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have been written without the historical sense that Eliot touts in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," specifically his notion that the "existing order" of literature

> is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

In a sense, that is what Quentin and Shreve are trying to accomplish in the novel – to "readjust" the version of events given by Compson and Rosa and fit their new authoritative narrative in that historical sequence. We cannot know whether Quentin and Shreve ever read Eliot, but they are nevertheless proof positive of the dynamic between past and present that has to occur if scissors-and-paste history is to be overcome, and we are to emerge with our own forms of knowledge.

I have jettisoned almost all of the books I acquired in graduate school, replacing them with other editions or with books that reflect new interests. But the Faulkner–Eliot nexus abides, and I don't see how I could have gone forward without them.

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THE APOTHEOSIS OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

To use one of William Faulkner's favourite words, I think of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) as an *apotheosis.* When I first started reading Faulkner's novels I did so in chronological order, beginning with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). *Absalom* was, therefore, the sixth Faulkner novel I read and, although by that time I was already firmly hooked, I remember the experience as a consolidation. Both in style and in content, Faulkner's fictional universe expanded for me very early on in that reading. From the start, *Absalom*'s interwoven narrative voices wrestle with the story of Thomas Sutpen, Yoknapatawpha's "biggest single landowner and cotton-planter," before his property is almost completely lost due to the events of the Civil War. Sutpen's tenacity, ruthlessness, and cruelty in creating his fortune horrify and fascinate his community for generations, even long after his death. It was through the complexity of Faulkner's style – the nested narratives all trying and failing to encapsulate the import of this life – that I realized that where Faulkner had in earlier novels emphasized profound interiority, the key to this novel would be the irreducible interconnectivity of people, places, and times. The opening pages of *The Sound and the Fury* centre around Benjy Compson's experience of watching golfers "hitting" in the distance, while he compulsively remembers the loss of his beloved sister, Caddy. The outset of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) focusses on the similarly personal perspective of Darl Bundren, who is faced with the equally shattering loss of his mother, Addie.[1] One opening passage concerning the Sutpen story in *Absalom*, however, reads as follows:

[1] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Vintage, 2004).

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It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land … and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which … should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only – (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) – and died.[2]

In these few lines Quentin Compson's narrative, which seeks to simplify the extreme complexity of Sutpen's life story, is qualified and self-qualified numerous times to account not only for the personally embittered voice of Rosa Coldfield but also for the antebellum layer of southern history which Rosa represents. The prolonging of this intermixture of complementary and competing narrative voices across the whole novel speaks to Faulkner's deepening interest at the time of writing in the ways that the voices of the past (and of diverse places) interact around and within the stories we tell.

There is broad agreement on the novel's importance as a manifestation of a broadening and deepening of Faulkner's engagement with the implications of material geography and history. This was an undertaking that Faulkner, in the mid-1930s, found himself only newly equipped to tackle. As *A Dark House* he set the project aside and, as a respite from the very onerous challenges it presented, he wrote the novel *Pylon* (1935), which is set in a fictionalized New Orleans and tells of the emergent social worlds that aviation had made possible in the eccentric lives of its characters.[3] As scholars have observed, notably Michael Zeitlin, Faulkner's non-Yoknapatawpha tale of mythic, heroic, quite literally unearthly barnstormers is no mere ancillary.[4] In *Pylon*'s expanded scope, however, I see an example of *Absalom*'s pervasive influence.

In my reading experience, *Absalom* has been Faulkner's great catalyst. The novel triggers for me a reactionary change that activates elements latent in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*,[5] with their focus on family, dynasty, and tradition, and *Light in August* (1932) with its acute, though more microcosmic, concern with race and racist violence. *Absalom* is a novel that initiates a globalizing, historicizing trend in Faulkner's fiction which builds upon his intimate portraits of the psychological, emotional, limitedly social worlds of the Compsons, the Bundrens, and Joe Christmas. The text, however, anchors this focus on the personal, subjective, lived experience of single characters into a nexus of time and place. It concerns the deep history of Mississippi, the South, the mid-continent, and their explicit wider connections to Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa.

This vision of global zones of contact and interconnectivity, and continuities across deep history and even deep time, is one I read as present though muted before *Absalom*. As a reader of Faulkner, it is only through this great novel that I was first able to access those hidden insights in the earlier work. In later texts, such a view of history and geography is far more explicitly explored. *Go Down, Moses* (1942), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) all provide us with a

[2] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (London: Vintage, 2005, 9).
[3] William Faulkner, *Pylon* (New York: Vintage, 2011).
[4] Michael Zeitlin, *Faulkner, Aviation, and Modern War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022); Zeitlin, "*Pylon*, Joyce, and Faulkner's Imagination," in Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and the Artist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 181–207.
[5] William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (London: Vintage, 1995).

