

“Bullets in the Dining Room Table”: The (Im)possibility of Mending Wounds in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

Merle Williams

Summary

This article focuses on the significance of wounding in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*. Drawing on the thought of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, wounds are shown to be imprinted in the very fabric of Southern life, as they are impregnated in the *fleshly* tissue that chiasmatically intertwines the perceiver with the perceived world. At the same time, Faulkner’s South is deemed to be haunted by the spectres of its violent past, as understood in terms of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. The mutual enfolding of these two aspects of the novel produces the network of tensions informing the text. In their extended narrative, Quentin and Shreve seek to interpret Southern experience by recapturing the capacity for transcendent choice and action that might have shaped the seemingly impenetrable misfortunes of the Sutpen family. Quentin, in particular, also attempts to render justice to this dislocated history of suffering. However, the redemptive endeavour fails, and the novel remains shadowed by the tragic losses implicit both in its title and in the proper names of its characters.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op die betekenis van verwonding in William Faulkner se *Absalom, Absalom!*. In navolging van die Franse fenomenoloog, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, word aangetoon dat wonde afgestempel is op die wese van die lewe in die Suide. Die *vlesige* weefsel hiervan is oortrek met wonde wat die waarnemer en die wêreld wat waargeneem word chiasmatis met mekaar vervleg. Daarby word Faulkner se Suide beskou as 'n streek wat gekwel word deur skimme uit 'n gewetddadige verlede na analogie van Jacques Derrida se *Specters of Marx*. Die ineenstrengeling van hierdie twee aspekte lei tot die netwerk van spanning wat die teks deurweek. In hulle uitgebreide narratief poog Quentin en Shreve om die Suidelike ervaring te interpreteer deur die vermoë tot 'n transendentale keuse en handeling te herwin, 'n vermoë wat moontlik die skynbaar ondeurgrondelike teëspoed van die Sutpen-gesin veroorsaak het. Quentin in die besonder poog om reg te laat geskied aan hierdie uit verband gerukte lydensgeskiedenis. Die poging tot versoening misluk egter en 'n skadu huiwer steeds oor die roman vanweë tragiese verliese wat in die titel en name van die karakters geïmpliseer word.

There is no shortage of physical, psychological and social wounds in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. Thomas Sutpen, whose legend lies at the centre of the novel's multiple narratives, is savagely injured in his attempt to suppress a slave uprising in Haiti. General Compson loses an arm amid the carnage of the American Civil War. Henry Sutpen kills his half-brother, Charles Bon, on putative grounds ranging from bigamy to incest to miscegenation. Miss Rosa lives for nearly half a century in the aftermath of an aborted marriage proposal, which amounts to little more than a crude demand that she bear Thomas Sutpen a son and heir. Bon's octoroon mistress leads a twilight existence of luxury, clouded and constrained by patriarchal domination and racist exclusion. Her son, Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon, resorts to self-destructive aggression in his struggle to live out his mixed-race heritage, which renders him neither white nor black, neither master nor slave. More broadly, the entire community of Jefferson is torn from its moorings by the consequences of the Civil War, as ruined plantations slide still further into desolation and the disaffected landowners threaten to initiate a campaign of intimidation that presages the rides of the Ku Klux Klan. The entire text seems to be permeated with traumatic upheaval, loss and the corrosive self-alienation of the principal characters. At the end of her first monologue, Miss Rosa describes a scene that vividly evokes the ways in which the woundedness of Faulkner's narrative is not only inscribed within individual consciousness, but also impregnated in the substance of the body in its daily interactions with the Southern environment. Thomas Sutpen's slaves have been engaged in one of those regular bouts of brutal wrestling without rules that attract an avid audience of white and black gamblers or curious male speculators, when Ellen Sutpen realises that her young children, Henry and Judith, are missing.

Ellen running down the hill from the house, bareheaded, in time to hear the sound, the screaming, hearing it while she still ran in the darkness and before the spectators knew that she was there, hearing it even before it occurred to one spectator to say, "It's a horse" then "it's a woman" then "My God, it's a child" – ran in, and the spectators falling back to permit her to see Henry plunge out from among the negroes who had been holding him, screaming and vomiting – not pausing, not even looking at the faces which shrank back away from her as she knelt in the stable filth to raise Henry and not looking at Henry either but at *him* [i.e. Thomas] as he stood there with even his teeth showing beneath his beard now and another negro wiping the blood from his body with a tow sack.

(Faulkner 1990: 21)¹

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1. All references to *Absalom, Absalom!* (Faulkner 1990) are to the corrected text of the novel, edited under the direction of Noel Polk on the basis of the first edition, Faulkner's holograph manuscript, the typeset copy, and the working galley proofs. All subsequent references in the text are indicated by *AA* and the page number(s).

What appals Ellen is not so much Henry's condition as Judith's disappearance. She challenges her husband, even as she pleads with him, "I can understand ... your wanting Henry to see this; I will try to understand it; yes, I will make myself understand it. But not Judith, Thomas. Not my baby girl, Thomas" (AA 21). Since Sutpen denies all knowledge, let alone responsibility, Ellen resorts to calling Judith "in a voice calm and sweet and filled with despair". Miss Rosa concludes the episode by acknowledging the second-hand status of her information, yet evoking "the two Sutpen faces – once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her – looking down through the square entrance to the loft" (AA 22). Judith and her coloured half-sister, Clytie, have clearly been watching the wrestling, but without Henry's composite reaction of terror and overwhelming disgust.

