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**ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND THE RIPPLE-EFFECT OF
THE PAST**

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Bringing one's present experiences to bear in reconstructing the past is an inherent given in the practice of the historian. It is a vivifying process that integrates the static remnants of the past with the present, thus confirming the interrelatedness of time. R. G. Collingwood notes that

To the historian, the activities whose memory he is studying are not spectacles to be watched, but experiences to be lived through in his own mind; they are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own.¹

In *Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner allows his characters to reconstruct the rise and fall—the history—of the Sutpen family and illustrates, through their various retellings, how such characters regard and respond to the past, and, ultimately, to the present and future as well. This paper intends to give a critical overview of the major characters' conception of time and history, via their tellings of the Sutpen story.

Faulkner himself often spelled out his conception of time and history, fostering the view that past, present, and future are essentially interrelated:

time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was—only is.²

In other words, history comprises a continuum of time, in which the past is never sealed off from the present but is rather contiguous with it. In the novel Quentin Compson, too, acknowledges this fluid condition of time:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripple moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-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

*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 ineradicable rhythm.*³

The seamless quality of time suggested here is further explained by Faulkner: "There isn't any time....There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity."⁴ Faulkner acknowledges indebtedness for his conceptualization of time to Henri Bergson, who similarly characterized the interrelatedness of time as a "continuous flux,"⁵ adding that "I consider duration as the multiplicity of moments bound to each other by a unity which goes through them like thread."⁶ It becomes apparent in the book that the actors in and narrators of the Sutpen story have different reactions to the contiguousness of time. To begin this analysis, there are characters who try to arrest or manipulate the continuous nature of time.

Rosa Coldfield is one such character whose actions attempt to arrest changes brought about by time. Rosa virtually ceases to be a participant in a full life—having a present or future—because since the events at Sutpen's Hundred, which occurred around the time of the Civil War, she has spent the next forty-three years looking backward to that period trying to make sense of it. Like one of Sherwood Anderson's grotesques, her life is locked into a position of looking backward in time, to figure out how she *might have lived* in the present had past events turned out differently. As she tells Quentin before they head out to Sutpen's Hundred in 1909: "*there is that might-have-been which is the single rock we cling to above the maelstrom of unbearable reality*" (186). The events surrounding the Civil War become the only life Rosa ever knows; even at age twenty, in 1866, she recalls that she seemed to live in that moment alone, without having had a childhood, since "*the world came [to her] not even as living echo but as dead incomprehensible shadow*" (202). Mr. Compson also describes her childhood, in that "grim mausoleum air of puritan righteousness," as being composed ironically of an "absence of youth" (72).

What she wants to come to grips with about the past is why she did not get married (to either Charles Bon or Thomas Sutpen) and why the Southern way of life disintegrated, both of which are related to and take place around the War. In her talking *at* Quentin (there is really no conversation, only a monologue) she imagines that there might have been wedding vows between Bon and herself. However, after Bon's murder by Henry, whatever hopes she had had become dashed. She hears the shot's echo and interprets it this way:

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That sound was merely the sharp and final clap-to of a door between us and all that was, all that might have been—a retroactive severance of the stream of event: a forever crystallized instant in imponderable time (197, emphasis added).

Thus the “*arras-veil before what-is-to-be*” remains docile for Rosa, for she chooses not to “*make the rending gash*” in it (177). Regarding the Southern way of life, in her looking up to Sutpen as a Civil War hero, she considers him and other such Southerners as having “fought for four honorable years for the soil and traditions of the land where she had been born” (18). The consequences of the South’s Lost Cause are seen by Rosa to have been, in hindsight, a “holocaust which had taken parents security and all from her” (18).

That she is so vehemently jaded towards Sutpen for most of her recollection and that she is so convinced of the impossibility of taking action in life after the War demonstrate how her obsessive reconstruction of the past is, for the most part, fed by emotion rather than reason. Rosa says as much herself to Quentin:

That is the substance of remembering—sense, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel—not mind, not thought: there is no such thing as memory: the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream (178).

As someone who contents herself with living in that “crystallized instant” of the past, Rosa is prepared to die virtually after she meets Clytie and Henry Sutpen after forty-three years, for she is able, for a moment, to re-live the past in actuality when she pushes aside Clytie as she did forty-three years earlier to run upstairs and see what lies behind the bedroom door. Instead of confronting antiquated ghosts, as Mr. Compson suggests in his letter to Quentin at Harvard, she meets instead “*actual people...[the] actual recipients of the hatred and the pity*” (470). The reconstructed past that embodies Rosa’s present comes face to face with the living remnants of the past, and we get the impression that once this meeting occurs, the two visions of the past cannot cohere for Rosa for very long.

