

Theodore Colson

**Analogues of Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Hawthorne's
"The Birthmark"**

In the summers of 1925 and 1926 when Faulkner vacationed in Pascagoula he fell in love with a girl named Helen Baird. She only tolerated him, and married another man, but characters in two of Faulkner's novels were drawn from her — Patricia Robyn in *Mosquitoes* and Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *The Wild Palms*. Both represent a type of beauty Faulkner was drawn to. But Helen Baird had some bad scars, and Faulkner did not hesitate to transfer them to Charlotte. Why? Joseph Blotner, Faulkner's biographer, suggests that the suffering indicated by the scars was partly what drew Faulkner to Helen Baird.¹ Charlotte's scars suggest her vulnerability; she is associated with Aphrodite, but she is all too mortal.

There are some remarkable parallels between *The Wild Palms* and Hawthorne's "The Birthmark". beginning with the marks on the heroines' faces.² Hawthorne's story is romantic and Faulkner's is naturalistic, but both stories have the force of parable, and the parables are similar: in each the lovers are totally committed to love, and that love is symbolized by the physical perfection of the woman; in each they try to make that perfection total through an operation, and the operation is fatal. In *The Wild Palms* Charlotte deserts her husband for Harry, an intern. Their total commitment to sexual love is uninterrupted until she becomes pregnant. She finally persuades him to perform an abortion, and it kills her. In "The Birthmark" the scientist Aylmer marries Georgiana, who is an utterly perfect woman except for the birthmark on her cheek, in the shape of a tiny hand. He becomes obsessed with removing it, and he finally does, but it kills her.

Georgiana's mark is a sign to Aylmer of humanity's fallen state: "It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are

temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain." It is the "symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death." Charlotte has "a faint inch-long scar on one cheek which he recognized as an old burn, doubtless from childhood." And when she first meets Harry, Charlotte tells him that it is also on her shoulder and side and hip, and she got it while fighting her brother. Her scars are not given any weight of meaning, like Georgiana's. Yet, as R.V. Cassil points out in the introduction to the Signet edition, the story is of course not realistic. Georgiana's birthmark is like the scar of Melville's Ahab or Milton's Satan, and though Charlotte acquires hers naturalistically rather than supernaturally, her scars have the same significance. They are similar to the symbol of Caddy's muddy drawers in *The Sound and the Fury* (also acquired after fighting with her brother) which we associate with knowledge of good and evil and of death as we see Caddy peering in at Damuddy's funeral from the Compson tree of knowledge. But once Faulkner establishes the fact of Charlotte's scars he does not elaborate on it; it is her pregnancy that becomes the 'birthmark'.

Both couples fit very nicely in the whole Edenic tradition of American fiction.³ They hope that by removing the symbol they can remove the condition of original sin and return to Edenic innocence and timelessness. Temporality is inextricably part of the fallen impure state they abhor. Aylmer specifically hates the birthmark as a sign that nature's work are "temporary and finite". The theme of return to Eden is clear enough in Harry and Charlotte's idyllic retreat to the lake. "Well, Adam," she says as soon as they are alone. Charlotte displays an Eve-like unconsciousness of temporality, but Harry is tormented by the diminishing row of cans of food, and when he is driven to make a calendar, he reconstructs the count of days by using Charlotte's menstrual periods.

The stories are one more demonstration of Hawthorne's and Faulkner's somewhat similar concerns for and their different approaches to the theological problem of the imputation of Adam's sin to the rest of mankind. The clearest statement in Faulkner's work is Quentin Compson's saying, "theres a curse on us its not our fault is it our fault." Hawthorne's characters are simply and orthodoxly born with original sin — the birthmark comes at birth. He plays with this idea most intricately in *The Scarlet Letter*: Pearl asks if she will get a scarlet letter when she grows up, but of course she is already herself the

embodiment of *the scarlet letter*. Caddy and Charlotte are not born with the symbols of sin, the muddy drawers, the pregnancy, but come by them in a natural fashion. But the parallels are clear: Caddy and Pearl, Hester and Charlotte have the same problem. There are other symbols of the Adamic curse in Faulkner: the commissary ledgers in "The Bear", or Joe Christmas' ambiguous color, but I think his general approach is best represented by Caddy and Charlotte.

