Faulkner's Contact with Cubism

Hironori Hayase

Introduction

Abandoning the traditional canon of representation, the Cubists fragment the object into many facets from multiple perspectives and then rearrange these fragmented parts into an organic production by collage. The two innovative techniques—fragmentation and collage—can be found in Faulkner's main works, and more importantly, these two lie at the core of Faulkner's vision from which to construct his fiction.

The importance of Cubistic vision in Faulkner's works has been referred to by some critics, though most of these comments are concentrated on As I Lay Dying. In "Darl Bundren's 'Cubistic' Vision," Watson Branch, who successfully demonstrates the Cubistic elements in As I Lay Dying, remarks: "Darl often exhibits specific Cubist technique in the verbal constructs by which he expresses his view of the world" (48). "The Cubist use of planes instead of lines," admits Arthur Kinney, "is similar to the planes of multiple narration in As I Lay Dying" (103). On the same novel, Frederick Karl observes: "Faulkner developed a 'verbal cubism,' by which he tried to capture the matter through angles, slants, edges, indirectly, surely not through pure representation" (353). Among others, Panthea Broughton advances a forcible opinion, in "Faulkner's Cubist Novels," that Cubists' techniques "do seem to be necessary conditions in Faulkner's works" (93).

Despite the frequent reference to the importance of Cubism in Faulkner's fiction, however, no critics have discussed how much Faulkner is connected with Cubism or how interested Faulkner is in Cubism. Then, the aim in this essay is to attempt to document the relationship between Faulkner and Cubism, paying attention to the innovative cultural ambience around him and some relevant documents.

1. New Artistic Milieus

Cubism is one of the innovative ideas coming from the milieu in the early twentieth-century which denies traditional notions and styles and seeks for a new technique of existentializing the object according to the artist's unique mode of perception. The concept of Cubism, which is essentially based on the philosophy of perception, puts utmost significance on the artist's "mode of perception." Cubism is an intellectual method of existentializing the object, so they deny as "illusionism" the traditional painterly technique which has observed the law of a single, fixed perspective since the Renaissance.

In The Culture of Time and Space, Stephen Kern points out the radical change in views of time and space between 1881 and 1918, influenced by the development of science. As for time, he explains
the free vision as follows:

. . . these features of traditional time were also challenged as artists and intellectuals envisioned times that reversed themselves, moved at irregular rhythms, and even came to a dead stop. In the fin de siècle, time's arrow did not always fly straight and true. (29)

And "New ideas about the nature of space in this period," comments Kern, "challenges the popular notion that it was homogeneous and argued for its heterogeneity. . . . Artists dismantled the uniform perspectival space that had governed painting since the Renaissance and reconstructed objects as seen from several perspectives"(132). Kern observes that this kind of defiance to traditional

In the early period of this century

William Spratling. Phil Stone

his lite

can be simultaneously seen in every academical and social field in the Western world of that period, and explains that these changes occur with the philosophy of "perspectivism" in Nietzsche's words:

In geometry and physics, biology and sociology, art and literature attacks were launched on the traditional notions that there is one and only one space and that a single point of view is sufficient to understand anything. Sometimes the historical record is generous and supplies abundant evidence for a cultural change. In this period it also supplied an interpretation of that change with the philosophy of "perspectivism." (150)

In the early period of this century, there prevails distrust in absolutism and authoritarianism, and as Alfred Barr maintains in Picasso—Fifty Years of His Art, Cubism is drawn from theories of relativity as follows:

Post-Euclidean geometry in the form of popular explanations of the time-space continuum and the fourth dimension may have encouraged Picasso: A Cubist's head, which in this way suggests the fusion of temporal and spatial factors, might serve as a crude illusion of relativity. (68)

Under these cultural circumstances, with a keen sense of the times, Faulkner, like the Cubists, questions the traditional technique of representation and seeks for his own unique method from which to create the true image of his subject as it is on literary canvas.

