world, and that knowledge is both the source of his anguish and the impetus for his life. (2)

The consequences of Horace's self-delusion are best seen in his bumbling defense of Goodwin. Why does Horace not help Lee find a better, less involved lawyer? Does not Horace risk the appearance of collusion if it comes out that he was at the Old Frenchman place just a few days before the murder? Could he be more helpful as a witness giving his knowledge of Popeye's presence at the scene? Tacitly, Horace acknowledges Miss Jenny's practical concerns: "'I'm sure he could get a better lawyer. It's that—'" (113), the answer trails off. Later he warns Ruby, apparently unaware he counsels obstruction of his precious justice: "'You understand how it is. If the judge suspected that I knew more about it than the facts would warrant—'" (117). Horace involves himself with Lee and Ruby because it gives him the opportunity to assert a new, more positive identity. He naively trusts that an innocent man cannot be convicted within a world ordered by the abstract principles he assumes to be operating here. If he were to pass on the defense to another, if he were to offer himself as a witness to Popeye's presence at the Old Frenchman place, he might be required to provide embarrassing explanations about his leaving his wife or about his spending an evening with the group of bootleggers and thugs. It would require, in other words, that he sacrifice his dignity publicly, that he expose himself as a fool, just at the moment he most needs to reinforce his self-esteem.

Horace's behavior, then, results from an overwhelming self-concern and the paralyzing insecurity that causes him to make over the world in his mind as he would have it be. Faulkner has drawn Horace, Daniel Singal notes, as representative of a post-Victorian culture and a "bourgeois ethos" (159-60). He isolates himself by projecting assumptions which would support his insecure identity upon the world then conducting himself as if they were facts rather than assumptions. When Horace fails in his defense of Lee Goodwin, it is not simply because he has been crushed by the external evil Popeye represents. Clearly he has participated in his own defeat.

Although in focusing on Horace's preoccupation with his own needs, we understand the reasons behind his bumbling preparation of a defense, we do not explain his paralysis at the crucial moment of Temple's testimony. Nor do we account for his passive withdrawal and submission to Narcissa and Belle after the trial. This retreat, in fact, represents a significant revision of *Sanctuary*, one which Faulkner undertook only after the galleys had already been set (Langford 7). In the original ver-

sion Horace notifies Ruby by letter that he will appeal Goodwin's conviction, and Narcissa tells him Lee has been moved from Jefferson to avoid lynching. Horace witnesses no burning; though stunned by his unexpected defeat, he plans at least to try again. By altering this ending, Faulkner deepens our sense of Horace's failure. He has lost the war, not just another skirmish with evil. He has underestimated the power of evil within the world and overestimated the protection conferred by the abstractions upon which he has structured his values and hopes. In other words, he has received a jolting education into the world as it is. Yet we have not explained why this education does not fit him to reengage evil in the more realistic light of his experiences. The answers lie in his discoveries about himself as well as those about his world and in his reaction to that painful self-awareness.

Faulkner centers those discoveries around Horace's complex and ambiguous relationships with women—with Temple, his wife, his sister, and especially his stepdaughter, Little Belle. He would like to cast them in roles of unsullied innocence and himself in the part of their champion. But, instead, he finds they seem to have an "affinity for evil" (194), and implicit knowledge of sin. Rumblings of incestuous yearnings for Little Belle surface for the reader before they become apparent to Horace. She is the innocent child whom he would protect from contact with any potentially corrupting influences; yet she is also a woman. On one level he is seduced by the "delicate and urgent mammalian whisper," by her "seething sympathy with blossoming grape" (162); on another he feels only "quiet horror and despair" (163). Faulkner's language indicates that Horace senses in Little Belle a sensual, pre-rational connection to life-as-it-is missing within himself. He is in the words of one critic, "estranged from the female" (Lockyer 20). While his world evolves intellectually from his mind, hers is one in which she is immersed naturally and unconsciously.