This passage makes palpable the experiences of the various members of the Sutpen family. Thomas's triumph at the defeat of his slave opponent is expressed as much through the taut control of his injured body as through his arrogant dismissal of Ellen's concern, because she is a different kind of being, a woman who cannot be expected to understand. Ellen's maternal apprehensiveness is, significantly, given corporeal form in her running, her disregard for the filth of the stable and the timbre of her voice, just as Henry's emotional turmoil issues in vomiting and screaming. Lastly, the restrained watchfulness of the two girls, their self-sufficiency and closely bonded interconnection, at once gives the lie to Sutpen's claim about female sensibilities and portends their future. Both Judith and Clytie will remain externally impassive and emotionally remote in response to suffering, while their fascination with violent spectacle points to Judith's visceral delight in instigating wild carriage rides to church with her father's grinning coachman.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, then, it is simultaneously a sensible (or "objective") and sentient (or "subjective") body that responds to its encounters with a lived world from which it is both phenomenologically and existentially inseparable. The body sees because it is attuned to palpating the things that surround it with its visual-tactile sense, just as visible things at once shape themselves to the processes of sight, while eluding comprehensive disclosure. As the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, puts it in *The Visible and the Invisible*,

in general a visible ... is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world – less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 132)

Between "visibles", then, Merleau-Ponty suggests that one might "find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency". This he calls a "*flesh* of things" (1968: 132-133), with which all human beings are intertwined in a figure termed "the *chiasm*". This argument brings Merleau-Ponty to the "difficult point" of explaining the "bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals". Here he proposes that a musical idea, for instance, vibrates evocatively in the melody which makes it audible; it is accessible only as *idea* through "carnal experience" (pp. 149-150). By contrast, the score representing the musical *idea* constitutes an abstraction produced by reflection. More dubiously, Merleau-Ponty claims that an "*operative* language" rooted in the interaction of embodied consciousness and the circumambient world gives rise to formalised, conventional systems of signification at the level of reflection. Such "acquired ideas", he contends, are "themselves caught up in a second life" and "second visibility" on the far side of *operative* language. Yet, to borrow from Leibniz, this hypothesis should not be read as conflating the action of a donkey that goes straight to its fodder with the knowledge that mathematicians hold about the properties of straight lines (pp. 151-55).

The application of this account to Faulkner's novel can be seen in the opening paragraphs, which set the framework for Miss Rosa's compulsive narration of her past to Quentin Compson. As he struggles both to concentrate on the story and to distance himself from it, he becomes aware of "a wisteria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away" (AA 3). The wisteria becomes a corporeal *idea*, the emblem of Miss Rosa's lonely yearning and her humiliating failure to secure the respectful love of a man. In the words of a trite children's rhyme, she continues to berate herself and to fuel her tireless resentment: "*Yes, Rosie Coldfield, lose him, weep him; caught a beau but couldn't keep him; (oh yes, they will tell you) found a beau and was insulted, something heard and not forgiven*" (AA 138). The ambience of her despairing disillusionment echoes across Faulkner's corpus to *The Sound and the Fury*, in which Quentin's illicit, near-incestuous love for his sister, Caddy, is essentialised into the smell of honeysuckle ([1931]1979: 136, 141-142). Whereas Quentin tries to obliterate that stimulus, Miss Rosa finds in the wisteria not a catalyst for memory, but its very fabric, modulated into a personal-impersonal tale of long ago – "*once there was ... a summer of wisteria*". For her "*sense, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel – not mind, not thought*" supply "*the substance of remembering*". So she contends that grief may fade, but the tear ducts will not forget weeping (AA 115), just as Charles Bon argues in his letter to Judith from the battle front that the body retains sensations of "old peace and contentment" even when the names of those "scents and

sounds” have been lost (p. 104).² The *operative* language of concretised ideas becomes the measure of intimately felt experience, which in turn permeates the Southern milieu. The significations deducible from the “second life” of “acquired *ideas*”, as manifested in the language of narrative, cannot be divorced from the rearousal of intense sensations, which have firmly imprinted themselves on the body. If, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, “we are *condemned to meaning* and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history” (1974: xix), then the South must imprison Miss Rosa and Quentin in its ineluctable associations without any “*trashy myth of reality’s escape*” (AA 115).

The chiasmatic interweaving of the perceiver and things perceived through Merleau-Ponty’s construct of the *flesh* is central to this reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*. The seminal instance of such interweaving is the moment at which a black slave-butler condescendingly instructs the ragged, adolescent Thomas Sutpen to report to the back door of his master’s Tidewater mansion (AA 188). From the passionately sensed impact of this wounding rebuff and its inherent concrete *idea* springs Sutpen’s incipient “design”, which in turn launches the complicated chain reaction of wounding in the novel. However, a phenomenological perspective of this kind functions in taut inter-implication with a contrary impulse. The novel is also a ghost story, offering an alternative perspective to Merleau-Ponty’s materially based (yet equally pertinent) projection of experiential history (see, for example, Rampton 2008: 95). As Miss Rosa relentlessly pursues her indictment of Sutpen, the syntax swerves into the subjunctive mood, with Quentin inadvertently discovering that “listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound” in a strangely depersonalised evacuation of engaged perception. It is at this point that the “long dead object of [Miss Rosa’s] impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear” in the guise of a superior satyr or “man-horse-demon”, with a “faint sulphur reek still in his clothes” and “grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men” (AA 3-4). The undertone of a creation myth, together with its whiff of hellfire and damnation, moves the reminiscence into a virtual space of moral and metaphysical metamorphosis. This is the family legacy that Miss Rosa has elected to embrace, although (as Jacques Derrida contends in *Specters of Marx*) such transmissions must always prove elusive and heterogeneous: “One always inherits from a secret”. The “critical choice” enjoining the “reaffirmation of this inheritance” can therefore be unified only by “dividing itself, tearing itself apart ... by speaking at the same time several times – and in several voices”

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2. David Rampton (2008: 98) approaches Miss Rosa’s comments in a manner that is superficially similar to this reading, yet it implicitly preserves a mind-body dualism: “Faulkner is entirely consistent here in having his character assert the uncanny power of the senses, the way they trigger strong emotions, and the way they assert their pre-eminence over mere ratiocination”.

