

Ambivalence and
anguish: the
inescapability of the
old south and its
destruction ...



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William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* identifies the fundamental problem of Southern history as a wretched combination of two predominant qualities: the shameful and abhorrent nature of the past, and the haunting and mythical presence of such a past in the hearts and minds of the descendants of the old South. In the essay "Faulkner and the Civil War: Myth and Reality," Douglas T. Miller argues that Faulkner often implies the retrospective "moral failings" of the old South but at the same time grants its history an immense mythic and heroic quality. "Much of Faulkner's writing is concerned with the inability of the descendants of the old order leaders to deal effectively with the modern South," writes Miller. "To some of these individuals it is the legend of the Civil War that incapacitates them from acting meaningfully in the new South" (204). Quentin Compson's mental anguish in the final pages of the novel and his subsequent suicide reflect a profound inner estrangement—the myth of the antebellum South and the cold reality of the post-bellum world colliding in the mind of one man who cannot quite come to terms with either. Quentin's long-winded and convoluted description of the South functions in the novel as a poignant commentary on the painful aura of history that exists below the Mason-Dixon line. It is something even he, a descendent of the South, simply "cannot pass" (Faulkner 139). The South is unintelligible for Quentin, yet its history has been internalized nonetheless. The stories that haunt Quentin into convulsions make the past no more lucid, but they do indicate the innate presence of the South in his soul. Miller contends there is a strong "myth-making quality of Southern memory." Quentin can internalize and access such mythical memories of a foregone era because he has been so shaped

by that era. In *Faulkner: The House Divided*, Eric J. Sundquist calls Quentin “one of the remaining fragments of Sutpen’s nightmarish design, and as such [he] continues to express the long trauma that outlived the design” (130). The narrator conveys this profound connection by dissolving the boundaries between past and present. “It was a day of listening too—the listening, the hearing in 1909 even yet mostly that which [Quentin] already knew since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning of 1833” (Faulkner 23). The juxtaposition between Quentin’s innate association with the old South and Shreve’s fundamental detachment from it explains why the outsider can never embody the varied nuances of such a past. Shreve is removed both geographically and temporally from the legend of the South that he yearns to comprehend. Charles S. Sydnor’s essay entitled “The Southern Experiment in Writing Social History” argues that historians from the South face similar difficulty when explaining their past to people removed from the Southern tradition—“people who have in some measure a different standard of values” (460). [M]uch skill and art are needed if a civilization that is gone is to be made comprehensible to men of the civilization that displaced it. Perhaps the historian can never hope to accomplish the task as well as the novelist can do it. At best, the historian may make a profound and penetrating analysis of a culture, but he is rarely able to make it breathe and move before the eyes of another generation of men (Sydnor 460). Faulkner’s own work both mirrors and emphasizes this inability to translate certain aspects of history across regional lines. In the novel, Quentin—a man separated by time but not origin—tells Shreve: “You can’t understand it. You

would have to be born there” (Faulkner 289). In agreement, Shreve says that Southerners have “ something [his] people haven’t got”—the internal phantom of a past so repugnant that it can never quite be forgotten. “[I]f we have got it, it happened long ago across the water and so now there ain’t anything to look at every day and remind us of it” (Faulkner 289). The “ something” Shreve describes is that certain and stubborn essence that makes the South, the haunting past that has lived decades beyond the Civil War. Sundquist contends that Faulkner’s entire work “ is permeated by an aura of decay and failed magnificence—of a grand design gone wrong through the sins of the fathers” (97). More than a lasting problem, Shreve describes the Southern curse as eternal: “[A]s long as your children’s children produce children you won’t be anything but a descendent of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge at Manassas” (Faulkner 289). No matter how many generations arise, the origins and roots will always trace back to that ill-fated era. The curse is a blood curse—and there is no blotting out the history of the South. In an essay entitled “ The Ever-Vanishing South,” Charles P. Roland notes that Southern fiction often “ swarms” with long family lineages that go on ad infinitum: “ The strengths and weaknesses of the present generation are seen as a legacy from its forebears” (12). In the individual case of Thomas Sutpen and his legatees, the sins and threats of miscegenation and incest pervade the generations and persevere with the life of Jim Bond, leading Quentin to ponder the infinity of memory. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached to a narrow umbilical cord to the next pool

which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old inevitable rhythm (Faulkner 210). The soft "ripples" in Quentin's metaphor deviate from the intense reality of his own internal conflict: "[Quentin] began to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably until he could even heard the bed" (Faulkner 288). Even though Quentin explicitly states, "I'm not cold," Shreve offers Quentin coats and blames the cool climate of the Northeast; he cannot fathom that Quentin's "violent and uncontrollable" spasms might have originated from a deep-seeded conflict of self spurred by the vestiges of his history. Unlike Shreve, who has nothing "to look at everyday" to remind him of the past, Quentin must face himself and grapple with his innate, albeit temporally distant, relationship with the South. The unintelligible nature of Quentin's own history spurs his subsequent mental torment. When Shreve questions his understanding of the history, Quentin appears markedly ambivalent: "I don't know ... Yes, of course I understand it ... I don't know" (Faulkner 289). The South is at once ubiquitous and elusive. "What is it?" asks Shreve, "Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wrath-like and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago?" (Faulkner 289). Shreve's choice of the word "cease" emphasizes the crux of his confusion: not only did the "happenings" occur fifty years ago, but they also ostensibly ceased, concluded. Quentin's internal struggles prove, however, that the