Both Faulkner's and Hawthorne's worlds are filled with men who are outraged and tormented by the thought of impurity. The convict in the "Old Man" story, whose chapters are interleaved with *The Wild Palms*, is one of these men. And of course both Georgiana's birthmark and Charlotte's pregnancy are symbols of impurity — the kind that is often symbolized by loss of virginity (Quentin Compson's attitude is an example). But virginity is valued in neither story; both are in a sense about the chastity of wedded love that Milton hymns, with the very great exception that Harry and Charlotte explicitly, and Aylmer and Georgiana in their fashion, scorn ordinary husband and wife relationships. Both stories are about absolute purity of love — of sexual love. The sexuality is, characteristically, only hinted at in Hawthorne's story, and the lovers try to make it totally spiritual in spite of its physicality. In Faulkner's story the flesh is insisted upon. This is not a minor difference, since it nicely represents the distance of the century from 1843 to 1939. But the similarity, the concern with total commitment to love, is greater than the difference.

Georgiana's love is so great that when she knows intuitively that Aylmer's experiment will kill her she still encourages him: "Her heart exulted while it trembled at this honorable love - so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection nor miserly make itself contented with an earthier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment than that meaner kind which would have borne with imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual." And Charlotte's commitment to "holy love" is equally obsessed: "It's got to be all honeymoon, always. Forever and ever, until one of us dies. It can't be anything else. Either heaven or hell! no comfortable safe peaceful purgatory between for you and me to wait in until good behavior or forbearance or shame or repentance overtakes us." Both couples set up "holy love" as their ultimate value, and to give in and accept their respective birthmarks would be treason to it.

Allen Tate's criticism of Poe's "Ligeia" could apply almost exactly to "The Birthmark": "The hero professes an impossibly high love of the heroine that circumvents the body and moves in on her spiritual essence. All this sounds high and noble, until we begin to look at it more narrowly, when we perceive that the ordinary carnal relationship between a man and a woman, however sinful, would be preferable to the mutual destruction of soul to which Poe's characters are committed."⁴ For Georgiana death is preferable to treason to holy love. And with some curious inversions Tate's observation is apropos to *The Wild Palms*. Harry and Charlotte's relationship is carnal all right, but it is carnality of a peculiar kind, elevated as a supreme value; "the ordinary carnal relationship" may want to prevent having a baby, but it will permit other human activities to exist along with the sexual. Not Charlotte and Harry.

Both Hawthorne and Faulkner eschew respectability because it is the appearance of goodness which can cloak the worst evil. But Harry and Charlotte hate and fear respectability because only in an aura of obvious adultery can they preserve the intensity of their wholly sexual relationship. As soon as Harry finds himself with a job and a home, settling down, becoming a *husband*, they must flee. And the pregnancy is the ultimate threat. A child is a bond between husband and wife, but the child asserts its own claims. Charlotte says she doesn't want a child because "they hurt too damn much." At first Harry thinks she is talking about childbirth, but then he realizes she is talking about the emotional pain of the relationship; she has left two children with her husband, and try as she might she cannot forget or stop loving them. She wants nothing between herself and Harry; she does not want a developing of love, but a stasis of love. In pleading for an abortion she says, "It's not us now . . . I want it to be us again, quick, quick, quick. We have so little time. In twenty years I can't any more and in fifty years we'll both be dead."

Charlotte has made sexuality their god, and confronted it with a titanic hubris: They will rule it. But, as Edwin Arlington Robinson says in "Eros Turannos," they

That with a god have striven
Not hearing much of what we say
Take what the god has given.

Charlotte has some Aphrodite-like features herself, for to Harry she embodies the godly power of sexuality. And here is another parallel with "The Birthmark": the hubris of trying to act godlike is doomed. This theme is explicit in Hawthorne's story; like Rappaccini, Aylmer develops an ambition to usurp God's unique power: he says he has had "thought which might have enlightened me to create." He forgets that nature "permits us indeed to mar but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make."

This hubris is what Allen Tate (again writing of Poe) calls the "angelic imagination" - that kind of mind in which "neither intellect nor will is bound to the human scale, their projection becomes god-like, and man becomes an angel."⁵ In the "angelic" aspiration, writes Tate, the three classical faculties are hypertrophied. In hypertrophy of feeling "a nightmare of paranoia, schizophrenia, necrophilism, and vampirism supervenes, in which the natural affections are perverted by the will to destroy."⁶ Such perversion of feeling is apparent enough in Faulkner's world (we have only to think of "A Rose for Emily"), and certainly though less obviously present in Hawthorne's. "The second hypertrophy is the thrust of the human will beyond the human scale of action," and the third is "the intellect moving in isolation from both love and the moral will." Clearly in characters like Ethan Brand, Hollingsworth, and Sutpen the imagination is "angelic". Aylmer's and Charlotte's imaginations are "angelic", and Georgiana and Harry in admiration acquiesce. The hypertrophy of feeling and will is apparent enough in both couples' exaltation of love. The hypertrophy of interest is obvious in Aylmer's confidence in his science, and in Charlotte's demands on Harry's science. Georgiana's situation is clear cut; she is the passive female victim of the experiment; she goes into it with masochistic knowledge that she is victim. Harry's situation is much more complicated: he is male, and has to wield the knife, but he is also the passive member of this couple, and seems the more victimized of the two. But clearly enough the partners in both couples mutually victimize each other.