In Ellen Coldfield we see that once Ellen achieves status and the appearance of well being, she too tries to put a stop to the natural progression of time. After being married to Sutpen for several years

and raising two children, Ellen succeeds (Mr. Compson guesses) “at last in evacuating not only the puritan heritage but reality itself;...[having] immolated outrageous husband and incomprehensible children into shades; [and] escaped at last into a world of pure illusion,” (83) a “bland region peopled by dolls,” as Mr. Compson adds (83). But of course Ellen has no control over the fluctuations of time, and so her static, Old South world-view crumbles upon any intrusions of reality. If we believe Mr. Compson’s account, what causes Ellen’s eventual dissolution is not Henry’s denial of family or the break-up of Judith and Bon’s engagement, but rather the “shock of reality entering her life” (96), which leaves her a “substanceless shell” that will be buried only two years later as a “shape” and a “recollection” (156). Judith, unlike her mother, *consciously* removes herself from a participatory life of her own after Bon’s burial and after she gives Quentin’s grandmother a letter she received from Bon. Although we see Judith does not fall to pieces like her mother, or become stagnant like Rosa—because, for example, she takes in Bon’s octoroon wife and raises his son—we do see resignation on her part: as Rosa wants to be remembered through her story’s retelling to Quentin, so Judith wants Bon’s letter to be a remembrance of “something just because it would have happened...at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once” (158). Judith resigns herself from living for a present or future and leaves an artifact behind to prove that she was once, at least, a participant in life.

In opposition to Rosa, Ellen, and Judith, we can look at Thomas Sutpen, as gleaned from all the narratives, as someone deeply committed to living in the present with, at the same time, probably more concern with molding the shape of the future. Different from others in this respect, he differs also in his regard towards the past. His humiliation at the hands of a well-dressed black servant way back in his Tidewater Virginia youth is a catalyst for Sutpen’s design, which is, basically, the erection of an impressive present and future Old South lifestyle upon the foundations of a *pre-fabricated past*. Without drawing on his real-life experiences, Sutpen plays out the role of Old South plantation owner in a rather mechanical fashion. Sutpen seems like the antebellum patriarch only in terms of the *physical props* of the role; i.e., in striving to fulfill the role so perfectly, Sutpen negates the element of human unpredictability as well as a code of values, thus transforming the role into a mere formula to be solved rationally. For how else could he just pick up and leave his household as a youth to become a man on the make in Haiti, and how else could he make a clean break from his first wife only to start from scratch again in

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Jefferson if he were concerned with more than just physical appearances? General Compson characterizes Sutpen's ignorance of values and human unpredictability as a kind of innocence,

which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out (328).

Sutpen himself illustrates his tendency to rationalize over human emotion and morality when he goes to talk to the general. In his mind he had achieved all the accouterments of a Southern gentleman; he runs through these props like items on a laundry list: "I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man" (329). That business in Haiti with his first wife, he thinks, ended cleanly upon his arrangement for support, leaving him justified to make his second attempt at achieving his design. Of course, in his second attempt he builds again a past from scratch; however, when his legitimate past impinges on the present, incarnate in his son Bon, his entire design is eventually brought to ruin. The *actual presence* of Sutpen's past is too much for its brittle, abstract replacement to bear; it collapses in part because of Sutpen's obliviousness of other people's feelings or their needs to communicate. For example, Sutpen considers Bon's appearance at his house not as a "moral retribution" but "just an old mistake in fact which a man of courage and shrewdness...could still combat if he could only find out what the mistakes had been" (334). He can adapt sufficiently to the vicissitudes of the present but necessarily fails to keep past events *in the past*. That he can adapt to changes in the present is clear by his activity in the Confederate army, which both contributes to his image of being a Southern patriarch (as even Rosa acknowledges) and ensures that his investment in Sutpen's Hundred would remain secure. But both the outcome of the war and Henry's abandonment of the family force Sutpen once again to adapt to change and start from scratch in a third attempt to achieve his design. On his third try, his actions certainly adapt to the changed present (e.g., he opens a store with Wash Jones); however, the fixed purpose of his design no longer seems in sync, for by this time his land is diminished, his standing in the community is no longer even tentatively tolerated (he refuses to ride with the "sheets and hoods"), and time itself is confounding him. He is

about sixty when he starts for the third time, and his proposal to Rosa is explicitly made only for the purpose of breeding a male heir. Finally, his very last attempt to sire a male heir with Milly fails when she gives birth to a girl. It elicits little surprise that the instrument of Sutpen's death is a rusty scythe. For though Sutpen can try to deny the past, he is helpless against the impending reality of the future, and comes to a violent death when seemingly both past and future fall in upon him in the present.

