

“New Men” in Mississippi: Absalom, Absalom! And Dollar Cotton

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Notes on Mississippi Writers, II (Fall, 1969), 55-66

My purpose in this paper is a modest one—to call to the general attention of students of Southern literature certain parallels linking William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and his brother John Faulkner’s *Dollar Cotton*.¹ In many respects the books invite comparison. Indeed, their pairing would seem natural to anyone who had read both carefully, even if they were not the work of blood kindred. Of course, there are other novels of “new men” and their part in opening up the Old Southwest. Elizabeth Spencer’s *This Crooked Way* is a Mississippi (and Delta) instance.² Moreover, the same basic theme has innumerable non-Southern versions. The skeins of analogy lead off in all directions and solicit industrious speculation—aesthetic, historical, and psychological: the sons of Adam gone “westward” from Eden to recover their preforfeited inheritance. However, brother William’s stern catalyst figure and centerpiece, Thomas Sutpen, and brother John’s less formidable (but no less enterprising) parvenu protagonist, Otis Town (or Towne)—when viewed together—form a bond between their respective fictional histories that is particularly thought provoking: a comparison useful in both formal analysis and in determining something of the distinctive temper or bias of sensibility that went into each of their makings. That bond is of sufficient complexity and significance to warrant treatment.³ To explain, I will begin with the pattern and dynamic of the lives of Sutpen and Town.

¹ *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, 1936; *Dollar Cotton*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942.

² *This Crooked Way*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1952. I originally intended to include this novel—which in several details surprisingly resembles *Dollar Cotton*—in my analogizing. The nature of its connection with things Faulknerian, however, soon deterred me. Questions of influence, echo, and mere similarity point toward a labyrinth I cannot politely and briefly negotiate. It is enough for me that Miss Spencer’s novel is well made—however it came into being.

³ In the strict sense of the term, Quentin Compson is the protagonist of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Thomas Sutpen merely the “activator” or “formal cause” of the story to which Quentin reacts in the action proper. Readers interested in seeing an explanation of this position should see my “Brother, Son, and Heir: The Structural Focus of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” *Sewanee Review*, LXXVII (Summer, 1969).

The career of Yoknapatawpha's hillbilly superman is too familiar to require much review. Sutpen is the child of West Virginia's mountain frontier. Circumstances (i.e., family passivity) propel him downward, into the cultivated lands and the reality of society; and there he is stimulated to act on his own, inspired in injury to become a man of place and power. After a false start in farming (and an abortive interlude with a woman of color), he acquires—just as it becomes available for cultivation—a huge holding of North Mississippi virgin soil and a slender, severe Puritan bred girl to wife. Also he comes into possession of several Negroes, whom he works (with himself making one more hand) in a fashion most determined and fanatical. In Jefferson he hews out for himself and his heirs a position important, if ambivalent. However, the children of the two aforementioned unions later become terrible entangled, and finally their commerce (and related violence encouraged by Sutpen's unswerving mania) conspires to leave the would-be dynast without heirs. Also a turn in the enveloping action of regional (and national/international) history reduces his agricultural fortunes. Finally, he dies alone and inconspicuous, without understanding anything of the forces that made and then undid him.

Otis Town comes from the Tennessee uplands, probably from the Cumberland Ridge settlements along the western reaches of the great river that gives the state its name, (My guess is that Hardin or Hickman County was his place of birth; many people from those regions went to the Delta in the century's first two decades.) Mr. Town secures a portion of tax sale lands (covered with swamp, cane, and big timber) soon after levee construction, new clearing and drainage techniques, plus the construction of a rail line make large scale agriculture upon them feasible. He recruits (and also works furiously) a team of Negroes. And he likewise drives himself. His liaison with a Negress produces a son; but it is terminated (more or less) when he takes a wife from among his own people, the school teacher who waited for him back in Tennessee. Though this conjunction is incomplete, ruined by the husband's singleminded devotion to land and the wife's cold Puritan fury at Otis' casual social conduct, there is issue. Moreover, the hillman's dogged evangelical perseverance pays off; and after a few years its evergrowing fruitage is "measured not in acres but in miles."⁴

⁴ The citation is from William Faulkner's account of Mr. Sells Wales in the April, 1954, issue of *Holiday* (reprinted on pp. 21-24 of James B. Meriwether's edition of *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*. New York:

Following after the ironic old adage (a descriptive summary of all mortal business gone out of hand), Otis undertakes to “raise more cotton to . . .” (*Dollar Cotton*, p. 18). Soon, Mr. Town becomes Old Man Towne, one of the “proprietary lords” of the Delta. However, his miscegenation, his general asocial innocence, and his neglect of children finally come back upon him and leave his personal life in ruins. At the same time, history (in this case, agricultural depression instead of war) collapses his cotton empire. He survives this debacle to make a feeble effort at self-restoration but then expires in a scene of desiccation almost as anticlimactic as his Yoknapatawpha counterpart’s last day.

