

MINK'S SENSE OF HONOUR IN FAULKNER'S *THE MANSION*

Enrique García Díez
Universidad de Valencia

The story of Mink, which first appears in «The Hound» and in *The Hamlet* in connection with the murder of Jack Houston, is retold from a different angle in Faulkner's last novel of his trilogy on the Snopes, *The Mansion*.

In the first section of this novel Mink is on his way to Jefferson after thirty years of imprisonment in Parchman; then suddenly his story is suspended throughout the whole middle section of the novel to be taken up again in the last section, where the story of the murder of Flem Snopes at the hands of his cousin Mink becomes the central concern of the narrator.

In this study my interest is mainly with Faulkner's manipulation of language and style by means of which the figure of Mink, who at the start of the novel bears a strong resemblance to the animal of his name (1), gains mythic stature and conquers a place among «Helen and the Bishops» (2).

Throughout *The Hamlet* and in the first section of *The Mansion* Faulkner carefully maintains the analogy with the animal: on his way back from prison Mink travels on back roads; he hides from people and moves inexorably towards his prey, Flem Snopes, as if driven by instinct.

Let us look at the passage of Houston's death in an ambush:

Then it was tomorrow morning. He took from its corner behind the door the tremendous ten-gauge double-barrelled shotgun which had belonged to his grandfather, the twin hammers standing above the receiver almost as tall as the ears of a rabbit. «Now what?» his wife said, cried. «Where are fixing to go with that?»

«After a rabbit», he said. «I'm burnt out on sowbelly», and with two of the heaviest loads out of his meager stock of Number —Two and Five— and —Eight— shot shells, he went not even by back roads and lanes but by hedgerows and patches of woods and ditches and whatever else would keep him private and unseen, back to the ambush he had prepared two days ago while waiting for Varner to return... (3).

Faulkner's rhetoric, at this point, mutes the heroic side of Mink's character. On the contrary, the detached voice of the implied author stresses the animalistic features

of Mink in a way that, for a moment, the identification between the animal and the person is practically established.

The syntactic structure of the passage is imitative of the animal's determination to kill. The accumulative effect of the subordinate clause («he went») by polysyndeton and juxtaposition conveys a feeling of urgency and fatalism, as if the crime were inevitable. The tone of the description alludes so clearly to the animal's way of hunting that, for a moment, we forget that it is Mink who is going to hunt «a rabbit».

This elaborate amphibology has misled some critics in their interpretation of Mink's motivations and final apotheosis. Elmo Howell, for example, affirms that Mink is Faulkner's first character with a criminal mind (4). Despite the sharpness of his analysis, Howell has mistaken the effect for the cause. Mink does not have a criminal mind «per se» as we infer from the fact that he does not decide to kill Houston until his patience has been exhausted; and when he does commit the crime it is because Houston has gone beyond the limits of human dignity. It is Mink's sense of honour which redeems him from being a common outlaw and which makes him the implicit hero of *The Mansion*.

Michael Millgate also misses the point when he says that «Mink's principal motive for the murder seems to have been his fundamental anger at his ill luck, especially in comparison with that of his relative Flem and a neighbor like Houston»(5). This is only partially true since the specific function of his bad luck within the structure of the novel is to stress the point that beyond calamity and misfortune there is a human principle which is incorruptible, which does not give up. Faulkner makes it quite clear in the following passage: «It was simply that his own bad luck had all his life continually harassed and harried him into the constant and unflagging necessity of defending his own simple rights.» (6) Besides the narrator's explicit comment we also know that Mink's most cultivated virtue is his patience. So it is not despair at his bad luck but the defense of his simple rights which leads him to the crime.

Cleanth Brooks shows a sharper understanding of Mink's nature:

Ratliff observes about Mink that he seems to be a different kind of Snopes, like a cottonmouth is different kind of a snake, and in the sequel to *The Hamlet*, *The Town* Ratliff remarks that Mink is the only out and out mean Snopes «we ever experienced». Later Faulkner was to devote the better part of a whole novel (*The Mansion*) to the story of Mink, but even in the foreshortened account of Mink given in *The Hamlet*, Mink has with all his bitterness and viciousness a sense of honor; it may be little better than cross-grained pride but it is at least that.

It is this sense of honour which places Mink side by side with the literary heroes of the «Comedia de Honor» of the 17th century Spain, and also with the tragic heroes of the 19th century such as Raskolnikov. As in the Spanish tradition Mink's honour is unconcerned with the laws of invented morality; it is a sort of self-respect, which results from one's conduct with some inexpressible and intrinsic principle. Honour is intimately associated with pride although not identified with it.