To borrow a line from Mr. Compson, Charles Bon certainly is a curious one. But Mr. Compson's pairing of Bon with Sutpen is significant:

He [Bon] came into that isolated puritan country household almost like Sutpen himself came into Jefferson: apparently complete, without background or past or childhood (114).

Rosa never sees Bon, and all that we are given of him comes from his letter to Judith, Mr. Compson's narrative, and Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of events. Because we have so few facts to go on, it may be worthwhile to consider Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction. To recall Collingwood,

The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement [sic] of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it.⁷

If we buy Quentin and Shreve's version, then, we can assume that Bon does not choose to deny his past but is simply ignorant of it. Only when he becomes involved with Henry does he yearn to find recognition of his past, by Sutpen's acknowledging him to be his son. And furthermore, only when his desire is frustrated does Bon begin to resemble his father, as seen in his willful desire to negate the past and start from scratch, a desire which is documented in his letter to Judith. For he writes to Judith that "*what WAS is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861...I must stop...thinking, remembering—mark that I do not say, hoping*" (162-63). Bon's desire to forgo the past is denied ultimately, when Henry, his closest acknowledged tie to the past, confronts him at Sutpen's Hundred and murders him.

It is worthwhile to consider Mr. Compson for a moment, for although he is not an actor in the Sutpen story, he does play a significant role in transmitting much of the Sutpen history. Mr.

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Compson's recollections fill chapters III and IV and are found also in chapters VI and VII, via Quentin's narration of Sutpen's past, as related by Quentin's grandfather. As a transmitter of history, Mr. Compson himself is conscious of the historiography involved in telling the Sutpen story and seems frustrated over the difficulty in drawing out any meaning from it:

It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting...impervious to time and inexplicable....They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest...; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but...nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene (124-25).

Mr. Compson's "chemical formula" image should recall the image that General Compson, in referring to Sutpen, uses of baking cake; that with all the right mixtures and ingredients, a nice neat little cake—or story—should, but does not, result. Mr. Compson's method of reconstruction has been faulted for being too rational. Carl Rollyson charges that Mr. Compson in this passage discounts the "interpretive processes of the mind." Rollyson goes on to say that reconstruction of the past entails far more than piecing together the artifacts of the past, that "the past is made imaginable by the intricate connections such as Mr. Compson himself is able to make between the human thoughts and activities suggested by this evidence."⁸ Larry Allums points out that Mr. Compson's reading of history remains deficient, then, because he holds himself aloof from the Sutpen history.⁹ But this point is only partly true, because Mr. Compson is still able, as Rollyson suggests, to employ his imagination to fill in gaps which the artifacts do not account for. He can become involved in the telling of the story without being overwhelmed by it. An important point to examine, then, is why much of Mr. Compson's version of events is rejected by Shreve, who supplies a fuller, more imaginative telling of the story.

Shreve, a Canadian, is explicitly an outsider in all of this. Not from the South, not even from the United States, Shreve yet sees something in the Sutpen story that “my people haven’t got.” He asks Quentin in the Harvard dorm: “What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago?” (450) Allums suggests that Shreve successfully is able to “engage and then disengage” himself from the telling,¹⁰ avoiding both the aloof extreme of Mr. Compson and the immersed extreme of Quentin. Certainly, Shreve has at first a rather playful regard of the story. (At one point he tells Quentin that the South is “better than the theatre, isn’t it. It’s better than Ben Hur, isn’t it?” [271].) And at other times that night in the dorm he slips into a playful role, and resumes such a role by the end of the night. But, as the narrator points out, his apparent flippancy is “born...of that incorrigible unsentimental sentimentality of the young which takes the form of hard and crass levity,” a levity, the narrator says later, “behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself” (343, 349). Shreve engages himself in the reconstruction at least as intensely as Quentin does. David Minter notices too that whereas Shreve may have been merely flippant at the onset of his involvement in the story, he does become involved in “full participation in remembering and recounting.”¹¹ When Shreve takes over the narration from Quentin, for example, the narrator tells us it

was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one (378).

