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THE PUZZLING DESIGN OF ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

IT IS NOW GENERALLY RECOGNIZED THAT *Absalom, Absalom!* consists of several interrelated attempts to make sense out of the past, that none of these attempts is definitive, and that the contorted, jungle-like style so offensive to Clifton Fadiman is an essential counterpart to the search for meaning and certainty undertaken by the characters. Yet, none of the interpretations of the novel thus far offered pursues the implications of these statements. If none of the narrators reports reliably, we cannot use their analyses of events as clues to Faulkner's own attitude toward the past and the South. Each successive insight provides us with crucial information about the narrator who is offering it, but every addition to our knowledge of the Sutpen legend only gives further proof that it is impossible to interpret human experience objectively, to draw conclusions from it that will be valid for anyone but the speaker and interpreter of the moment.

Faulkner dramatizes on every page the futility of imposing any kind of order or pattern upon human life, while at the same time revealing with the utmost compassion, and making us feel with the greatest poignancy, that the yearning to make logical sense out of events is a compulsive, inescapable need, one of the defining characteristics of the human soul. More than this, while he takes great pains to remind us that the narrators' interpretations are unreliable and wholly subjective, and while a close study of his text will lead the reader to total skepticism, Faulkner has constructed the novel with such extraordinary skill that our disbelief is almost wholly suspended as we read it

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for the first time. His daring and brilliant strategy in *Absalom, Absalom!* is to divide us against ourselves, our emotional against our intellectual responses, by providing us with continually more irresistible and subtle rhetorical arguments until we forget what we have been asked to take on faith and what we can safely accept as known and proven. Faulkner plays upon precisely those needs and desires in us that he shows operating in his characters, and demonstrates the truth of his fable by making us equally blind and hopeful participants in the search for illumination. He knows which springs to touch in us at which moment; we respond with increasing eagerness to the successive accounts of his characters because each new interpretation appeals more to our innate trust that human experience not only can be understood but will be found to accord with the laws and precepts of logic and morality that we like to believe govern our lives, though we might have trouble actually demonstrating their prominence. Yet, a dispassionate, analytical review of the novel's structure should demonstrate that far from clarifying the original subjects of concern and uncertainty, the different revelations actually obscure the *facts* of Sutpen's life and hinder the reader from evaluating their significance.

One distinctive feature of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the number and importance of the uncertainties about the central events voiced by each of the narrators of the legend. Every attempt to discover the causes and origins of behavior is marked by breaks in the narrative introduced by some variation on the central refrain: "Nobody ever knew," "He didn't remember," "He didn't say," "He didn't know," and so on. Some of the missing items in the material reliably reported at first hand and so presumably true are the following: the birthplace and birth date of Thomas Sutpen; his manner of reaching the West Indies; how he spent his time there; how he subdued the natives; what was wrong with his first wife; how he reached Jefferson; how he made his money; the nature of the deal with Coldfield; the activities and feelings of all the principals before the wedding with Ellen; what Sutpen told Henry at Christmas 1860, and, again, in the Confederate camp just before the end of the war; what

Sutpen meant when he told Quentin's grandfather he had to make a choice; why Rosa married Sutpen and why Sutpen insulted Rosa; the identity of the boy adopted by Judith and Clytie after the war; what Quentin learned when he went to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa; and, most importantly, whether Bon was the son of Sutpen and whether he was a Negro. Some information that we know to be true—if, after reading the novel, we can ever again use the words "know" and "true" without embarrassment—is that Thomas Sutpen arrived in Jefferson in 1833, determined to complete a "design" undertaken because of certain specified childhood experiences; that he married Ellen Coldfield; that his son Henry killed his daughter Judith's fiancé; that he insulted his sister-in-law Rosa after proposing marriage to her; that he fathered a daughter upon Milly Jones, whose grandfather killed him; that his son Henry and daughter Clytemnestra perished in a fire that consumed Sutpen's great house. These are the basic materials of the Sutpen legend; the rest is pure conjecture.