In Faulkner's case, this innovative air of the age, we can see, is brought mainly by Phil Stone and William Spratling. Phil Stone, Yale student, well-known as one of Faulkner's important mentors in his literary career, gives information on new artistic trends of Europe he got at Yale. "Faulkner may have learned," as Hönnighausen observes, "of new trends in art and literature from Phil Stone" (15). It is noticeable that, according to Hönnighausen, Yale University at that time is highly caught up by the aesthetic movement, especially Oscar Wilde and that Yale Record, the undergraduate human magazine, shows a lively appreciation of Beardsley and art nouveau (10-11).

Faulkner meets Spratling in New Orleans and shares an apartment in the French Quarter. New Orleans is, to Faulkner, an important milieu where he can get new artistic trends through communication with many artists there. As Karl comments, "The artistic milieu in New Orleans included besides Anderson, the very young Hamilton Basso, the artist Spratling and hordes of other writers and artists" (214). Spratling, among others, has the greatest influence on Faulkner. Especially interested in Mexican sculpture, he is teaching architecture at Tulane University. With Spratling he publishes Sherwood Anderson and Other Creoles, which includes the caricature of Sherwood Anderson. Besides, Spratling appears by his real name in "Out of Nazareth" and "Episode" in New
Orleans Sketches and also appears in Mosquitoes as a figure by the name of Gordon who looks like him.

More importantly, Faulkner goes to Europe with Spratling, who seems to have taught him modern paintings. He recommends Faulkner read Clive Bell’s study of the post-impressionists and Elie Faure’s History of Arts. Clive Bell is known as an artistic critic who has a direct influence on Cézanne and Cubists. Faure is also one of the influential art critics of Cubism and his History is one of the books in Faulkner’s Library Catalog.

Incidentally, these two books are also referred to in “Elmer” which is begun to be written in 1925: “And there were the books he had brought. Clive Bell. The Outline of Art, by Elie Faure—an elegant heavy book in expensive green and gold which a bright cold saleswoman had sold him in New Orleans and which he had opened once with hushed astonishment and determined despair. . . .” (344).

It is true that Faulkner does not mention the direct influence of Cubist painters, such as Picasso and Braque, and yet, we can find a few documents which suggest that he is somewhat interested in modern painters. According to his letter postmarked 18 Aug., 1925, “I spent yesterday in the Louvre, to see the Winged Victory and the Venus de Milo, the real ones, and the Mona Lisa etc. It was fine, especially the paintings of the more-or-less moderns, like Degas and Manet and Chavannes. Also went to a very very modernist exhibition the other day—futurist and vorticist” (Selected Letters 13).

Besides, the letter of 22 Sept. says: “I have seen Rodin’s museum, and 2 private collections of Matisse and Picasso (who are yet alive and painting). . . .” (Selected Letters 24).

In his library, there are two books on Picasso: Picasso—Fifty Years of His Art by Alfred Barr and Picasso by Wilhelm Boeck. The former deals mainly with the general analogies between Cubism and theories of relativity.

In addition, in his library we can find another book related to Cubism: Guillaume Apollinaire’s Alcools: Poèmes, 1893–1913. Apollinaire, also author of Cubist painters, is a notable Cubist poet as well as an essential critic of Cubism, applying himself to “the task of defining the principles of a Cubist aesthetic in literature as well as painting” (Encyclopedia Britannica). Alcools is his experimental masterpiece in which he relives his experience sometimes in regular stanza, sometimes in short unrhymed lines, and always without punctuation. Faulkner’s possession of these books implies his interest in Cubism.

### II. Bergson and Cézanne

There are no firsthand documents which prove the direct relationship between Faulkner and Cubism, but some clues can be found to connect them and even show his understanding of Cubism. One of the most substantial derives from the fact that he has a special interest in Henri Bergson.