(1994: 16). In this respect, Miss Rosa enters a spectral realm in which she grapples with the dead, doggedly re-enacting the conflicts of the distant past, straining to reverse the exercise of power and to subjugate the Sutpen ogre of her imagination to the corrosive force of her hatred. Nonetheless, hatred at once courts insatiability and reduces itself to logical absurdity, as Emmanuel Levinas has observed. In a single gesture, it seeks to dehumanise the other person by turning him into a mere object of contempt, yet it demands "his lucidity and witness" in the moment of his "fall" (1969: 239). Caught in the shadow play of her obsession, Miss Rosa repeatedly disfigures the image of Sutpen, only to find herself baffled by his impenetrability and maimed afresh by the reopening of old wounds.

Corporeal memory and ghostly, stillborn fantasy reciprocally subtend the shaming resurrection of Miss Rosa's quest for love. As the unwanted, belated child of a mother who dies giving birth to her and a recessive, middle-aged father, she lives obliquely in the interstices of shared temporality. She has no peers, occupying the ludicrous position of superannuated child, immature adult and aunt who is younger than her niece and nephew. The heady summer of wisteria finds her clumsily cobbling together underwear for Judith's trousseau and spinning fancies of her niece's fiancé on the basis of a stolen glimpse of his photograph. Lurking in the shrubbery of the Sutpen garden, she "*dream[s] upon the nooky seat which held invisible imprint of his absent thighs*" and longs to lie in the same bed as Judith, whispering impressions of love. Rather than waiting for Judith's confidences, she muses: "*Don't talk to me of love but let me tell you, who know already more of love than you will ever know or need*". This curious loving without hope of fulfilment – which Rosa qualifies with "*if it were love*" (AA 190) – sketches physical intimacy from sheer ignorance, passion from deprivation, and communion from loneliness. The solidity of tangible encounters with a warm, vital partner is alchemised into a suggestive absence that is accorded credence precisely because it lacks substance. These paradoxes are reiterated when Miss Rosa serves as a pall bearer for her surrogate lover, who never was. She tries "*to take the full weight of the coffin to prove to myself that he was really in it. And I could not tell Because I never saw him. You see?*" (AA 122). The shift from literal "seeing" to the metaphorical "You see?" brings the "*flesh of things*" into collision with the ghostly drama of unrequited love that Rosa has scripted in parallel to Judith's engagement. In her guise of disregarded juvenile aunt, she has indeed inherited her sense of crushing deprivation from the secret potentialities of a doubly absent lover – absent because she has never met him and absent because he is dead. Her "critical choice" tends towards reducing multivocality so as to make the stab of loss more bearable. As she explains, "*There are some things which happen to us which the intelligence and the senses refuse ... occurrences which stop us dead as though by some impalpable intervention, like a sheet of glass through which we watch all*

subsequent events transpire as though in a soundless vacuum ..." (AA 122). Bon's death becomes the watershed occurrence of her life, fracturing her sense of the actual and separating her from the possibility of productive interaction with human-objectual *fleshliness*.

Nonetheless, the final phase of Miss Rosa's search for a male partner takes place within the context of the fleshly world in the most fundamental sense of that phrase, although the consequent wounding disables her entire being through the "*aghast unbelieving which has lasted for forty-three years*". Standing casually with the reins of his horse over his arm, Sutpen addresses his betrothed in "*bald outrageous words*" as though "*he were consulting with ... some ... man about a bitch dog or a cow or mare*" (AA 136).³ This proposal follows a brief episode in which he stops Rosa, puts his hand on her head and looks intently at her. Michael Zeitlin accords the "symbolic power" of Sutpen's "watchfulness" strongly phallic connotations. In the event, it seems as though Rosa has already been violated by this gaze before Sutpen's speech overtly confirms his intentions (2004: 630). Hence Rosa lays the foundations for her legacy of curdled disappointment as an unmarried widow, a compromised virgin and a betrayed Southern gentlewoman, unflaggingly haunting and dematerialising the landscape of Jefferson with lurid distortions of Sutpen and his actions as the index of her own hauntedness.

The case of Charles Bon's octoroon mistress is set in counterpoint to Miss Rosa's predicament, framed as it is by notions of decadence and voluptuousity. The enfolded layering of this narrative complicates interpretation; Mr Compson's cynical surmises cocoon a highly subjective portrayal of Bon's efforts to convince Henry of the legitimacy of his keeping a mixed-race mistress. The stark, countrified outlines of Jefferson give way to the cosmopolitan mystery of New Orleans, where the "*flesh of things*" pulsates with the promise of richly hidden depths. Henry is imagined as both fascinated and repelled by "the flash and glitter of a myriad carriage wheels, in which women, enthroned and immobile and passing rapidly across the vision, appeared like painted portraits beside men in linen a little finer and diamonds a little brighter and ... faces a little more darkly swaggering than any [he] had ever seen before" (AA 88). Immediately lived experience turns into a distinctly different spectacle from the blood-stained wrestling at Sutpen's Hundred. The interior horizons of searching consciousness are met not with responsive visibility but with walled and gated concealment such as the carefully protected site for duelling, which shows only the "most recent of the brown stains" on the "immaculately raked" surface of the