All of this is not to say that the conjectures are necessarily false; there is excellent reason to believe, for instance, that Bon was Sutpen's son by a woman with Negro blood. But it must be recognized that such a statement is a supposition, since there is no objective evidence upon which to support such a belief. Faulkner has shown what a splendid story can be constructed upon such an assumption, but he takes elaborate precautions to prevent his readers from being able to prove its veracity. Neither Quentin's grandfather nor his father knew that Sutpen had fathered Bon; the "fact" is first revealed to us by Shreve in an imaginative leap based upon the way Quentin has told him about Sutpen's early life. Shreve matter-of-factly tosses out this startling conclusion, which Quentin and his father had already arrived at independently and used as the basis for a whole new theory of Sutpen's life. Only later does Shreve ask Quentin where he got the additional information for a new version of the legend and intuits that it came from Quentin's visit to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa. Much later, when that visit is actually described, the reader can find no substantiating detail

that shows how Quentin learned the "truth" about Bon. Instead, Faulkner provides us with several unsatisfying possible explanations.

For instance, Quentin might have found out about Bon by seeing Clytie at Sutpen's Hundred. Earlier, Shreve had said, ". . . you wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about if you hadn't been out there and seen Clytie. Is that right?" And Quentin answers, "Yes." Shreve's emphasis on the importance of seeing Clytie is repeated in his imaginative reconstruction of Quentin's meeting with her: ". . . and she didn't tell you in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret; nevertheless she told you, or at least all of a sudden you knew——" One possible source for Quentin's certainty, then, is simply the sight of this one part-Negro child of Thomas Sutpen, whose presence suggests the possibility that another such child was born and caused all the mysterious difficulty. Such a tenuous connection between stimulus and response is characteristic of the operations of the human mind in its search for valid meaning that Faulkner depicts in this novel.

There is no certainty, however, that Quentin's insight comes from Clytie. When he recalls the visit himself at the end of the novel, he attributes no particular significance to the meeting with Sutpen's daughter. Instead, he suggests a wholly different line of reasoning that might have led to the new theory. When he catches sight of Jim Bond in the hall, "He remembered how he thought, 'The scion, the heir, the apparent (though not obvious).' " "Apparent" and "not obvious" serve more than a punning function to imply the operations of Quentin's own mind and perceptions. Since, at this point in chronological time, Quentin knows nothing of Bon's parenthood, his insight suggests a real revelation. It is cast into relief a moment later when Rosa orders Jim Bond to help her up, saying, "You aint any Sutpen!" Again, though, Quentin does not dramatize the moment as an illumination; the whole episode is written to emphasize the confrontation with Henry as climactic. And yet, that confrontation is masterfully reported in as inconclusive and frustrating a form as possible. The nearly perfect chiastic structure of the dialogue in this scene—with the first question-and-

answer pairing repeated as the final pairing, the second repeated as the next-to-last, the third almost exactly repeated as the fourth—precisely captures the quality of Quentin's mind as it is revealed throughout the novel, endlessly circling round and round an experience without ever coming to grips with it. The dialogue is somewhat like the ripples Quentin visualizes on a pond when he realizes he is doomed to retrace his father's steps. Thus, Quentin's comment on the impact of his dialogue with Henry is poignantly characteristic: ". . . waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived." The form of the dialogue and everything we know about Quentin strongly suggests that nothing conclusive or objectively verifiable took place at Sutpen's Hundred. The scene functions as another tantalizing enigma which Faulkner leaves for us to solve. He teases us with numerous possibilities, none of them wholly satisfying. Like his characters, we cannot connect a cause with its effect. We know that Quentin decided Bon was Sutpen's Negro son; we know that his trip to the great mansion brought about this decision; but we know no more. No one ever knows.