Both stories use the knife image. The knife as a sexual image could never be more explicit than in Faulkner's story: when Harry attempts the abortion Charlotte says, "We've done this in lots of ways but not with knives, have we?" and the policeman who arrests him says, "Using a knife. I'm oldfashioned' the old way still suits me. I dont want variety." In Hawthorne's story Aylmer has a dream in which he operates

on the birthmark: "but the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana's heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away."

Each of these stories gains in stature by their juxtaposition. Hawthorne's is clearly one of his romances; it is far-fetched and obviously allegorical. *The Wild Palms* on the other hand is so grossly — apparently — committed to the physical that its main intention might be seen as pornographic (well, that is to the hypothetically stupidest of all possible readers). But the stories are transformations of the same thematic structure. *The Wild Palms* is the naturalistic fulfilment of the idea of "The Birthmark": outside of romance women do not have hand-shaped birthmarks that represent original sin, but lots of women get pregnant. On the other hand "The Birthmark" is the allegorical statement of the situation of *The Wild Palms*, and the pregnancy is seen to be the birthmark of original sin — not in that the adultery is sinful, though having like Dimmesdale's and Hester's "a consecration of its own", but the pregnancy is for them a symbol of temporality, "liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death."

Both couples see time as the great enemy — a theme of both stories is one theme of Shakespeare's sonnets, love's war upon time. All four lovers' ambition is to defeat time and mortality symbolically, since it finally cannot be done any other way, cannot be done in the flesh. Aylmer would achieve this by 'creating' an utterly perfect, flawless Georgiana. Charlotte's method is simply to ignore time and in the experience of love escape, transcend time (just as Ike McCaslin and Hightower do in their mystical visions). Harry tries to articulate this (in very Faulknerian rhetoric): "you are one single abnegant affirmation, one single fluxive Yes out of the terror in which you surrender volition, hope, all — the darkness, the falling, the thunder of solitude, the shock, the death — . . . but forever afterward you will know that . . . for one second or two seconds you were present in space but not in time . . ." (His friend McCord reacts to this somewhat as Allen Tate does to the love of Poe's Ligeia: "Sweet Jesus . . . If I am ever unlucky enough to have a son, I'm going to take him to a nice clean whorehouse myself on his tenth birthday.")

Georgiana, predictably, has the most spiritual vision: "I might wish to put off this birthmark of mortality by relinquishing mortality itself in preference to any other mode. Life is but a sad possession to those who

have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand." This "degree of moral advancement" is the kind of love that D.H. Lawrence finds so abominable: "The lust of hate is the inordinate desire to consume and unspeakably possess the soul of the hated one, just as the lust of love is the desire to possess, or to be possessed by the beloved, utterly. But in either case the result is the dissolution of both souls, each losing itself in transgressing its own bounds."⁷ She worships Aylmer to the point where she is willing, indeed eager, to die for him and his obsession. "Do not repent" she says, "that with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the earth could offer. Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!" In justice to Georgiana, she does not at all think her degree of moral advancement is the highest: "Were I weaker and blinder it might be happiness. Were I stronger it might be endured hopefully. But being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die."

Charlotte certainly does not think she is at the best moral point for death, but she is willing to risk death, and in her pain wishes for it: "Then take the knife and cut it out of me. All of it. Deep. So there won't be anything left but just a shell to hold the cold air . . ." Charlotte would scorn the sublimating away of physical sex in Hawthorne's story, but could readily understand the passion which makes both Aylmer and Georgiana willing to risk Georgiana's body for "holy love". Her idea of love is as wholly sexual as she can make it, but it is a deity. When she begs Harry to do his first (and successful) abortion for their friends she says, "This is for love too. Not ours maybe. But love."

