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The Unconscious and Its Environs

Though it has since been described as one of the most impressive achievements of literary high modernism, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* was treated, upon publication in 1936, as one of the movement's most dismal failures, as leftist reviewers argued that the novel represented the inevitable results of interaction between a psyche and a stagnating culture. Faulkner's narrative, and even his mind, appeared to waver futilely within insurmountable boundaries: on the one hand, the text represented how desires and anxieties could be repressed in static realms of unconscious imagery, and on the other, how these affects could be banned from cognition by the fantastic, stultifying claims of regional ideology. Thus *Absalom, Absalom!*, in the words of Philip Rahv, represented an "ideological dream of history" and functioned to "mystif[y]" the "historic process"; it further suggested that the author himself was "[h]emmed in by his own consciousness, . . . beat[ing] his fists against its walls, finding a forced release only in violence and melodrama."¹ Modeling forms of subjectivity so affixed to their internal dilemmas that they could not effectively interact with their surrounding social arena—no matter how clearly that context might contribute to their psychological problems—*Absalom, Absalom!* seems to describe how psychological dynamics could entrap individuals in a largely asocial, even allotemporal, existence—one somehow isolated from larger social structures.² In this sense, it exemplified the kind of modernist experimentation that—both at the time and since—has been considered intrinsically apolitical, because it creates an isolated realm in which to contemplate "anomie," angst, defeatism and alienation.³ What is most upsetting for Rahv, then, is that Faulkner's deep exploration of such psychological states may actually function to elide the social

and political problems that contribute to such problems.

Notably, such criticisms could be—and today often are—applied to another form of discourse focused on subjective states: because psychoanalysis typically focuses on the mental life of individuals, it constitutes, in one critic’s argument, “a prescription for a politics of quietism, fatalism and defeat.”⁴ And though Faulkner’s initial critics did not extend their complaints concerning his work to all discourses concerning subjectivity, that may be because a third term—that of the region—intervened. Rather than seeing Faulkner’s aesthetic style as a method of representing subjectivity—hence, leading them to interrogate whether such a focus might be inherently apolitical—they attributed his aesthetic style to a specifically white southern form of subjectivity. Complaints concerning the psychology of white southern writers were, after all, somewhat standard in the period, from Ellen Glasgow’s complaint, in 1935, that the younger generation dwelt perhaps too solely in “despair,” to Wilbur Cash’s claim, in 1941, that their work reflected hate and love for the region, as well as “defense mechanisms.”⁵ But for Cash, these figures constituted only particular types of a general phenomenon—*The Mind of the South*—with its various symptoms, and this understanding of a monolithic and potentially immutable southern psychosocial pattern was widespread during the 1930s and 40s.

Such conclusions resulted not solely from perceptions but also from methodological principles concerning how to assess the potential for social change, and they concerned not only southern whites but also southern African Americans. Many social scientists understood the region’s racial hierarchies as a kind of “caste system,” and the belief that such social “mores” must largely determine personality appeared even in the sociological efforts of a researcher—John Dollard in 1935—who was manifestly committed to observing the psychoanalytic dynamics shaping individual cases (analyzing dreams, etc.).⁶ Though his *Caste and Class in a*

Southern Town acknowledges some variation—particularly among middle class whites and African Americans—his method leads him to posit generalized psychological “gains” attending each group living amid segregation. He concludes, for instance, that where whites gain a target for hostility that allows them to “drain off” the inevitable frustrations of social life, the “lower-class Negro” is “more free to enjoy, not merely free to act in an external physical sense, but actually freer to embrace important gratifying experiences.”⁷ Further, analyzing the “parent-child symbol” invoked by paternalist racism, he determines that these attitudes are “powerful bindings . . . between the castes . . . one of the strongest barriers which a real economic democracy in the South would have to face.”⁸ In sum, Dollard provided a psychoanalytic account of how southern racial segregation, by exacting various defenses and accommodations from the groups whose lives it shaped, had effectively formed their mental and emotional life. Still, in his insistence that the region’s “system of subjugation . . . is, for all its seeming firmness, shaky and contradictory,” Dollard’s account is, in relative terms, optimistic: other caste system theorists assumed that, because white and black southerners were so acculturated to racial segregation, substantial transformation in the region might be impossible.⁹