3. Following Quentin's account, these words would anticipate Sutpen's remark to Miss Rosa's arch-rival, the "poor white" Milly Jones, who had presumably agreed to giving birth to a son as a precondition for marriage. When the baby proves to be a girl, Sutpen comments, "[T]oo bad you're not a mare Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable" (AA 229).

earth" (AA 90). Most disconcerting are the octoroon *placées*, in particular Bon's partner, with her "face like a tragic magnolia, the eternal female, the eternal Who-suffers", bred to "fulfill a woman's sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert" (AA 91, 93). Stephanie Li (2007: 85-112) has written astutely about this phenomenon of the deep South, which enables men to mould, control and commodify a certain class of women in terms of their absorbing sexual fantasies. Yet the visible, tangible environment in all its concentration on erotic pleasure is crossed by the spectre of an inescapably gendered and racialised history: the myth of primitive African passion, the dark past of West Indian slavery and the subliminal fear of anything creole.⁴ Married in a ceremony that carries no legal validity, pampered and bought off with luxury, Bon's mistress occupies a liminal area that is defined by its selectively condoned transgression of prevailing social norms. The *placée*'s refined value for privileged young men in New Orleans becomes precisely her human existence in non-existence for other purposes. When Henry remonstrates with Bon about the potential bigamy entailed in his planning to marry Judith, the answer comes promptly and smoothly, reopening with a veiled caress the South's thinly crusted wound of miscegenation: "Have you forgot that this woman [and her] child are niggers?" (AA 94).⁵

While Bon's liaison with the octoroon woman constitutes a peculiarly licensed taboo, the relations among Henry, Judith and Bon himself prove more complicated and disturbing. Mr Compson's convoluted speculations outline a triangular interplay that borders on the perverse. He wilfully invokes a subtext of incest, perhaps because he is speaking to Quentin or perhaps in the spirit of a wearily unshockable cynicism. But the wound goes deeper, because he toys with another sexual orientation that must remain unspoken in the antebellum South: the trace of homosexuality. After hinting at a strong homoerotic attraction between Bon and Henry during their student phase at Oxford, Mississippi, he proceeds to outline Judith's role as the envisaged fiancée of one man and the sister of the other:

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4. In "The Direction of the Howling': Nationalism and the Color Line in *Absalom, Absalom!*", Barbara Ladd (1994: 525-538) provides a detailed examination of changing attitudes to the creole in the American South by considering changing generational perspectives within the Compson family. This essay takes account of the dominant eugenicist discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
 5. In *Light in August* ([1932]1967), Faulkner prefigures the Southerner's sensitivity to the disruptive force of miscegenation in the ambiguously "parchment-skinned" Joe Christmas, who cannot come to terms with his own identity, while remaining dangerously at odds with his community.

In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realising that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. Perhaps that is what went on, not in Henry's mind but in his soul.

(AA 77)

The elaborately ritualised register of this convoluted explanation sketches a triangular circuit that collapses "soul" into flesh and sublimates flesh into soul in a consummation of embodied consciousness. Judith becomes little more than a vehicle for the illicit intimacy between Henry and Bon, effectively depriving her in anticipation of the shadowy prospect of a marriage that is never to be realised. At the same time, passages such as this aptly foreground resemblances to *The Sound and the Fury* once again, as Matthew Vaughn (2007: 522) has noticed.⁶ In the "June Second, 1910" section, Quentin's relationship with Shreve mirrors Mr Compson's construction of Henry's fraught attachment to Bon. In fact, Quentin is stung by hearing Shreve described as his "husband" (Faulkner [1931]1979: 75). Moreover, his girlish fainting into the arms of Dalton Ames, whom he has just attempted to warn off any further romantic association with Caddy, mutates into his trouncing by Gerald Bland, when he quixotically defends the honour of women, especially sisters (1979: 145-47, 149-151). All these threads are still more tightly interwoven within the fabric of *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Shreve and Quentin reconstruct the Sutpen saga in the tomblike chill of their Harvard rooms. Suddenly, the frame narrator interrupts the fable of Bon's childhood to remark that "there was something curious in the way [Quentin and Shreve] looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself – a sort of hushed and naked searching ..." (AA 240). So the forbidden form of carnal love re-emerges, purified into the latent *flesh* of chiasmic visuality and rendered innocuous by the assurance of inherent virginity.

It would appear, then, that the second half of Faulkner's novel draws at least part of its warrant from the oxymoronically appealing mutual wounding of Quentin and Shreve. Their ambiguous closeness facilitates a vital endeavour of sense-making that passionately threshes out a coherent version of the Sutpen family's cataclysmic history. Repressed, unavowable impulses fuse with the reiterated harrowing of a South torn apart by its subconscious drives and darkly disguised prejudices. Myra Jehlen has proposed that

6. Vaughn's article, "'Other Souths': The Expression of Gay Identity in *Absalom, Absalom!*" (2007: 519-528), offers a persuasive analysis of the homosexual undercurrents in this novel.