As Horace learns more about Temple Drake, she and Little Belle merge in his mind. His first reactions to the tale Temple tells of her experiences—the "bright, chatty monologues which women can carry on when they realize that they have the center of the stage" (208-09)—are horror and disgust. "His intense reaction to Temple's story," Singal writes, "illustrates how desperately Horace clings to the myth of Southern womanhood—one part of the Victorian cultural edifice he cannot abandon without jeopardizing his very sanity" (161). In his reaction to the interview with Temple in Memphis, his suppressed desires surface. He is forced to confront things about himself he has managed to keep hidden; but first he must face the horror of Temple's night at the Old Frenchman place. The abstractions with which he has veiled the world have not prepared him to face the reality of evil at its most terrible; nor have his assumptions about the innocence of women prepared him to understand the manner in which Temple relates the story. He concludes she has been absolutely corrupted by her experiences and that, consequently, it would be better if both she and her world would cease to exist:

> Better for her if she were dead tonight, Horace thought, walking on. For me, too. He thought of her, Popeye, the woman, the child, Goodwin, all put into a single chamber, bare, lethal, immediate and profound: a single blotting instant between the indignation and the surprise. And I too; thinking how that were the only solution. Removed, cauterized out of the old tragic flank of the world. (213-14)

Better to be dead than to face such a world, than to expose oneself to the infecting power of evil. For Horace death is just another hill to lie on. He withdraws, as he has always withdrawn, rather than involve himself in life as it is.

Faulkner develops Horace's psychology as a movement from disillusionment with a world in which such brutality could take place to a personal despair as he begins to see himself as participating in that brutality. Now when he picks up Little Belle's photograph, he sees there the reflection of his heretofor suppressed desires:

> the face appeared to breathe in his palms in the shallow bath of highlight, beneath the slow, smokelike tongues of invisible honeysuckle. Almost palpable enough to be seen, the scent filled the room and the small face seemed to swoon in a voluptuous languor, blurring still more, fading, leaving upon his eye a soft and fading aftermath of invitation and voluptuous promise and secret affirmation like the scent itself. (215-16)

Horace finds in the photograph what he subconsciously wants to find—the offer of fulfillment for his repressed incestuous desires. Having just listened to Temple's revelations, he is now prepared to discover within himself an evil he has only recently learned is active within the world. Horace seems to abandon himself to this fantasy in which Little Belle becomes Temple and he seems to become the agent of her violation.

His new understanding of the extent of his weakness triggers a guilt leading to despair. Again Faulkner's purpose becomes clearer in light of Ricoeur's insights. The symbolism of guilt Ricoeur says, shifts the focus of responsibility from a communal to an individual experience. Collective reform is no longer possible; the individual is set adrift to fend for himself, to find his own salvation (105). The communal sense of sin is internalized to become an individual sense of guilt. No longer is Horace a man trying to rebuild his self-image, trying to assert a fresh identity. The man whom we see abandoning himself to his sexual fantasies on the floor of his bathroom has surrendered himself to his own worst self-image. He assumes now he has reached his nadir. He seeks only one last sanctuary: "'I'll finish this business and then I'll go to Europe. I am sick. I am too old for this. I was born too old for it, and so I am sick to death for quiet'" (253). Horace no longer moves toward something—he simply wants to retreat. He has despaired of the possibility of saving himself. He sees himself as lost in a world of virulent and infecting evil. Thus, the Horace who sits before Temple as she destroys Lee Goodwin with her perjured testimony is already a beaten man.

Is *Sanctuary* a book in which everyone belongs to the party which Robert Barth calls the "non-elect"? (89) The walls of Horace's identity have collapsed; he is left staring inward upon the vacuum created when his abstractions are exposed as illusions. With what resources might he achieve redemption? Despite his allusions to his gentleman God, Horace's vision has never been a Christian or even a religious one. John Hunt distinguishes the merely moral from the religious point of view:

> Religion involves what God has done for man that man cannot do for himself. It is at least moral but it is more than morality. Morality takes on a religious character, and ceases, therefore, to be merely moral, when

> the kind of meaning of fulfillment or salvation for which it aims receives its definition from beyond itself—put simply from God's point of view rather than man's. (3)

As we have seen, Horace never escapes his own point of view. His needs determine his values. His vision more closely approximates what Hunt calls the Stoic point of view. The evil one experiences from this viewpoint is accounted for as a failure of reason, by ignorance, error in judgment, or lack of courage. Such are the excuses Horace has used repeatedly to explain away his own weakness or the inhumanity he finds in his sister or his community. This evil never undermines a commitment to rationality or personal moral integrity, but the evil he encounters in Popeye, Temple, and, most importantly, in himself is clearly something other. Lockyer notes that Horace's profession as a lawyer "labels him as a man who relies heavily on written codes of conduct, who believes fervently in the universe that man's intellect... has circumscribed" (11).