In this context, then, Rahv’s concerns about *Absalom, Absalom!* appear quite trenchant. To recap, the subjectivities staged in that novel *do* find it difficult to interact in their social milieu. Further, by Quentin’s own account, the white southern way of being is not only pathological—“stubborn backward looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever”—but also pathogenic: from “twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air,” Quentin, who never experienced the “fever” of the Civil War, is himself a “barracks filled” with ghosts.¹⁰ And not only did Faulkner’s work—in reception, if not intrinsically—support perceptions of a fixed southern social order (a problem, it must be noted, in which

critical reviews were also complicit), but that pattern continued with the following critical embrace of Faulkner's work, which did not so much rebut previous interpretations as revalue their accounts of backward-looking white southerners.

Certainly, that period was followed by decades in which scholars discovered a more productively critical Faulkner, one whose subjective studies revealed the process by which conservative ideologies or forms of identification are inculcated. In the late twentieth century, Faulkner's dense depictions of psychological development and fixation provided opportunities to deconstruct ideologies of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and perhaps most belatedly, region. But, in a sense, it is precisely the semantic and psychological richness of Faulkner's texts—not to mention the careful, persuasive arguments of these scholars who observed the process of social construction as depicted there—for which Faulkner is often currently criticized. In such accounts, Faulkner not only locates racial division at the base of conscious and unconscious development—much as Dollard did—but he also threatens to naturalize such fixed psychological structures. Patricia Yaeger, for example, argues that “his mystifications of oedipal angst and miscegenation have . . . [made] race-mixing the only game in town, *the epic*, underlying structure driving the whiteness of the American dream” (emphasis in original).¹¹

Thus Faulkner now appears the twenty-first century version of a retrogressive modernist. While modernism more generally is currently, in Jennifer Wicke's terms, being positively “rebranded,” such efforts often try to avoid the apparent “cul-de-sac of high modernism,” where Faulkner continues to be located.¹² In his myth-laden explorations of regional history, intricate prose style, and creation of “his own” fictional county, Faulkner seems readily to align with the grand narrative, the epic, the autonomous work of art, the apolitical or conservative elite—despite the fact that this image of the artist has, I think, been persuasively complicated by

previous criticism.¹³ Notably, Faulkner's "stock"—to use another of Wicke's metaphors—has fared much better in inter- or trans-American literary studies, where he is openly claimed by Latin American writers.¹⁴ Residing at a border—thematically, stylistically, culturally, and to a great extent geographically—Faulkner alerts us to a history of movement and exchange, perhaps helping to ward off critical anxieties that his work might encode a kind of fixity. But even here, Faulkner's project is associated with the threat of epic and closure: as Edouard Glissant explains in *Faulkner, Mississippi*, "Epic literature seeks to fortify a community's identity and sense of destiny," and this mode is regularly present in Faulkner—though in an "erratic and disturbed" way, which "touch[es] on veiled or buried questions."¹⁵

Notably, Glissant sees Faulkner's chronotopes and characters much as Rahv did: small Yoknapatawpha constitutes "the world," in a time characterized by repetition, deferral, compression and vertiginous eternity, and its people suffer—become, in Glissant's terms, "extreme and monstrous"—from their placement in this literally maddening society.¹⁶ But for Glissant, this "vertigo" is instructive: not merely a regional failing, such psychological distress appears, to him, endemic to the continuing process of Creolization—"the distended, naked world that clashes, kneads, and mixes."¹⁷ To understand Faulkner, then, is to recognize the reverberations of that process in the psyche, and also the reverberations of the psyche in social networks. Observing the collapse of epic in Faulkner helps us to relinquish our desires for such a closed and static world, "*affecting our conscious and contemplative presence in this world-totally*."¹⁸ Crucially, though, Glissant never considers the possibility that Faulkner's characters—or actual southerners—could be thoroughly acculturated to accept such a restrictive world in the first place: the novelist's chief failing, in his opinion, is that Faulkner's "Blacks are permanency itself."¹⁹ As Barbara Ladd points out, Glissant understands the southeastern U.S. as