Each author ends his story by drawing a moral, each in his characteristic rhetoric. There are two steps in Hawthorne's moral. First, "the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight." And of the cloddish servant Aminidab's laughter, Hawthorne comments: "Thus ever does fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state." So there is a higher, a "celestial" state where Georgiana's and Aylmer's perfect love could exist. But Hawthorne must add: "Yet had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his moral life of the selfsame texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and living

once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present." I suppose similar advice might have been given to Charlotte and Harry — that they could have woven mortal lives of jobs and respectability with their celestial sexual love. That is what their friend McCord thinks.

That the moral of Faulkner's story must be from Harry's point of view is in one sense ironic, because of these four characters Harry is the least idealistic, the most practical, and therefore the most anguished by the whole business. Like Georgiana he must try to understand and to articulate what is happening. He chooses not to try to escape from the police, and not to use the cyanide pill that Charlotte's husband offers him, but to live out his life imprisonment. He seems to have reached a "degree of moral advancement" stronger than that of Georgiana, who welcomed death. And in this story there is no higher, celestial state. Faulkner's Harry is rigorously naturalistic: the physical is *all* there is; when he is gone nothing will be left of what he and Charlotte had, and so, to honor that — religiously — he will stay alive. The concluding lines of *The Wild Palms* approach Faulkner's best work:

Now he could see the light on the concrete hulk, in the poop porthole which he had called the kitchen for weeks now, as if he lived there, and now with a preliminary murmur in the palm the light offshore breeze began, bringing with it the smell of swamps and wild jasmine, blowing on under the dying west and the bright star; it was the night. So it wasn't just memory. Memory was just half of it, it wasn't enough. *But it must be somewhere*, he thought. *There's the waste. Not just me. At least I think I dont mean just me.* Hope I dont mean just me . . . But after all memory could live in the old wheezing entrails; and now it did stand to his hand, incontrovertible and plain, serene, the palm clashing and murmuring dry and wild and faint and in the night but he could face it, thinking, *Not could. Will. I want to. So it is the old meat after all, no matter how old. Because if memory exists outside of the flesh it wont be memory because it wont know what it remembers so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be.* — Yes, he thought, *between grief and nothing I will take grief.*

Faulkner did not, like Hawthorne, collect morals in notebooks and then make stories to fit them; but that this moral is important to Faulkner is made clear by his asserting it in a wholly different context in one of the sessions that went into *Faulkner in the University*: "between grief and nothing man will take grief always."⁸

Hawthorne's conclusion is that human imperfection "demands the completeness of a higher state," yet at the same time people would be

better off putting up with 'birthmarks', somehow accommodating them with a sense of eternal life. In his fiction he frequently appeals to heaven; in Hawthorne's personal theology skepticism and faith were generally able to coexist; his view of the world is stylistically perfectly represented in his much commented on device of multiple possibilities. But, when his back was to the wall, he hesitatingly pinned his hopes on heaven. And so that is what he does with Georgiana.

Faulkner is quite different, the naturalistic humanist; he must pin his hopes on man. Of course his other works frequently end in hopelessness, as in *Sanctuary* — or with hope for the simple and good like Lena Grove or Dilsey, but none for the complex and tormented, like Quentin Compson. But in the conclusion of *The Wild Palms* he puts some affirmation, what must be about the most minimal affirmation there is, in Harry, who would be one of the simple, yet has been forced by Charlotte into this much complexity. It is a minimal affirmation and yet it is great. Harry is, in the sense of Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech, "prevailing".

But of course the great interest of both stories is not in their conclusions but in the psychological and spiritual development of these couples, and especially of Georgiana and Harry. That development is sick, by standards of normal mental health, and yet it is heroic.

NOTES

1. *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random, 1974), p. 512, and *passim*.
2. Though several critics have written about parallels of Hawthorne and Faulkner, no one has convincingly demonstrated that there was any direct influence. The only Hawthorne book in Faulkner's library in 1939 when he published *The Wild Palms* was the *Blithedale Romance* (*William Faulkner's Library — A Catalogue*, compiled by Joseph Blotner. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1964). The texts I have used are *Mosses from an Old Manse*, *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. George P. Lathrop (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), II, and *The Wild Palms* (New York: Random House, 1939).
3. For example, consider R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).
4. Allen Tate, "The Angelic Imagination," *Collected Essays* (Denver: Swallow, 1959), p. 435.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 443.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 434.
7. D.H. Lawrence, writing of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922), in *The Shock of Recognition*, ed. Edward Wilson (New York: Modern Library, 1952), p. 982.
8. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences of the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph Blotner (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1959), p. 25.