In these two descriptions there is obviously very little difference; and in each career there is a remarkable constancy, confirmed even in final gestures at the moment of death. Yet Thomas Sutpen and Otis Town are assuredly dissimilar men. Taken in a narrow view, they are two accountings for one phenomenon, the first monstrous and perverse, the other relatively benign. Indeed, John Faulkner’s book is (in some sense) an answer to the image of the nouveau mulled over and around in his brother’s acknowledged masterpiece. For Thomas Sutpen’s ruling passion is to secure his in-boyhood-wounded pride from all conceivable injury, present, future, and even posthumous: the pattern of his life a “design” to shore up that self-regard, a design concocted hard after his anguish with first knowledge (from a Negro plantation house butler) that such wounds were possible.⁵ And Otis Town, though often ruthless (even a killer in one instance) and betimes indifferent to the human worth of his help, his family, and his associates, is never a man worried about his dignity or interested

Random House, 1965). Wales is obviously Otis Town—down to the Plain garb, the unexpected purchases of automobiles and baseball teams, and the wild trips to survey sport or business also reported in *Dollar Cotton*. I do not know if both Faulkners had in mind a living prototype when they wrote. But they both certainly knew parts of the same story.

⁵ *Absalom, Absalom!*, pp. 232-235. On pp. 3-11 of *Dollar Cotton* there is an accounting of Otis Town’s very different motivation for “rising in the world.” Having long been frustrated as a hill farmer, he is drawn to the Delta by a hunger to do his work better—to see a more satisfactory result from his labors—and not by a desire to change or escape from his providentially “given” place. Otis’ lawyer friend (the novel’s chorus) renders the best account of his spirit to be found in John Faulkner’s book:

It is born in him to labor in the fields. Poetry, to him, is the growing of a seed into full fruit under his patient hand. Shelley himself created no more perfectly than his growing stalk, and the *Iliad* is no more complete than his full-fruited bolls. Accomplishment without sweat is only a house on sand. (p. 83)

What the attorney describes can be set off against (yet related to) the author’s observations on the ordinary hill folks’ view of land and labor. (*Dollar Cotton*, pp. 259-260)

in a scheme for self-aggrandizement. Not to exalt himself does he press upon the world, but rather so that he may discover the fruitfulness of the land hidden from him in the hard clay and engender in such earth the plentitude that will fulfill him. Therein lies the crux of my distinction. For there are ambitions *and* ambitions. Thomas Sutpen is (in the ancient sense) “steward” of nothing he possesses, is owned by none of what he owns. But his latter day equivalent is “responsible.” He is no legalist and has no absolute property in men, women, or acres. Therefore, he never violates the spirit of those he sometimes injures. And, *with a warm heart*, he pays all his debts (sometimes in cash, sometimes in care) with the same spontaneous spirit that he farms. He wants profit from his crop only that he may grow a bigger one and because he demands a dignity, not for himself but for the undertaking and the product. Sutpen is (as Leo Strauss and Michael Oakeshott use the word) a “modern” or (in Eric Voegelin’s terms) a “gnostic”; Town is neither—does not require an earthly identity that is separate from his function.⁶ Though they do not fit the context he never understands—we should consider carefully Otis’ rare “set speeches” on the rationale behind his mode of existence:

“Land’s wuth whatever it takes to grow a crop on it.” And later (to New York brokers): You fellers don’t know what hit’s wuth to grow things . . . You don’t know a middle buster from a turning plow. You got no ground to grow nuthing in. Yore land is all took up with those big store buildngs like what we’re in now. And when you go however many miles hit takes to git past them, you run into a lot of little cities growed up end to end, and factories spreading smoke all over ever’thing. What ground you can see up here ain’t farmed. . . .