Absalom, Absalom! assumes the contours of a detective story, because it "directly sets out to discover something" (1976: 55), whereas Joseph Reed tends to dismiss the element of suspense, moving the focus to "telling and hearing" (1973: 167, 146). Both views are persuasive, yet both miss the urgency of Quentin's need to confront the unexorcised ghosts of the Southern past and to determine his relation to them. This predicament is partially mirrored in Hamlet's exchange with his father's ghost on the battlements of Elsinore. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida presciently addresses the Prince of Denmark's lament that "[t]he time is out of joint. O cursed spite/ that ever I was born to set it right" (1: 5: 196-197). In Derrida's reading, time has become "*disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged ... *deranged*, both out of order and mad". Hamlet is therefore "the man of right", who must institute a new kind of justice that exceeds repetitive historical cycles of vengeance (1994: 18, 21). Quentin too finds himself disarticulated from the oppressive familial and cultural traditions that disrupt his purchase on temporality. He cannot survive within the context of a mad and disordered time that haunts him with inherited guilt and inadequacy in the face of his own fears or failures, not to mention the unachievable standards of a forfeited past. (It is hardly surprising that his first deliberate act on the day of his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* will be to twist the hands off his grandfather's watch (Faulkner [1931]1979: 76).⁷) Quentin too must accept the responsibilities of the "man of right", who renders justice to a bloody and often confusing past by temporarily redeeming lost time through the recognition of its complex, tragic patterning.

It is this combination of consuming concerns that drives Quentin to partner with Shreve in fashioning an integrative fiction of wounded, deranged time. Unlike Mr Compson, the young men eschew the intellectually effete hypothesis of inexplicability: "You bring [Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen] together again and again nothing happens; just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs" (AA 80). Instead, the frame narrator presents Quentin and Shreve,

both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what

7. The intertext might be extended still further to *Light in August* ([1932]1967). Very briefly, this novel is dominated by the motif of temporal cyclicity, while the figure of Hightower (who surveys events from an elevated position akin to the apex of a clock tower) has been dislocated from the normal processes of time.

were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporising breath.

(AA 243)

When the young men participate in collaborative thinking, their mental processes are translated into physical voice; this creative articulation strives in parallel fashion to reverse the abstraction of conventional signifiatory systems, hence seeking to reinstate *operative* language in the *flesh* of worldly experience. As Merleau-Ponty phrases it in a slightly different context, the empirically audible is “fold[ed] back” or “invaginat[ed]”, so as to exhibit the concrete *idea*, duly inflected by the structures of formalised reflection. The embrace of this insight is not an apprehension of “the [inaccessible] shadow of the actual”, but an appreciation of “its principle”, the “style” which emerges from the opening of the interior horizons of consciousness onto the exterior sensory environment (1968: 152). In other words, there may be no reliable factual basis for the figures created by the two friends, yet their spectrality – even their necessary incorporeality as “shades” – cannot be summarily divorced from the latent *fleshly* tissue that lines all intramundane encounters. This aporetic conjuncture of the sensible with insubstantial ghostliness is confirmed by the frame narrator’s subsequent observations. When the friends plot the details of the hasty, provocative Christmas Eve departure from Sutpen’s Hundred, “it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts ... four of them and then just two – Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry”; and the two Harvard students share the same understanding of Henry’s thoughts (AA 267). This strongly empathetic identification of the living with the dead produces an imaginative reincarnation that accommodates suffering and compassion rather than balked, detached commentary on the “mischancing of human affairs”. The impulse towards association is so intense that the dead regain embodiment, while the living become spectres. Even when Shreve resorts to excited hyperbole in describing Sutpen as “this Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub” or near-derisive levity in calling Miss Rosa “this old dame” (AA 145, 143), the measure of his commitment remains undiminished. On the contrary, flippancy is the mask of thoroughgoing, albeit critical, involvement.

It is through this involvement that Quentin, supported by Shreve, is to some degree able to rehumanise Sutpen as the victim of his own “innocence” (AA 178) in believing that the wealth and power of the leisured planter class could be met and combated by the acquisition of still greater wealth and power.⁸ Quentin is particularly alive to his grandfather’s

8. Gretchen Martin (2008: 397-416) plausibly outlines two distinct phases in Sutpen’s career. She shows the ways in which his behaviour prior to the Civil War is influenced by his upbringing among the fiercely independent yeoman stock of the West Virginia mountains. Martin suggests that after the

friendship with Sutpen. He highlights the General's appalled recognition of Sutpen's moral literal-mindedness (which amounts to a callous indifference) when he assumes that he can justly reject his first wife and her son simply by making an adequate financial settlement on them (*AA* 211-212). General Compson's intuition that a "design" so monomaniacally pursued is a doomed "design" has clearly escaped the client who consults him. From this perspective, Sutpen is neither the demon nor the galloping satyr of Miss Rosa's overheated fancy, but a determined, hard, misguided man, who brings his injuries on himself. In a similar fashion, Shreve instigates the invention of a melodramatic biography for Charles Bon by picturing him as the spoilt, yet mercilessly manipulated, child of an obsessively vengeful mother (*AA* 239-240). Unattractive as this image of a suavely pleasure-seeking Bon may be, he emerges as the victim of his parents' misdeemeanours, longing principally for the affirming recognition of his absent father. In this regard, Bon's desire mimics Quentin's yearning for the approval of the spectral fathers of his Southern ancestry, right down to the heroically wounded General Compson.

The fiction that Quentin and Shreve concoct comes in due course to include the South's catastrophic experience of the Civil War and the bitter aftertaste of defeat. The elusive frame narrator makes another of his unpredictable interventions in the text, disrupting Henry's agonised reflections on the prospect of Bon's incestuous marriage to his half-sister, Judith, and seeming to ventriloquise for Faulkner as novelist. The Confederate conduct of the war is seen in terms of Mark Twain's irritated commentary on a Southern romance inspired by Sir Walter Scott and dedicated to outmoded chivalries, together with long-defunct forms of leadership (1984: 327). So the narrator describes generals "already as obsolete as Richard or Roland or du Guesclin, who wore plumes and cloaks lined with scarlet ... and captured warships with cavalry charges but no grain nor meat nor bullets", the kind of officer who could "destroy a million dollar garrison of enemy supplies" and then be shot dead for being caught "in bed with a neighbour's wife" (*AA* 276). This carries the ring of Sidney Lanier, for example, who enjoyed music and high living, wild rides and hair's-breadth escapes from the Unionist troops, while picketing the mouth of the River James (Wilson 1987: 457). Yet a cruel military campaign exploded his idyll, leaving him with a legacy of disabling pulmonary disease contracted in a dank Union prison. Faulkner's novel sharply captures the fragile reconciliation of these tensions in Bon's letter, which records the exhilarating capture, not of ammunition but of stove polish, by a swaggering group of ragged, shoeless, starving men (*AA* 103). The juxtaposition of such opposing recollections bears the ring of fact, implicitly modifying the fictitious biographies that

war Sutpen slides into adopting the attitudes and values of the now obsolete planters.

