

A Murder Foretold
A Reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*

I first read Faulkner in my early twenties, or at least the big works: *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light In August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down Moses*. All except for *Absalom, Absalom!* I re-read in the succeeding decades. But, it is this book that hit me hardest, nearly convincing me to agree with Faulkner when he reportedly claimed, “I think it is the best novel yet written by an American”. I would have modified that statement only to include *Moby Dick*.

And, all these years later--though it dates and defines me--I would say the same thing. Or, at least, I would say they are still the two American books I love the most. As novels, both books are baggy, “implacable”, “irrevocable”, “unregenerate” (to use the Faulkner lexicon), cosmological rather than social in their aspirations and insistence. And, both, through the aural and visual power of their language, have almost physically shaped the way I hear and see the world, as well as what I believe to be the fundamental, distinct identity of the Americas. I feel myself falling into absolutist judgments.

Loving it, why did I not re-read *Absalom, Absalom!* until now, and what did I remember of it before I picked it up again? For one thing, like *Moby Dick*, it is a work-out, a world you cannot climb into casually for an hour before sleep. Having said this, I have to quickly admit that one of the reasons I loved *Absalom, Absalom!* originally and always is because it is a terrific mystery story—and more than that, a murder mystery, a genre which is one of the guilty pleasures of my life. Long after the fatal genealogies of Sartoris and Sutpen, of Eulalia Bon, Charles Bon, Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon, and Jim Bond faded from memory, I could recall the feel if not the exact rendering and sequence of the gothic details: the dire secrets that unravel a marriage; the endless perusal of crumbling letters containing pieces of the tangled story; the tombstones carved of Italian marble and carried home through the carnage of Manassas and Gettysburg; the ghost in the attic; the “tragic, gnome’s face” in the window of a massive, monstrous burning house; and “the scion, the last of his race...howling”, “bellowing”, amongst the ashes of his family.

But it was not only for these Brontesque details that I carried *Absalom, Absalom!* inside me through the decades it went un-read. The book is a perverted version of Genesis, which creates a world from the primal ooze, a book of begats, and also a kind of chthonic myth in which the Creator/Demon, like Cronus, eats his own children. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, I believed that Faulkner had written the great ur-genealogy of the New World. And from this genealogy flowed all his fatal pairings: of mud and blood, incest and fratricide, miscegenation and murder.

Two images remained viscerally incised, close to the bone through the intervening years. The first is the fight-pit scene that ends Chapter 1, with “the two Sutpen faces”...-- “once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her”--peering down from the loft of the barn onto the naked, bloody, “feral” combatants below--one white, one black--inhaling each other’s sweat, covered in each other’s blood. The second image is of a face like a magnolia blossom, product of a two hundred year-old breeding program in the service of the senses and protected by law, locked behind decorative, wrought-iron gates, bathed in lamp light, swathed in silk: the *octoroon*—a word exotic even in its sound.

It is particularly this parsing of pigmentation that I could never forget, the mathematics of “breeding”, that left Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon with five names and a barely discernible, “olive” “spot of negro blood”, the first of the Sutpen “get” not to be named by the progenitor himself. That remained with me, as did the inevitability of murder—of flesh and spirit--that Faulkner’s obsession with the co-mingling of blood implies.

What I hadn’t remembered is the centrality of the incest plot—central also to *The Sound and the Fury* and to the even more snarled genealogies of *Go Down Moses*--or its brilliant use in the spinning and unraveling of the *Absalom, Absalom!* mystery story, that slow, incremental progression through what Charles Bon knew and when he knew it. Of course, many readers will have looked ahead to the uninflected chronology *cum* genealogy that concludes the book, and will know that Charles Bon is a half brother of Judith, Henry and Clytie, even if the unveiling of the final fatal fact--his part black origins—is, for a time, withheld.

Like Henry, the reader is intentionally misled as Faulkner keeps upping the stakes with ever more shocking explanations of Bon’s perceived sin in proposing to Judith, moving from Mr. Compson’s explanation of “intended” bigamy, through incest, to miscegenation—the final trump card—and, thereby, to murder. The dealing out of the final card is, itself, brutally prolonged, hinted at, but never quite unwrapped, until it becomes the air we breathe, the bloody mud below our feet, like the Haitian earth, “burdened still with the weary voices of murdered women and children homeless and graveless about the isolating and solitary sea”.