⁶ For Strauss, see *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), an *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); for Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1962); and for Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968). Their accounting for modern political and economic man is epitomized by the passage in *Absalom, Absalom!* in which Thomas Sutpen is presented as willing himself into the eminence he desires, with language reminiscent of the Deity’s creative fiat in Genesis: “Be Sutpen’s Hundred” (pp. 8-9). Old Man Towne (his wife adds the final letter) has his own iron will and Sutpen-like moments of calculation; however, they never corrupt his innermost self, which keeps an innocence far deeper than the ignorance of Sutpen.

Or again:

You fellers never put no seed in the ground and saw hit come through a plant with little branches and little leaves on it, and saw them little branches and leaves grow into more little branches and little leaves, with you hoeing grass away so's hit wouldn't be choked out, and keeping the dirt around hit soft and crumbled up so's hit could git sun and rain to make hit keep on agrowing until hit could git full growed and *bear the fruit hit was supposed to bear*. You never picked no crop from plants that you had growed yourselves. They ain't even a bale of cotton setting on that floor where them fellers is saying what hit's wuth.⁷

What all this evidence comes to is what William Faulkner's Sutpen story is "aimed at" that rustic Prometheus, while John Faulkner's novel throws back upon the world by which his protagonist is corrupted. Incidentally, *Dollar Cotton* may be a compassionate gloss on the ancient theme, *de contemptus mundi*—a comment on the folly of all mortal enterprises which become ends in themselves. For men who have forgotten to labor to the glory of God and the erection of His shadowy Kingdom—the hierarchy that is family in the largest sense—invite disaster. Such is the wisdom Otis Town learned in the hills and never really forgot, even when he went against it:

. . . the harsh teaching of their fathers who acknowledged a stern-lipped God who showed men rich fields in other times, too, and in that day men forgot Him and arrogated to themselves the omnipotence of self-sufficiency and in that day, too, He had lifted His hands and the fruits of those vines had soured, even as the fruits of the vines of Sodom.⁸

Nonetheless, conventional implications aside (implications in keeping with John Faulkner's non-tragic or elegiac temper). This novel has another burden, one that we would not expect to discover in a book by his brother. For John is more interested in the evil of the times or the dangers of false doctrine than in the willful errors of men. His other published fictional writings confirm the generalization: the system produces (or helps produce) the

⁷ *Dollar Cotton*, pp. 203 and 231 (italics mine).

⁸ *Dollar Cotton*, p. 260.

sinner.⁹ Implicated in the fall of Otis Town is the entire machinery of the money crop system, the superstructure of agricultural capitalism that tempted a natural farmer into overindulging his (when held within bounds) worthy zeal for the work he was born to do. Thus diverted, Town has no mind to keep order in his own house. And the ethos of too-much-money-made-toos-wiftly-and-with-too-little-work did its internal damage there as well as upon the planter himself.¹⁰ Then, at the end, it took away from him his hard-won twenty thousand acres—and with them the hope of growing cotton again. At that moment Otis, in keeping with his established character, finally gives way. Left alone on his lawyer's couch, Town in his passing is terrible, but not so terrible as is Sutpen. His death brings a sign, not a shock, a sense of pathos, not of tragedy. Such is the difference between two different kinds of good novelists—two Southern versions of the *real*. Certainly the elder Faulkner has written with more penetration and with greater scope of the “struggling upward”—and written with the longer view. However, while William Faulkner tells us more about humankind in general, John Faulkner may indicate better than his brother how it felt to be a Mississippian in the first half of our century; and that itself is not a contemptible accomplishment.

⁹ I refer especially to *Men Working* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1941). There are also a few short stories, the biography of William, *My Brother Bill* (New York: Trident Press, 1963), and some children's fiction. John Bradbury remarks this implication in John Faulkner's work—but with no genuine perception of its value in *The Southern Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 152.

¹⁰ Town's children, nonetheless, make an interesting contrast with Sutpen's. Unlike Charles Bon and his mother, Otis' mulatto son, Wee Boy, and his black mistress, Martha, remain close to him throughout his life. No one denies anyone; and a curious reciprocity of devotion and duty springs up within that trio. And Town's white children (Loraine, Elaine, and Van), though he is admittedly no proper father to them, do not come out in their portion of his story with a great moral advantage over him—as do Henry and Judith Sutpen over Thomas. Even in his marriage Town is as much sinned against as sinning.