Flem's code of values, on the other hand, is based on social recognition; his own success is only meaningful in a social context: he likes to be seen sitting in Varner's barrel chair, and he does not like to be seen going to the liquor store with Linda.

There is still one more point of contact between Mink's sense of honour and the Spanish tradition in that both understand that honour can be avenged only with blood. After leaving Parcham, Mink could have escaped or gone to Mississippi but deep in his heart he knows that the only possible way to restore his honour is to kill Flem. This certitude turns him into a monomaniac like Raskolnikov, and, like him, Mink goes through the ordeal of crime as an assessment of individual human freedom. Jean Weisberger shares this opinion:

Enfin, la liberté que Raskolnikov escompte en vain de son crime—la preuve qu'il n'est pas une vermine, mais un homme— Mink put en jouir effectivement, mais sur un autre plan, dénué qu'il est de tout raffinement intellectuel ou sensibilité morale (8).

Mink's crime implies a metaphysical question as well: whether there is something or somebody behind human affairs to guarantee the final triumph of justice. In the Spanish «Comedia del Honor», justice was guaranteed by God, but Mink somehow reverses the process: the existence of «Them» depends on the success of his revenge which will show that there is divine and unalterable law above human justice. When Faulkner says that Mink is not religious, he means that he does not believe in the idea of a personalized God; however, his faith in «Them», as he calls it, can be interpreted as the voices of a supreme internal law, or as the chorus of a Greek tragedy. Mink, like Orestes, is a tragic hero whose actions are constantly driven by a fatal flaw. He is aware of it and tries to fight it with perseverance and endurance:

Because patience was his pride too: never to be reconciled since by this means he could beat Them; They might be stronger for a moment that he but nobody, no man, no nothing could wait longer than he could wait when nothing else but waiting would do, would work, would save him (9).

By Faulkner's skillful manipulation of the point of view, Mink's individual plight becomes the reader's plight as well. The emotional distance between Mink and the reader is progressively reduced by a change in the position of the observer. In *The Hamlet* it was the implied author who would account for Mink's ins and outs with the result that Mink was as a hunted-down poor devil, a sort of mean and vicious animal. In *The Mansion*, however, it is Mink's voice that we hear through the disguise of the free indirect style.

Mink's acceptance of his bad luck is a kind of rebellion because he knows that in the end «They» will bring him justice:

... when he not only would have to depend on Them but had won the right to depend on Them and find Them faithful; and They dare not,

They would not dare, to let him down, else it would be as hard for Them to live with Themselves afterward as it had finally become for him to live with himself and still keep on taking what he had taken from Jack Houston (10).

«They» are testing him, but at the same time he is testing them. They cannot deceive him. His unsophisticated voice gains the sympathy of the reader, who just then begins to understand the greatness of his curse.

Mink sees the necessity of his crime in a sort of epiphanic experience, which turns into an *idée fixe*. But while Raskolnikov reaches full consciousness of his crime through a rational process, Mink's determination to defend his honour lacks psychological depth. He must defend the honour of the self with passionate ardour because he has nothing else to defend, as Brooks has pointed out (11). Mink knew he had to kill Houston when he asked for the extra dollar:

—«I'm not talking about eighteen dollars», Houston said. «I'm—»
—«And seventy-five cents», Mink said.
—«—talking about nineteen dollars. You owe one dollar more.»
He didn't move; his face didn't change; he just said: «What one dollar more?» (12).

Faulkner emphasizes the fact that he was calm and still, as if absorbed in a sudden revelation. When Mink leaves, the narrator says: «But he had already turned, already walking, peacefully and steadily, carrying the coiled rope, back down the lane to the road» (13). The slow, yet inexorable, pace of the sentence marked by the ending «ing», the contrast between the adverbs «already» (repeated twice), which indicates sudden determination, and the modal adverbs «peacefully» and «steadily», which de-dramatize and slow down the action, convey the tranquility of spirit resulting from a strong decision. Mink does not go through the tormenting agonies Raskolnikov undergoes. The rest is just a matter of time and planning.

The resolution to kill Flem arrives in the same way: «... and he was returned, handcuffed, to his cell, and the door clanged to and he sitting now, quiet and still and composed on the mattress-less steel cot, this time only looking at the small barred window where for months now he had stood sixteen or eighteen hours a day in quenchless expectation and hope» (14). Suddenly Mink realizes that Flem is not coming to save him; a few lines further we are told that Mink has reached peace. The realization that Flem has been playing with his honour is as if a vital string had been cut off or as if some elemental law had been suddenly broken. Flem has failed to meet the inviolable requirements of kinship and, as in the code of honour of most primitive cultures, only blood can avenge it. Mink, unlike Raskolnikov, is not a Christ figure; his crime is just his own in that he is dealing with a personal offense against his honour. Only later in the novel does Mink become a symbol of the human struggle against Snopesism. But this new dimension stems from the whole context of the novel, especially from the opposition Mink-Flem.