Whether his motivations are serious or not (All we have is Shreve’s word that he is sincere: “I’m not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I don’t know how to say it better” [450].), he does offer, at least, a plausible version of the Bon-Henry-Judith connection. And it is Shreve also who consciously ties in testimony of the other narrators (Mr. Compson and Rosa) to verify or clarify his telling. That he resumes his playful bantering in the end (concerning Jim Bond and the future miscegenation of the western hemisphere) may indicate that after such an intense involvement in the reconstruction he is able ultimately to pull back from it and regain his bearings in the present.

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Quentin, on the other hand, remains in conflict with himself, and thus is unable to bridge events of the past to the living present. He alone has possessed the ultimate burden of carrying on the Sutpen history with him, from his father's narrative (and by extension, his grandfather's) and Rosa's, and developing it at length with Shreve. What is ironic is that throughout the process of accumulating these fragments of the story, Quentin has been an *unwilling historian*. He is virtually summoned by Rosa to hear her side of it and is goaded by Shreve into developing it further. He also puts off remembering what lies behind the bedroom door when he and Rosa go to Sutpen's Hundred until he can no longer put it off. Although an unwilling participant, Quentin becomes, once he is involved, engulfed in the history, affected, in fact, to such a degree by the presence of the past that he can find no bridge to cross back into the present. This is no new insight into Quentin's character. But *The Sound and the Fury* aside, we are told early in the book that Quentin has grown up in an environment that is seemingly obsessed with the past: "his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts" (9). Quentin becomes devastated as his reconstruction with Shreve progresses. After he recounts the background of Sutpen, we are told that he "had not moved, talking apparently (if to anything) to the letter lying on the open book on the table between his hands" (318), seemingly imprisoned by the artifacts set down before him, oblivious to conditions in the present. (Notice too that throughout his reconstruction with Shreve it is the burly Shreve who reacts to the frigid conditions in the room, bundling himself up like a bear, while Quentin, meanwhile, allows his coat to slip to the floor unnoticed.) It is worth emphasizing that despite his immersion in the past, Quentin is not oblivious to what is happening to him. At the same time he narrates Sutpen's background to Shreve, he tells himself

*I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already
hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again
I shall never have to never listen to anything else but this
again forever* (345).

Later, after he recounts meeting Henry face to face, he thinks to himself, "Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore" (465). He finally articulates these feelings to Shreve: "I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died" (469). Quentin's emphatic denial of Shreve's question of why he hates

the South recalls the conflict Quentin has in the first pages of the book, when he is described as two Quentins: the one (of the present) who prepares to enter Harvard, and the other Quentin "who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South" (5). Quentin is unable to be one or the other, and, ultimately, he cannot reconcile the two.

Richard Gray recognizes the problems that both the actors in and the narrators of the Sutpen history have in making connections to people before and after them, and asks, "[W]hat positive evidence is there of another way—a framework of value that will at least allow a chance of succeeding" in making these connections?¹² Rollyson provides one clue, in suggesting that Faulkner "is implying that there is a meaning in history which eludes a logical, analytical approach."¹³ It should be added that meaning might be gleaned from history by eluding also an emotional or self-conscious approach. Rosa, Ellen, Judith, even Sutpen and Bon, and certainly Quentin cannot reconcile themselves to the fluid continuum of time that is characterized by the ripples passage quoted earlier. From Faulkner's treatment of his characters we can see that their tendency either to overly rationalize the consequences of history or to become self-conscious of and immersed in history frustrates them because they cannot manipulate or live within the natural progression of time. Of course Faulkner cannot spell this out explicitly, for then he would be creating obstacles in our own reconstruction of the story. Quentin and Shreve are able to go beyond Rosa and Mr. Compson's versions of the story because of an active dialectical relationship they bring to bear in their telling; so too does Faulkner require us to engage in a kind of dialectical relationship with the text, so that we each will form our own version of the story, which inherently affirms the ripple-effect of understanding the past.

NOTES

¹*The Idea of History* (London, 1956), p. 218.

²"Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel," 1956, *Lion in the Garden*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (Lincoln, Neb., 1980), p. 255.

³*Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936 (New York, 1986), p. 326. All subsequent references to the text will be from this edition and will be found in the body of this paper.

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⁴"Interview with Loic Bouvard," 1952, *Lion in the Garden*, p. 70.

⁵*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1903, trans. T. E. Hulme (Indianapolis, 1955), p. 25.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷*The Idea of History*, p. 215.

⁸*Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner* (Ann Arbor, 1984), p. 160.

⁹"Overpassing to Love: Dialogue and Play in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *New Orleans Review*, 14: 4 (1987), 40.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹"Family, Region, and Myth in Faulkner's Fiction," *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson, 1982), p. 193.

¹²*The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South* (Baltimore, 1977), p. 253.

¹³*Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*, p. 164.