Quentin and Shreve devise. The exchange between the actual and the invented suggests that the imagined is often starker than the historically verifiable, while past occurrences outdo fancy in their bizarre excess.

It is within this framework that the psycho-physical wounds of war are further disfigured by the South's deepest taboo and its most septic wounding of an idealised whiteness: miscegenation. Admittedly, there is no solid evidence in the novel that Bon has African blood, but it seems a reasonable inference that this taint, in particular, would have led Sutpen to annul the marriage to Charles's mother. A steady undercurrent of vicious racism runs throughout the text, from Sutpen's early experience as a poor white in Tidewater, to the foundation of his plantation through the labour of his savage Haitian slaves, to the double-edged ethos of expedient permission and iron exclusion that marks the creolised culture of New Orleans. Racism is, moreover, imprinted in the bodies of certain Southerners as a concrete idea, instinct in the *fleshly* chiasm binding the toucher to the tangible world. When Miss Rosa is summoned to Sutpen's Hundred after the shooting of Bon, Clytie tries to prevent her from rushing upstairs to accost Judith and to view the body. If Rosa is affronted by Clytie's resuming the childhood habit of addressing her by her first name, it is the electric contact with the other woman's restraining hand that proves decisive. *"Then she touched me, and then I did stop dead I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh"* (AA 111). "Monstrous", "shocking" and "outrage" seem to crystallise the quality of Miss Rosa's universe. Rapidly and surprisingly, though, she overturns this perspective by penetrating to a primordial physicality that impartially binds the *"central I-Am"* of enemies and lovers through the immediate energy of touch, shattering the *"eggshell shibboleth of caste and colour"* (AA 112). Yet her initial response, with its inherited and ingrained fixation on the alien qualities of pigmented flesh, cannot but tie her back into the nexus of disabling Southern racism. On the basis of such typically unreflecting reactions, Quentin and Shreve derive their warrant for concluding that racial characteristics will trump incest. These forces are compacted into the terrible, conflicted conversation that ends Chapter 8. Henry pleadingly reminds Bon, *"You are my brother"*. And Bon replies, *"No, I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry"* (AA 286). In its turn, the insidious vocabulary of licensed racism has decisively imprinted the signifiatory systems that constitute the obverse of concrete ideas.

The tragedy comes to appear complete and inevitable – but not quite. Once again, Sutpen has miscalculated the requirements of his "design", this time by setting Henry to forestall Bon's marriage to Judith. Yet in Bon's visceral understanding of the situation, a single gesture of recognition from his

impassive father would have rendered any further action unnecessary. Two extreme forms of innocent expectation destroy each other, while folding back onto the tortured history of a South ravaged by its delusional romanticism and poisonous prejudices. Nonetheless, Quentin and Shreve grope for an opportunity to humanise choices and circumstances that must otherwise be reduced to Mr Compson's generic formula of "bloody mischancing" with its undertones of ineluctable, classically defined tragedy. Ironically, this order of fatality is also encoded in the blood, since human desire becomes distorted by racist imperatives which destroy not only individual affinities but also the health of the entire body politic.

In a meticulously researched article, Marta Puxan (2007: 529-549) draws on narrative theory to prove that Shreve is an unreliable narrator and that the latter part of *Absalom, Absalom!* must be construed as fictitious projection. Yet the relationship between reliable reporting and free fabrication in the novel is by no means straightforward, as this discussion has already suggested. In the introduction to her moving engagement with traumatic suffering in *Auschwitz and After*, Charlotte Delbo (1994: 2) reflects self-critically: "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain that it is truthful". A similar distinction might pertain to Quentin and Shreve's imaginative fashioning of the violent self-destruction of the Sutpen family. Their account would not stand up to rigorous juridical interrogation, but it endeavours to uncover the "truthful". One purpose of such a search is to arrive at aspects which are not self-evident but inherent in perceptual phenomena, their uniquely expressive existential "style" or dynamically shaping and informing "principle". In a working note of May 1960 which was later appended to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968: 247) writes: "When I say that every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a '*punctum caecum*' ["blind spot"], that to see is always to see more than one sees – this must not be understood as a *contradiction* In the very measure that I see, I do not know *what* I see". Quentin and Shreve are involved in uncovering this capacity for transcendence that infuses all human action in its interplay with the *fleshly* tissue that ties it into the world. They want to know *what* they see. Shreve strategically recasts Miss Rosa's narrative, so that a picture of the octoroon mistress and her son is found in the metal case rather than Judith's gift of her photograph to Bon. He can thus deduce an explanatory motive; if Bon is to be killed by Henry, he must wish Judith to think him worthless, so that she ceases to grieve for him (AA 287). The flaw in this reasoning is not so much its lack of veracity as its courting of an impossibility that can never be circumvented. As Derrida explains in *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993: 53), the *aperspective* emerges as an "analogical index of vision" precisely when consciousness narcissistically strives to see itself looking. Even as an imagined composite individual with Bon, Shreve will never manage to trace

the reflex of a fleeting self-scrutiny whose disappearance is the very precondition of the invisibility that inhabits all visible manifestations.