Mink, by killing Flem, not only avenges his honour, but he also kills another monomaniac whose only drives are greed and self-interest. Flem is incapable of

understanding a relationship in terms other than monetary transaction; everything for him is finally convertible into profit. The fact that Mink is a stranger to the 20th century world emphasizes the idea that he represents some anachronistic values which are not present in a society where the value of money plays a very significant part. But it would be unfair to Faulkner to interpret his novels in terms of capitalism versus socialism or the like. Flem, however, certainly represents a degradation of values caused by excessive greed or ambition.

Mink, on the other hand, displays an absolute contempt for material gains, or as he puts it: «Me and Houston don't deal in money, we deal in post holes» (14). Mink represents the human element of a culture which, Theodore Green says, «has lost all respect for eternal verities and that has dedicated itself primarily to the values of the market place... The more one gets to know the Snopes, the more one begins to see and to smell Snopesism as a miasmatic American phenomenon» (15). Faulkner's masterful stroke, he argues, consists in making Mink the indestructible spark of goodness in every human being which fights Snopesism.

This vision of Mink takes us to a final consideration about his morality. His vision of the world is simplistic as based on a manichean distinction between Good and Evil. It is not a rational distinction but a kind of intuition of what is right and what is wrong. Once he detects the flaw, he becomes slave of the *idée fixe*. However, it was not Faulkner's intention to deal with abstractions, as he explains in an interview:

Life is not interested in good or evil. Don Quijote was constantly choosing between good and evil, but then he was choosing his dream state. He was mad. He entered reality only when he was so busy trying to cope with people, that he had no time to distinguish between good and evil. Since people exist only in life, they must devote their time simply to being alive. Life is motion and motion is concerned with what makes man move—which are ambition, power, pleasure. What time man can devote to morality, he must take by force from the motion of which he is part (16).

Later in the interview he states the secret of his art: «The aim of the artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.» In *The Mansion* Faulkner attained that «fixation of life» by making every human action part of a ritual performed with almost religious devotion. The end of *The Mansion* provides a good example of this ritualization:

Because he was free now. A little further along toward dawn, any time the notion struck him to, he could lay down. So when the notion struck him he did so, arranging himself, arms and legs and back, already feeling the first faint gentle tug like the furred old ground itself was trying to make you believe it wasn't really noticing itself doing it. Only he located the right stars at that moment, he was lying exactly right since a man must face the east to lay down (17).

Mink has found his peace and is preparing his little silent ecstasy. The almost naturalistic exactness of detail with which Mink has been described throughout the novel, gives way here to a diffused and connotative description, which creates a poetic vibration. Once more by Faulkner's manipulation of style, Mink has reached beyond his own stature of a free and avenged man. We finally forget about Mink's animal nature and accept him as a mythological figure, because in avenging his honour he has entered the history of humanity as a new Orestes. Mink has liberated Jefferson from Snopesism in the same way Orestes liberated Argos from corruption.

NOTES

- (1) Minks are common animals in the North Mississippi, and are usually described as ferocious and sanguinary.
- (2) William Faulkner: *The Mansion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 436. (All subsequent references are taken from this edition).
- (3) *The Mansion*: p. 38.
- (4) Elmo Howell: «Mink Snopes and Faulkner's Moral Conclusions.» *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1967, p.22.
- (5) Michael Millgate: *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 194.
- (6) *The Mansion*: p. 7.
- (7) Cleanth Brooks: *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 229.
- (8) Jean Weisberger: *Faulkner et Dostoieski: Confluences et Influences* (Bruxelles: Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 1968), p. 298.
- (9) *The Mansion*: p. 22.
- (10) *Ibidem*: p. 6.
- (11) Cleanth Brooks: *Op. Cit.* p. 222.
- (12) *The Mansion*: p. 25.
- (13) *Ibidem*: p. 26.
- (14) *Ibidem*: p. 41.
- (15) Theodore Greene: «The Philosophy of Life Implicit in Faulkner's *The Mansion*», *TSSL*, II, p. 405.
- (16) James Meriwether and Michael Millgate, ed.: *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*. (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 252.
- (17) *The Mansion*: p. 434.

 INDICE