From early in Chapter 1, the very rhythms of Rosa’s “Cassandralike” voice make us suspect that we are participating in a rigged game. So, that even as we follow the dangled clues, we are forced to realize that the mystery is not an open, investigative process in search of an answer, but, like Greek tragedy, a closed and fatal circle, a ritual story in which the final revelation and inevitable murder are foretold. What we are left with seems irreducible and beyond reconciliation.

The fact that in the last half of the book Shreve and Quentin, Faulkner’s apprentices, are making up the story from maybes, based on the fragments of old letters, overlapping but incomplete narratives, and their own identification with the “shades”, does not soften the irrefutable “facts” of the tale.

Yet, confusingly, at the heart of Faulkner's ritual story is also a longing for completion, a frantic search for the excised half, as if white and black can only become whole through the mingling of blood and flesh, through miscegenation rather than murder. In fact, there are moments in *Absalom, Absalom!* when incest seems nearly indistinguishable from miscegenation. Here is Charles Bon, to Henry, who he knows loves him: "I am the nigger who is going to sleep with your sister", even as we know they both already realize that he is also the brother that would sleep with the sister and that Judith is, for both of them, the body through which Charles and Henry might finally conjoin.

Even in this raw exchange, imagined and composed by Shreve and Quentin, there is more longing than rage or revenge, as dramatized by what comes before. Indeed, for the most part, longing takes the place of love throughout this book. Perhaps, it is Henry alone, in his instinctive longing for Charles Bon, who approximates anything resembling a pure form of nearly consummated love. Trying to imagine Bon's possible romantic feelings for Judith, Quentin murmurs, "But it's not love", a phrase that encompasses an absence that recurs throughout the book. And, indeed, Shreve and Quentin's final formulation is that, from the beginning, Charles Bon went courting a father rather than a bride. Here, in some of the most moving passages in the book, Bon---knowing his and Sutpen's regiments are approaching each other---longingly imagines a moment of acknowledgment by his father:

"He will not even have to ask me; I will just touch flesh with him and I will say it myself: 'You will not need to worry; she will never see me again'".

But, here is what happens instead when Bon does come face to face with Sutpen:

"Then for the second time he (Bon) looked at the expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was no flicker, nothing, the face in which he saw his own features, in which he saw recognition, and that was all."

After this final repudiation, Quentin and Shreve have Bon say, "...it was all finished now; that was all of it now and at last." But it is not quite finished. Confronting Henry after his conference with his father in the tent, Bon pleads still against the absolute, irrevocable absence:

"No word to me, no word at all? That was all he had to do, now, today...He didn't need to tell you I am a nigger to stop me. He could have stopped me without that, Henry."

Thus, is the inevitable murder set in motion.

And, thus also do we know conclusively—in case we might, ourselves, have been desiring an absolute conversion of longing into love or the "fall(ing) of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color"—that Faulkner is not offering any utopian resolutions.

We know that the murder is going to happen, just as we know that Othello is going to kill Desdemona, no matter our longing that, this time, he'll desist. But we know he won't desist, and the "he" in this case is Faulkner, who has already shown himself to be the scourge of God, all four horses of the apocalypse in the savage disappearing or killing off of his characters:

Goodhue Coldfield: Died of starvation, nailed in an attic from the inside, a kind of suicide.

Ellen Coldfield: Died of mis-use and dis-use.

Judith Sutpen and Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon: Died of yellow fever.

Mellicent Jones: Disappeared, rumored to have died in a Memphis brothel.

Eulalia Bon and Rosa Coldfield: Died of rage, dried up husks of female flesh, the incompleated brides of Thomas Sutpen.

Thomas Sutpen: Murdered with a rusty scythe that completes a circle, by a reaper from his own original caste.

Milly Jones and Un-Named Infant Girl Bastard of Thomas Sutpen: Murdered with a butcher knife applied to undefended throats.

Wash Jones: Murdered by search party with bayonet and rifle.

Charles Bon: Murdered by his half-brother.

Clytemnestra Sutpen and Henry Sutpen: Double murder-suicide, self-immolation in a burning house.

Jim Bond: Disappeared, but rumored to have become a ghost, haunting the demesne of Sutpen's Hundred.

In a book which is about a murder foretold, it is the author who is the most ruthless murderer of all. Almost as a kind of final, fatal joke, he even kills his most vulnerable character, Quentin Compson—a death by suicide which happens offstage in a much earlier book, and which we learn about in this book only by the death-date in the appended chronology. And because Quentin has been the intimate narrative viewpoint leading us for much of the book, the elided loss of him hits us between the eyes, personally.

Who could ever forget such a story, or not feel it still rumbling beneath our feet?