Faulkner himself admits Bergson’s influence and importance in his works: “In fact I agree pretty much with Bergson’s theory of the fluidity of time” (Lion in the Garden 70); “I was influenced by Flaubert and by Balzac. . . . And by Bergson, obviously” (72). One of the writers he tells Joan to read is Bergson: “read it. . . . It helped me” (Blotner Biography 511). Besides, according to Phil Stone, Faulkner seems to have actually read Bergson’s Creative Evolution in earnest.

In “Bergson, Le Bon, and Hermetic Cubism,” Timothy Mitchell, who thinks Bergson’s philosophy is an important supporter for the development of Cubism, demonstrates the analogy drawn between
Cubists' philosophy and Bergson's, paying special attention to "simultaneity" as the same idea: "Bergson's philosophy and Cubist painting reach conjunction in the idea of simultaneity. Passage of Cubists painters' writing dealing with time read like paragraphs of Bergson's work" (177). Besides, believing fragmentation represents reality as a series of separate acts, Bergson tries to perceive an object as a creative and constant movement in time. This method of perception exerts a great influence on the Cubists, as Mitchell suggests: "Bergson's insistence that reality is duration, that an object is only known through our experience of it in time, that the image of a static world is false, explains more satisfactorily than any reference to Einstein or Minkowski, the repeated occurrence of discussions of time in Cubists' writings" (177). As Christopher Gray also explains, Bergson can be thought of as one of the sources of Cubism: "One is to be found in the development of metaphysics through Nietzsche and Bergson. The other is to be found in Positivism. . ." (65).

As for the effect of Bergson on Faulkner, many critics have proven Faulkner's full understanding of his philosophy, although there are a few critics who warn against the overestimation of Bergson's influence on Faulkner. To take a few examples, Kartiganer explains: "The philosophy of Bergson is a clear presence in Faulkner's fiction, whether there by design or a common understanding. The poles of intellect and intuition, as Bergson defines them, are crucial in Faulkner's best novels" (166). Adams, who maintains "he probably read Creative Evolution and Laughter. . . and very possibly also Introduction to Metaphysics (39), demonstrates "Faulkner's way of working is strongly suggested by some of Bergson's theories of art and literature" (40).

Bergson's idea of time and of reality as the simultaneity of heterogeneous factors can be fully reflected in Faulkner's work as well as in Cubist paintings, whether directly from his knowledge of Bergson or indirectly from T. S. Eliot and James Joyce whose books are proclaimed to reflect Bergson's philosophy. Through Bergsonian philosophy, it can be admitted, Faulkner theoretically holds a Cubistic vision of reality.

Cézanne, as we know well, is the principal source of the Cubists both theoretically and practically. Stephen Kern explains the relationship between Cézanne and the Cubists as follows:

The important innovations he [Cézanne] made in the rendering of space—the reduction of pictorial depth and the use of multiple perspective—were carried further by the Cubists in the early twentieth century and have therefore come to be viewed as transitional. The Cubists repeatedly expressed their debt to Cézanne and used his techniques to create even more radical treatments of space. (142)

From Cézanne, whose primary concern is about the creating of space on the flat surface of the canvas, Faulkner learns how to create "space" in the literary canvas by introducing different perspectives for depicting different facets of the same subject. It is clear that he shows a considerable interest in Cézanne. In his letter from Paris, "And Cezanne! That man dipped his brush in light. . ." (Selected Letters 24); "I remarked to Spratling how no one since Cezanne had dipped his brush in light. . .(New Orleans Sketches 101-102). It is pointed out that Faulkner learns a great deal from Cézanne, especially the rendering of space. According to Arthur Kinney, Faulkner "builds by planes of narrative his literary analogy to Cézanne" (252), and Ilse Lind also observes "Faulkner derived much of his sense of curved form from Cézanne" (141).
Quite important is Mitchell's opinion that Bergson's concept of time had an impact as early as the late 1880s on the work of Cézanne (178). Through Cézanne, Faulkner becomes familiar with the Cubistic basic technique of multiple perspective. Thus, we can conclude through his special interest in Bergson and Cézanne, Faulkner learns principal theories and techniques of Cubism.