Horace has discovered, in Ricoeur's terms, that evil is "positive." It is *real*, not simply the absence of something else or the violation of an order. It is the "heart" of man that is evil, his very existence (Ricoeur 81-82). Horace's foundation in reason and inherent moral integrity has been undermined. He has lost confidence; and, thus, we watch as he exits the novel paralyzed by despair.

Driving back to his sister's after the trial, Horace remarks on the irony of spring's beauty: "'It does last.... Spring does. You'd almost think there was some purpose to it'" (285). The good now is only the illusion of a pattern which seduces men into a false sense of security. Only death offers Horace any promise of peace. He watches the mob burn Lee Goodwin's body almost with envy of the oblivion at the center of the flame. But suicide is beyond his capabilities despite the depth of his despair, for it would require that he act. Horace chooses a death-in-life, surrendering himself to the attentions and directions of his wife and sister, finding a measure of release in the identity of the slightly ridiculous, hen-pecked husband he was at the beginning of the novel.

What then are we to make of Horace's defeat? Faulkner intends, I think, that we attend more to the process than to the fact of Horace's defeat. From his superficially good intentions come the sources of an internally generated evil: not his ill-disguised sexual desires but his blinding self-concern, the guilt born of that self-concern, and a consuming despair evolving from that guilt. Horace participates in the external evil which destroys Lee. If *Sanctuary* is to be read as deterministic, certainly it cannot be in the usual sense of man buffeted by economic, social, or cosmic forces beyond his control. Horace has struggled with and has lost to an internal force, his own will. Finally, therefore, we must ask if Faulkner believes such defeat to be inevitable.

"Within my own rights I feel that I'm a good Christian," Faulkner said in the mid-fifties, "—whether it would please anybody else's standard or not I don't know" (Gwynn and Blotner 203). Faulkner's ties to formal religion are tenuous at best. His standards very well might not please many, and even these idiosyncratic beliefs of the fifties may bear little relation to his thoughts about religion in the thirties. In his 1956 interview with the *Paris Review*, he said: "[Christianity] is a code of behavior by means of which [man] makes himself a better human being than his nature wants to be, if he follows his nature only" (Brooks 24n). It is interesting

that he calls Christianity a "code of behavior," for it roots his religious beliefs in the actions of men. Faulkner's religious impulse is not toward an ascetic spiritualism; he does not focus upon the mystery, as Flannery O'Connor terms it, of divine grace acting in a fallen world. Nor does he embrace strict Calvinism, despite his focus upon terror and suffering as central human experiences or upon sexuality as the chief sign of man's fallen nature. Christianity, for Faulkner, is a "means" by which man accomplishes more than his nature unaided would allow him to achieve. In traditional terms he is interested in works, that is in the individual's capacity to act within his limited nature.

Horace Benbow only belatedly discovers the nature of his nature. His is a process of education to his own self-insufficiency. He resigns the struggle against external evil and surrenders to his impulses and the consequent evil generated from within. As Faulkner presents this process, it seems strictly inevitable, an enactment of that which Ricoeur describes as self-enslavement (152). Clearly we see Horace lacks the inner resources to free himself from this self-initiated circle of desire and despair. To "achieve redemption" in Barth's terms (89), Horace must *be freed.* He must, in other words, turn to resources outside the self. The question remains, though, whether or not Faulkner believes such resources exist and, if he does believe, how he sees them operating in the world to redeem man.

Perhaps we ask too much of *Sanctuary* when we demand explicit evidence of a saving grace. Faulkner has successfully communicated a profound sense of the inadequacy of man left to his own devices before external and internal evil. He has shown a world desperately in need of something like the God and the salvation of the Christian tradition. Perhaps we should not expect to find more than this strongly felt need. But *Sanctuary*'s readers have not been satisfied that it was Faulkner's intention to posit a God through indirection.