the site of a long history of cultural and racial mixing and conflict, such that the absolute categories established in southern ideology never suffice to contain individual desires or identities: for this reason, Faulknerian figures manifest, in psychological terms, a “gaping wound.”²⁰ But for readers less confident that such ongoing psychological conflict may be typical even in restrictive societies, Faulkner’s southern epic material suggests a closed world in which what we might like to consider madness is rendered not only typical but attractive: in Walter Benn Michaels’ words, “He was one of the great metaphysicians of race, able so thoroughly to intertwine it with class, money, and sex that his best novels make a world without race . . . look figuratively as well as literally pallid.”²¹

Unsurprisingly, then, what we see when we look at Faulkner’s representations—whether dense, static, rationalized hierarchies or volatile, splintering, unstable social systems—depends on our methodological predilections and assumptions. But my sense is that, for many readers, regionalized expectations still obscure how insistently Faulkner’s narratives plunge characters into psychological conflict, leaving them vacillating between belief and desire, apparent acceptance and unconscious revolt. Presented with a figure who fits a “type,” we may disregard the ongoing—and unpredictable—dynamics that shape that figure’s relationship with the social world. Quentin Compson, for one brief but critically central example, assures us immediately that he is stuck in a regional past, and as he becomes increasingly entranced by the stories of the nineteenth-century Sutpens, he seems truly to embody the backward-looking southerner for whom he has so often served as a scholarly model.²² Critics do often suggest that the Sutpen saga—with its triangle of erotic and violent relationships among a brother, his friend, and the sister that friend might marry—serves as a kind of screen memory for Quentin, who, as we learn from *The Sound and the Fury* (published in 1929), sought to disrupt the relationship between his

sister and her lover, disavowing his desire for that lover—and also purportedly protecting the classed and racial status of the family—through insisting on his incestuous and possessive desire for that sister. The degree to which these events, occurring shortly before those in *Absalom, Absalom!*, trouble Quentin is clear from how they assert themselves in his consciousness hours before his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*. But critics do not note—to my knowledge—how, in the later novel, Quentin’s father invites him to recognize analogs to his own experience in the Sutpen story.

Rather than simply succumbing to a regional screen memory, Quentin responds to a tale that has been precisely calibrated to assure him both of the transparency of his desires and of their destructive nature. As Noel Polk argues, Quentin’s sexuality seems abundantly apparent to his peers, and Norman Jones suggests that even Rosa hopes that Quentin might derive some liberatory potential from her own queer history.²³ But when Jason Compson assures his son that same-sex desire might be “immediate” even among “figures . . . not dwarfed and involved [as we are] but distinct, uncomplex”—and, further, that a “country” brother and sister might readily be “seduced” by the same elegant stranger—he further associates that desire with murder, loss, and familial disintegration: desiring his sister’s fiancé, Henry “loved grieved and killed.”²⁴ Given the disciplinary implications of this hours-long account, it is no wonder that Quentin “hear[s] . . . without listening”; what is more remarkable is that he enters into a reconstruction of this tale with his Harvard roommate Shreve, seeking to overcome the omnipotence of his father’s voice and to “overpass to love”—to find some bearable motive in this tale of loss and betrayal, and discovering, at least, some alignment between the working-class Dalton Ames, the mixed-race Charles Bon, and, at some remove, the upper-class white men who love them.²⁵ His limited, erratic, but occasionally passionate efforts suggest not an always-already backward looking and

status-conscious white southerner, or an inevitably suicidal closeted gay teen, but rather a young man perhaps perpetually in the process of trying to resolve the powerfully conflicting forces of ideology and desire.