In their determination to penetrate to the invisible core of traumatic wounding, then, Shreve and Quentin co-operate in fleshing out the allusively insubstantial spectres of the preceding narratives. Yet their tale-telling has a second, equally important goal: to render justice. If a disjointed, deranged time is to be set to rights, however, traditional retributive justice in the mode of *Hamlet* as revenge drama, or even a tolerant distributive justice, is insufficient. Teasing out a motif in Heidegger that he considers partially flawed, Derrida (1994: 24-27) proposes that an adequate expression of justice would at least entail giving the other his *proper* self-accord within a “lingering present” which is already hollowed out by traces of the past and intimations of the future. Yet, as he also notes in *Specters of Marx*, the person who assumes accountability for such justice would be one who is “learning to live” – perhaps learning to live finally – in the transitional space between life and death for which there is no substitute. In Derrida’s view, interactions of this kind require an ability to “talk *with or about some ghost*” (1994: xviii-xix), as well as unreserved receptiveness to the *arrivant* (or that which arrives). In the case of Hamlet and of Quentin, what is at stake is the *arrivant* as *revenant* or spectre. Nonetheless, a hospitable readiness to engage the other justly without any fixed programme for performance carries a significant risk of non-fulfilment, and therefore of despair (1994: 168-169). This is the conundrum that Quentin encounters in his tragic revisioning of his Southern legacy. He and Shreve recast the abortive efforts of Henry, Judith and Bon as tragedy, or perhaps pathos, concentrating on delivering to these others their *proper* self-accord as vulnerable agents. The fiction-making vibrates with an enthusiasm for talking to and about ghosts. Yet the agenda is simultaneously overdetermined and underdetermined. Slumped sullenly in his chair, thinking aloud, Quentin consistently falls short of learning to live effectively. Desired justice disintegrates into the taste of death, the temporal sequence remains dislocated, and attempted conversation with the shades of the past becomes unwilling possession by them in an introverted surge of paralysing memory. A bemused Shreve, now forcibly and somewhat disconcertingly alerted to the extent of his difference from Quentin, sums up:

We don’t live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves ... and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. 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?

(AA 289)

Quentin conspicuously fails to encompass a redemptive relation to his ancestors, despite the imaginative adventure of “overpassing” to love that

Shreve initiates, marrying "speaking and hearing", while allowing each of them to "forgive", "condone" and "forget" the "faulting" of the other in freely revivifying the spectres of past generations (*AA* 253). This disappointment seals Quentin's immersion in an asphyxiating atmosphere of stale emotions and cherished resentments, which prevent him from living finally. The effects of this pervasive miasma are compounded by a lingering self-preoccupation which even Shreve cannot dispel. Unlike Hamlet, Quentin cannot arrive at the point of declaring that "the readiness is all" (5: 2: 218). Looking to a future which is teleologically shaped by his complicated past, he simply cannot "say yes" in the spirit of absolute hospitality "*to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation", whether this be a human being or a spectre (Derrida 2000: 77). Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that the compelling project of rendering justice was traced by impossibility and potentially closed to the affirmation of hospitality from its very outset. If it were a function of absolutely just action to work tirelessly towards the healing of wounds, then the wounds of the Sutpen clan could be tended only indirectly, belatedly, symbolically, as a fragile gesture of imaginative restitution. An efficacious recuperation of existential truthfulness to this suffering would also entail delving deeper than the plot detail of the Sutpen saga allows. That story is embedded in the history of the South, a heritage that is striated by the incursions of racism and rent by the generally accepted practice of slavery. Yet these deeply engraved inscriptions in the *flesh* of Southern experience are scarcely visible to Quentin in his narrative, just as a draftsman cannot see the infinitesimal advance of the drawn line at the point where his hand makes contact with the surface of the paper (Derrida 1993: 44-45). Racism and slavery are not merely unhealed wounds in the Southern imaginary. They approach the condition of the "heal-less",⁹ surreptitiously inhabiting the chiasm of embodied mind and world. To do justice to the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen, Henry, Judith and Bon would in some sense be to render it unSouthern, to deprive it of all lived meaning and to turn inside out the value of hospitality.

The extent of Quentin's predicament might also be construed in terms of the paradoxically overlapping separateness of seeing and hearing in Faulkner's novel. With regard to Merleau-Ponty's provisional metaphysics of the *flesh*, seeing draws the individual into the visible palpation of the perceptual world, whereas hearing operates more noticeably at a remove, facilitating the conversion of "operative *ideas*" into the conventional sign system of formalised language and theoretical reflection. Hearing is associated with telling, with narrative, with a particular order both of

9. This notion is taken from Hillis Miller's drawing on Martin Heidegger to discuss the inherence of nihilism in metaphysics, while showing metaphysics reciprocally to assign nihilism its philosophical context and significance (1979: 227-228).