What these readers fail to account for are the few individual acts of selflessness cast into relief by the predominant atmosphere of selfishness. It is these stays against evil, temporary, halting, and incomplete, which oppose any final surrender to despair. These are the signposts by which Faulkner points out the direction man must take to regain a sense of meaning in his life. They offer no escape from evil; rather, they portray a purposeful engagement of evil—an action rather than a reaction. They offer, in other words, an alternative to the futile, despairing withdrawal from experience we have found in Horace.

Faulkner presents, in Ruby Lamar, a figure appropriate to *Sanctuary*'s stark vision of evil. Plunged into the experience of evil, both by what happens to her and by what she does herself, Ruby is able to rise above its effect. Defined by the conventional standards of the town as a profligate sinner, Ruby accepts what she is without shame or guilt or pride. She is not paralyzed by self-recrimination; she seeks no asylum from life's blows. The difference in the response to evil rests in the motivation. Ruby sacrifices herself to her love of Lee. She acts not to indulge her desires nor to protect herself but only to do whatever she can to help him. She tells how she once prostituted herself with an unscrupulous lawyer because she thought it was the only way she could secure Lee's release from Leavenworth. We find her willing to offer her body to Horace as payment for Lee's defense. It matters not that she is taken advantage of, that her efforts to save Lee prove futile. Clearly, Faulkner has shown that one individual cannot save another. What Ruby achieves is a pattern of action based on love for someone beyond the self. Her prostitution, then, is not a

despairing surrender to unmanageable desires but a conscious choice to sacrifice herself for another.

Faulkner's characterization of Ruby here anticipates by more than twenty years his much fuller treatment of sacrificial suffering in the sequel to *Sanctuary*, *Requiem for a Nun*, published in 1952. In that sequel Faulkner presents Nancy, the negro maid, who murders Temple's infant to prevent Temple's destroying herself and her family by again giving in to her own worst nature. Nancy gives her life—and from a conventional perspective her soul as well—because she loves Temple more than she loves herself. She assumes by her sacrificial action the burden of the evil within others. Nancy suffers and in so doing gives meaning to her existence.

With Ruby, just as with Horace, Faulkner directs our attention to the manner in which one reacts to the first recognition of the evil. "It was like I had died," she says. "I sat there... wondering why I didn't let go, go on with him, get drunk and never sober up again" (269-70). Her first impulse is to pull away from a man and world capable of degradation, to give herself up to the oblivion—the peace—offered by drunkenness, desire, and death. It is just that impulse to which Horace surrenders himself. But Ruby fights through: "I went back to my room and the next day I started looking for him" (270). In refusing to be defeated even when she is, by all the usual measures, defeated, Ruby affirms her existence. She turns outward rather than inward with her love and, in losing herself, finds herself.

Faulkner's vision does not introduce epiphanal moments of grace to rescue man from the limits of his nature. He presents no characters who appeal directly to God for their strength. Rather, he looks to what capacities exist within, to the human potential for transcending the self through humility and involvement. *Sanctuary* is not a celebration; it is a survey of evil—of an evil that infects from without and corrupts from within if allowed to. And yet, we can find in the novel an affirmation of life. Faulkner's charge is that one must involve oneself in the human community, in its ugliness and its pain, for that is the way to cope with what we are.

Faulkner is always the moralist. His readers are the ones with whose moral awakening he is finally concerned. When Horace allows himself to be crushed by his encounter with life as it is, readers should not conclude his despair mirrors the author's own pessimism. Rather, they are to see the blind alley into which such despair and pessimism must take them. We are to understand that despair, in fact, involves us in the creation of evil. Faulkner's morality partakes of a religious vision. Paradoxically, it depends both upon the sense that man is incapable of delivering himself from the entrapment by his own will and upon the sense that there exists a context within which his actions can be meaningful, can, in fact, be saving. There are no sanctuaries in *Sanctuary*, especially for the reader; there are only mythic representations of the processes by which men entrap themselves in evil by isolating themselves from the life-affirming action of human love.

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