This difference between static distorted “type” and actively tortured psyche seems central to critical assessments of Faulkner’s aesthetic project, and it emerges not so much between psychoanalytic interpretations and others as between different understandings of how psychoanalytic dynamics might function in representation and reading: whether they help us understand how and what a person has become and will now, implicitly, remain, or whether they provide insight into how and what a person experiences, which may perhaps, eventually, change. Faulkner’s characters, embedded in text, cannot pursue such alteration, but they do demonstrate that continuity can be, paradoxically, just as taxing and frenetic. Their palpable longing to work through individualized, psychological manifestations of broad social problems seems testimony not to stasis and passivity, but rather to an incipient politics—a desire to imagine more just and flexible political cultures.

¹ Philip Rahv, review of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), rpt. in *William Faulkner: The Critical Heritage*, edited by John Bassett (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 208-10. I’m using

Rahv here as a sort of synechdoche: several critics made similar complaints, though few mirrored Faulkner's gothicism so richly. See Malcolm Cowley, "Poe in Mississippi," *New Republic* (November 1936), rpt. in Bassett, 206; Lionel Trilling, "Mr. Faulkner's World," *Nation* 133 (1931): 491-2; Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 262-8; Louis Kronenberger, "Faulkner's Dismal Swamp," *Nation* 146 (1938): 212, 214; Alfred Kazin, "Faulkner: The Rhetoric and the Agony," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 18 (Summer 1942): 398-402; Maxwell Geismar, *Writers in Crisis: The American Novel Between Two Wars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), 143-83. See also Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., "Faulkner and the Democratic Crisis," *Faulkner and Ideology: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1992*, eds. Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), 70-72.

² For an account of allotemporality in fiction, and in the cultural imagination, see Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 212, 220, 232.

³ Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism," *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 132; Georg Lukacs, "The Ideology of Modernism," *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 24-40; Allen Tate, "The Man of Letters in the Modern World," *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968), 7-8. For an account and refutation of the critical complaint that modernists' temporal experimentations, often described as "spatial form," conflict with progressive politics, see Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 31-45.

⁴ Paul Gordon, 'Psychoanalysis and racism: the politics of defeat', *Race and Class* 42.2, April/June 2001, 31.

⁵ Ellen Glasgow, "Heroes and Monsters," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 12 (May 4, 1935), 35; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941; New York: Vintage, 1991), 377.

⁶ John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 3rd ed. (1937; Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1957), 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 443, 393.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 437-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 26; Oliver C. Cox, "The Modern Caste School of Race Relations," *Social Forces* 21.2 (1942): 218-26.

¹⁰ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; New York: Vintage International, 1990), 4.

¹¹ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 97.

¹² Jennifer Wicke, Appreciation, Depreciation: Modernism's Speculative Bubble," *Modernism/Modernity* 8.3 (2001): 394-5.

¹³ For one list of devalued modernisms, see Susan Stanford Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 8.3 (2001): 493. For the general lack of current critical attention to previous studies of Faulkner, see Catherine Gunther Kodat, "Faulkner and 'Faulkner,'" *American Literary History* 15.1 (2003): 188-192.

¹⁴ For Faulkner's significance to Spanish American writers, for example, see Deborah N. Cohn, "Faulkner and Spanish America: Then and Now," *Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century*, 50-67.

¹⁵ Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*, trans. Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear (1996; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 18.

¹⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷ Ibid., 220.

¹⁸ Ibid., 218.

¹⁹ Ibid., 59.

²⁰ Ibid., 22. See Barbara Ladd, “William Faulkner, Edouard Glissant, and a Creole Poetics of History and Body in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *A Fable*,” in *Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century*, 32-34.

²¹ Walter Benn Michaels, “*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Difference between White Men and White Men,” *Faulkner in the Twenty-First Century: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 2000*, eds. Robert W. Hamblin and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 151.

²² Faulkner, 276. For the degree to which Quentin has provided a model for white male southern identity, see Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 106.

²³ Noel Polk, “How Shreve Gets into Quentin’s Pants,” manuscript, 5; Norman W. Jones, “Coming Out through History’s Hidden Love Letters in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” *American Literature* 76.2 (2004): 349-50.

²⁴ Faulkner, 71, 77, 76, 77.

²⁵ Faulkner, 102.