Civil War was no panacea for the problems of the South, and the conflict yielded no catharsis. At the conclusion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, there is little resolution for Quentin either. Quentin's failure to understand his own past—one that he is inextricably and inescapably tied up in—contributes to a form of self-estrangement that he cannot overcome. He is neither synonymous with his past nor fully removed enough to function as a true member of his present. Quentin's mental "miscegenation" reflects the debacle of slavery and the war itself, which Sundquist argues "makes Clytie neither slave nor free and makes Charles Bon neither slave nor son nor brother" (114). This form of "improbable marriage ... creates the extraordinary psychological and stylistic turbulence in Faulkner's reimagining of Quentin's dilemma" (Sundquist 111). Zygmunt Bauman, author of *Modernity and Ambivalence*, defines the stranger as an "undecidable" who "disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance: he is physically close while remaining spiritually remote" (60). Quentin's existence hinges on the nostalgic yet horrifying past of Sutpen and the old South to the extent that he cannot fully align with the physical reality of living in the 20th century. Indeed, one of the subtlest—and most thorny—difficulties inherent in Southern history is the "cultural difference between the old South and modern America" (Sydnor 460). In many ways, Quentin is torn between two worlds. Contrary to Abraham Lincoln's vision in his House Divided speech, Quentin's past impedes his being "all one thing, or all the other." He is mentally unsound because he encompasses the old South yet contemporaneously exists in 1909. Quentin's breakdown is based on his inability to strike the "balance between nostalgia and rage" necessary to

lead a complete and contented life; he instead occupies both (Sundquist 112). Says Bauman: "Oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyze them" (56). Quentin's ambiguous response to Shreve's question about his own comprehension of the South signals the novel's conclusion, where Quentin ardently yet unpersuasively maintains that he does not hate the South. Shreve's initial inquiry about the nature of the South functions as a precursor to Quentin's psychological deterioration and consequent death in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Shreve's loaded questions lead Quentin "through an agonizing rehearsal of Thomas Sutpen's flawed design, through the might have been that had to be, and bring him to the threshold of his suicide" (Sundquist 100). "Tell about the South," Shreve asks. "What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all" (Faulkner 142). Quentin attempts to answer the questions in his detailed account of Sutpen's Hundred and the consequences such an abomination necessarily caused, yet by the novel's conclusion he realizes he can never fully explain the South to someone like Shreve. Even more troubling is Shreve's final question, "Why do they live at all?" Although Quentin does not explicitly give an answer, the response lies in Charles Bon's letter to Judith. [W]ithin this sheet of paper you now hold the best of the old South which is dead, and the words you read were written upon it with the best ... of the North which has conquered and will therefore, whether it likes it or not, will have to survive, I now believe that you and I are, strangely enough, included among those doomed to live (Faulkner 104-5). Quentin is doomed to live in the same way, doomed to a life dominated by the duality of one mind and one soul. Quentin's collapse reflects the "

utter fragility of the South's own vision of itself," as he has effectively stigmatized himself as a cultural stranger in the post-bellum world (Sundquist 99). Bauman defines stigma as "an otherwise innocuous trait"—such as Quentin's bond with history—that "becomes a blemish, a sign of affliction, a cause of shame ... eminently fit for the task of immobilizing the stranger in his identity of the excluded Other" (67-8). In asking about the South, Shreve indirectly implies and exposes Quentin's innate cultural difference—a flaw Quentin himself does not recognize until the conclusion of the novel when he finds "that contagion [has spread] to his bedroom in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1910" (Sundquist 129). Bauman asserts that stigmatized individuals often "go out of their way to rid and suppress everything which makes them distinct from rightful members of the community ... to guarantee their reclassification as insiders" (71). Quentin lacks such social flexibility because the essence of his stigma is the inescapable past embedded in his very being. To achieve full domestication, the stranger must "demonstrate the absence of old abomination," says Bauman. "To prove the absence of a trait is an endemically inconclusive task [because] to unmake the past is downright impossible." Faced with the inability of this task, Quentin hopelessly resolves to "unmake" his present—and future—by committing suicide in 1910. Works Cited Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1991. Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom*. Vintage International: New York, 1990. Miller, Douglas T. "Faulkner and the Civil War: Myth and Reality." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Part 1. (Summer, 1963) pp. 200-209 Roland, Charles P. "The Ever-Vanishing South." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol.

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