Conclusion

Breaking with the traditional canon, the artists in the early twentieth-century struggle for their own technique or vision through which to create their work. Under the ambience of relativism, Faulkner also, with the instruction of Phil Stone and William Spratling, comes in contact with a new vision of the world from which to create his object according to his innovative mode of perception. Greatly interested in and influenced by new philosophical and aesthetic movements around him, not so much in the United States as in Europe, Faulkner comes to have the same mode of perception as the Cubists. Admittedly, there is no evidence that directly connects Faulkner with the Cubists, but he is in a milieu which makes it possible for Faulkner to hold Cubistic vision and techniques through his special affinity with Bergson and Cézanne. With the Cubistic vision, Faulkner seeks for truth in a synthesis constructed through the process of breaking up the subject by multiple perspective and reconstructing them on literary canvas by *collage*.

Notes

1 About other relevant commentaries than those mentioned in this essay, see John Tucker, who affirms, “... the presence of cubism is more strongly felt in *As I Lay Dying*” (390); Stephen Ross, who observes *As I Lay Dying* is constructed in “the way a cubist painting shatters representational images” (“'Voice' in Narrative Texts” 308); John T. Matthews; on *As I Lay Dying*, he comments: “Faulkner's bold treatment of epic mainstays—the journey, the flood, the fire—in a cubistic technique epitomizes the metamorphosis of storytelling into the modern novel” (71); Arthur L. Scott, who says, “*Absalom, Absalom!* does bear a marked resemblance to two earlier art movements: Cubism and Futurism” (27). By contrast to the above critics, “The Effect of Painting on Faulkner's Poetic Form,” Ilse Lind doubts the effect of Cubism on Faulkner's fiction: “he gives little evidence of responding to Cubism in a strongly positive way” (140), and instead she observes: *As I Lay Dying* is “rather as a symbolist or even possibly an expressionistic undertaking” (141). Also, Hönnighausen thinks little of the effect of Cubism on Faulkner's works.

2Kern explains “perspectivism”: Nietzsche “urged philosophers to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge” (150). For books on the parallels between Cubism and other cultural developments, see Fry 147, 148.

3Einstein publishes his theory of relativity in 1905.

4In 1925 Faulkner portrays Spratling.

5Faure's *The Spirit of the Form* discusses Bergson.

6See *Faulkner's Library* 124.

7See *Faulkner's Library* 16, 106.

8See *Faulkner's Library* 90.
To add some more, Broughton 54; Minter 48; Blotner Biography 511; and McHaney 48. On the other hand, Cleanth Brooks claims Bergson’s influence is overestimated: “I doubt that Faulkner read Bergson very deeply or thoroughly. I believe that the influence of Bergson on Faulkner has been generally overestimated” (255). Kreiswirth also comments: “Although there are certain general correspondences between Bergson’s theories and the way in which Faulkner presents Elmer’s consciousness, it may not be necessary to go beyond specifically literary works in a search for formal or conceptual models. Discontinuous time schemes and flashback techniques appear in much early twentieth-century fiction, and are especially prominent in the works of Conrad, Ford, and the lesser literary impressionists, such as Beer and Hergesheimer, with whom Faulkner was familiar” (75-76). Douglass is so discreet as to maintain the indirect but clear influence of Bergsonian values on Faulkner: “It is clear that Faulkner made use of “Prufrock,” The Waste Land, and other of Eliot’s works. I contend Faulkner studies Eliot thoroughly enough to have picked up critical judgments and aesthetic values just as much as specific literary devices. Knowing the impact Eliot had on Faulkner, and seeing that impact in the criticism of other Southern writers, particularly Ransom and Tate we see why we find in Faulkner a deep, rich vein reflecting Bergsonian values” (120).

Works Cited