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panoramic perspective on race, racism, patrimony, and the whole formation of southern culture stretching back into the very distant past, to the birth of the United States itself and far further to the primordial, ahistorical, or prehistorical birth of folk cultures, mythic structures, and a sense of origins lost to time. *Absalom*, inaugurating this trend, roots in their nineteenth-century contexts its concerns with southern family, dynasty, traditions of plantocracy and slavery, and the race thinking and racism subtending such systems. Through the multiply narrated life of Thomas Sutpen a broad sweep of nineteenth-century American and world history is revealed. The narrative also uncovers the plural constitution of geographies, races, social classes, polities, and networks of kinship. Born in the mountains of western Virginia in 1807, long before the formation of *West Virginia*, Sutpen is nearly coterminous with a century in which certain political and racial fluidities or hybridities in the mid-continent ossified into the rigid essentialisms that the twentieth-century United States would inherit. At the time of Sutpen's birth the ink would still have been wet on the Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark had only very recently completed their western expedition. France, Spain, and Native peoples were being crowded out, United States imperialism was on the rise, and racial and cultural exceptionalism was donning new forms. The very ideas of racial difference and the clear anxiety around miscegenation which are central to *Absalom* are ideas shaped by the material conditions of Sutpen's lifetime. The driving terror in the novel of those "Jim Bonds" set "to conquer the western hemisphere" is a condition that rests upon very distinct historical and geographical foundations.[6]

It is for this reason that Sutpen so fascinates me and it is why I consider this novel to be the epitome of Faulkner's achievement because of the ways in which it seeks to reconstitute the narrative of his life. Sutpen's story is tragic because it is inevitable, because his *design* is not his own but one passed to him through his necessary interactions with time and place. Rosa Coldfield will suffer more than four decades of shame, incomprehension, and a sense of disgust and betrayal after Sutpen proposes marriage to her following his loss of his second wife, Ellen, Rosa's sister, and the disappearance of his son, Henry. What is intolerable to Rosa is not the prospect of marriage but the inhuman dimension of Sutpen's attitude to such a relationship. She only refuses Sutpen when he asks for them to "breed together for test and sample and if [they had] a boy they would marry."[7] It was not, however, Rosa's "ogre," Sutpen as seen through the lens of decades of personal resentment, who first devised the plan of riches, social status, and a racially homogeneous dynasty. Rather, such aims derive from the iniquitous treatment of the man who harbours and propagates them. There is, his personal history tells us, a subaltern Sutpen, a boy born in a cramped log cabin, in an impoverished region, to "a Scottish woman who … never did quite learn to speak English," whose "trouble was innocence" of the very structures of oppression that he will one day seek to master.[8] His sugar plantation in Haiti and his securing an heir through Eulalia Bon fails only because the *design* he had internalized during his childhood in the Tidewater plantations excluded the possibility of building kinship bonds across racial lines.

Early nineteenth-century stratifications of race and class, unknown to Sutpen in his native mountain home before he encountered the plantation system, come to govern his actions deterministically. After Eulalia and their son are abandoned by Sutpen on

[6] Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, 378. [7] Ibid., 177. [8] Ibid., 240, 220.

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these racist grounds the events are already set in motion that will lead to Charles Bon's threat of miscegenation and incest through marriage to his half-sister Judith. This in turn causes Bon's half-brother Henry to murder him and disappear following the killing. It further leads to Sutpen's failure to reignite his hopes of a dynasty with the unwilling Rosa and to his final attempt with Milly Jones, which provokes Milly's father Wash to cut Sutpen down with his scythe. Finally, the chain of events results in the eventual death of Henry – Sutpen's only legitimate heir according to his deranged definitions – which amounts to the destruction of his house.

An apotheosis of Faulkner's fatalism, *Absalom, Absalom!* both stands alone and informs or fulfils artistic impulses across Faulkner's fiction. A doomed fatalism without visions of emancipatory futurities is not, however, what this novel imparts to me. My own copy, the one I read for the first time, has a small bookmark inside with these words taken from the book written on it in pen: "*if happy I can be I will, if suffer I must I can.*" I repeat the words often. They remind me of what is generative in *Absalom*. If the self is shaped by place and time so too might place and time respond to the self. That autonomy might wrest something from strict fatalism depends on a stoicism of the kind Judith Sutpen's story expresses, as she waits for her marriage to Charles Bon that will never come: willingness to brave the possibility of suffering but also an openness to happiness in spite of everything.

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