immersion and entanglement in the recreation or representation of experience. Yet the reader is alerted to a curious reciprocity between hearing and seeing which contributes to the haunted ambience of the novel. To hear intensely and comprehensively is to be made to see and to touch, to be synaesthetically wound back into the virtualised tissue of mundane *flesh*. As Quentin and Shreve listen to each other, they see a chilly winter's morning at Sutpen's Hundred and vicariously gallop over icy ground to catch the boat for New Orleans. At the opening of the novel, Quentin half-succeeds in withdrawing from Miss Rosa's insistent narrative into the privacy of his own interiority. Yet his father's low-key commentary on the string of misfortunes that had precipitated the various burials in the Sutpen cemetery prompts Quentin to reflect: "*If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain*" (AA 155). As he lies in bed in his Harvard room, apparently turned inward to his own meditation, the text of his father's letter about Miss Rosa's death emerges vividly out of the darkness, right down to the idiosyncracies of Mr Compson's handwriting (AA 301). Finally, when Shreve takes over the telling of Bon's dilemma about marrying Judith, Quentin muses in dull misery: "*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 have to never listen to anything else but this again forever ...*" (AA 222). Hearing is the piercing and pervasive sense of thorough immersion, but there can be no easy escape into some inner consciousness, whether from seeing or from hearing. This is not because the straits which Merleau-Ponty describes as "gaping open" between interior and exterior horizons themselves constitute a wound. Instead, human beings as embodied subjects are necessarily co-ordinated with the multifaceted phenomenological world in which they dwell. When both subjects and their environment are injured, a potentially fruitful exchange becomes the medium for a steady flow of anguish, an unmitigated wounding, which ultimately haunts and takes possession of the reluctant sufferer who longs to stop hearing.

This disturbing situation is foreshadowed by the title of Faulkner's novel and the anchoring of a balked tragic history in the proper names of its characters. *Absalom, Absalom!* calls to mind war and rebellion during the Biblical reign of King David, Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar, and Absalom's fierce revenge. Throughout the novel echoes the lament of David for the overzealous killing of his favourite son, "O my son! Absalom my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you!" (2 Samuel 18: 33). Yet Faulkner's text is haunted by searing reversals of this narrative. Bon is the son who craves paternal recognition, while Sutpen effectively prompts his murder at the hands of his brother, Henry. In these confrontations of the Confederate South, lyrical grief is perversely aborted into those "bloody mischancings" that defy Mr Compson's attempts at elucidation. Moreover, the twisted reference to the apocryphal Book of Judith compounds traumatic alienation. The romantic-heroic tale of a chaste, but alluring, young widow,

who ingeniously rids her community of a vicious Assyrian invader (*The New English Bible* 1970: 68-85), is metamorphosed into the grinding endurance of military defeat and widowhood before marriage to the ironically misnamed "*Charles Bon, Charles Good, Charles the Husband-soon-to-be*" (AA 119). Instead of triumphantly producing the severed head of Holophernes from her food bag (Book of Judith 13: 15), the latter-day Judith contracts herself into marble calm. She delivers Bon's letter to Quentin's grandmother, saying "... you make so little impression You get born and you try this and you dont [sic] know why only you keep on trying" (AA 100). Perhaps choosing to give the letter to a virtual stranger (the stranger, the better) represents Judith's covert desire to break free of her haunted family history by engaging in a single gesture of unqualified hospitality to "*who or what*" may yet happen to turn up. In stark contrast to this receptiveness, her dreaming and planning culminate absurdly in a thwarted attempt to rescue Bon's son from his self-hatred as a man of cruelly mixed-racial identity, and therefore of no sustainable social identity at all. Biblical spectres thus haunt and mock their counterparts with the impossibility of rendering justice in a decaying community deprived of any fecund future.

Turning to classical models, the frustrated tragic register of the text is consolidated in the figure of Clytie, Clytemnestra who should have been named Cassandra. Yet Clytie is the compromised human product of her father's amorous exploits and the patiently unappreciated protector of his malign heritage, rather than a vengeance-taker settling the score for infidelities. Marginalised and indifferently exploited, she is certainly no perversely disempowered prophetic visionary, condemned to perpetual disbelief.¹⁰ For both Clytie and Judith, daily experience is unpredictable and often monotonously exacting. Ironically, it is only Sutpen's mare, Penelope, which participates in the *Odyssey's* legacy of homage to a faithful and incorruptible wife; she is honoured for giving birth to a spirited colt and earns herself a comfortable stall in the stable, while her master's family labour, scrimp and survive.

Once again, Faulkner's complex of interwoven narratives turns in upon itself, withholding the liberating catharsis that should issue from tragic experience and substituting *revenants* (or spectres of a relentlessly assertive past) for the access of a hospitality without self-interested limits provisionally sought by Quentin and Shreve. In a now familiar pattern, the invisible infects the visible, warping the concrete *ideas* that constitute the lived fabric of the South. When Shreve asks Quentin why he hates the South in a tone that combines challenge, incredulity and restrained compassion, Quentin testifies to his hauntedness in a passionate denial that masquerades

10. See the consolidated entries for "Clytemnestra" and "Cassandra" in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1970: 256-257, 210-211).

as affirmation: “‘I don’t hate it, he said, quickly, at once, immediately ... *I don’t hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, in the iron New England dark” (AA 303). As in Ellen’s panic-inspired dash to rescue Judith, thought and feeling permeate Quentin’s body, becoming his shivering and panting; Jefferson is transposed to Harvard in its endured intensity. These wounds of the body and its informing consciousness defy healing in the cross-grained diversion of impulses towards reintegration and unqualified justice. Quentin and Shreve have conjured the Sutpen spectres in the sense of creatively evoking them or calling them into conversation. They have paradoxically brought forth “*what is not there* at the present moment of the appeal” (Derrida 1994: 41). Yet they have failed to conjure their spectres by exorcising them. Derrida observes that “exorcism consists in repeating in the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead” (p. 48). Quentin cannot lay his ghosts to rest. The *arrivant* is the *revenant*, the future recoils into the past in a reversal of circular teleology – and the traumatised dead remain alive, at least as alive as the living.

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Merle Williams
University of the Witwatersrand
merle.williams@wits.ac.za