Faulkner taunts and challenges his readers in similar ways throughout the novel, carefully leading up to a revelation that will illuminate the obscure corners of the legend and then leaving us in darkness. His central theme is the mystery of human conduct and man's futile but compulsive efforts to control, limit, define, explain, and conquer that mystery. Every one of the characters—both the narrators and those narrated about—is seeking not only an answer to the mystery of his own and others' experience, but, as an essential corollary to this search for motive, justification, and understanding, each also hunts for some kind of affirmation that his existence is endowed with *permanent* significance, some assurance that his finite being can transcend the limits of time and space and reach infinitude.

Sutpen's obsession with his "design" is the most important search of this kind, since it serves as the model for all the others; and it is also the compelling reason why his onlookers must return to his story over and over again. When he first outlines it to Quentin's grandfather, he speaks merely of competing with

and outdoing the rich landowners he envied as a boy, and he describes his decision to go to the West Indies by saying, "I realized that to accomplish my design I should need first of all and above all things money in considerable quantities and in the quite immediate future. . . ." Faulkner intentionally obscures the nature of this original, limited design by having Quentin interpose between the telling of Sutpen's decision and of his arrival in the West Indies the much later conversation between Sutpen and Quentin's grandfather during which Sutpen says about his first wife, "I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside." Faulkner's strategy here, as throughout the novel, is to telescope time so as to suggest that an original action contains within it all the later consequences to which it will lead, making potentialities into actualities. Yet, by emphasizing the limits of Sutpen's initial design, we can trace the tragic course of his obsession more clearly, observing the stages by which his energies become riveted upon the single goal of bearing a son, even when there is nothing much for that son to inherit and nothing left of the impulse behind the original design. Sutpen's attention thus shifts from a project he can achieve in his own lifetime to a defiant gesture toward the future, the age-old compulsion to insure immortality in the only imperfect manner nature will allow. Viewed in this light, his tragedy follows the arc not of Faustus, which Shreve jokingly suggests, but of Tamburlaine.

While *Absalom, Absalom!* pivots around Sutpen's lust for permanence, his story is framed at beginning and end by Rosa Coldfield's pathetic and muted quest for some sort of lasting gesture of her own. Before she has really begun her version of the Sutpen legend, Faulkner sets down her reason for summoning Quentin as the hope that "some day you will remember this and write about it." Yet, her wish for remembrance is the most hopeless of all, doomed in the reader's mind as soon as articulated. For Faulkner has already written the story of Quentin Compson with its tragic ending, so that all of Rosa's theorizing about his marriage and wife and house seems cruelly ironic.

Nevertheless, after Sutpen's story is told—as much of it as can be reconstructed—Rosa's hope is given voice once again, this time by Quentin's father in the letter that has lain open in the cold Cambridge room all through the wintry hours of recitation and fantasizing: "*Surely it can harm no one to believe that perhaps she has escaped not at all the privilege of being outraged and amazed and of not forgiving but on the contrary has herself gained that place or bourne where the objects of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer ghosts but are actual people to be actual recipients of the hatred and the pity.*" Rosa's death had been announced in the beginning of the letter over 200 pages earlier, at the central point of the novel when the locale changes from Mississippi to Massachusetts. Faulkner thus carefully constructs the novel around Rosa's hopes, using her as one of the minor variations on his central theme. Her position all through the work—as a fixed and frozen figure who, as Quentin says, "died young of outrage in 1866 one summer"—emphasizes her timelessness in the present and her need for some kind of memorial that will outlast her own life span. Mr. Compson's vision of her after death, frozen forevermore into the same attitudes and passions that possessed her in life, is the final reduction of all human pretensions to a meaningful immortality, any hopes for betterment and growth. As such, it picks up and reinforces Quentin's desperate cry just before he recalls the letter—"Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore Nevermore Nevermore"—and serves as a fitting counterpart to Shreve's cynical speech immediately following, which reduces the whole Sutpen legend to a series of arithmetical equations, and concludes: ". . . it clears the whole ledger, you can tear all the pages out and burn them. . . ." Rosa's changeless, static existence finds its last reflection in, and is partly responsible for, the hopeless cry of Quentin that concludes the book and that implies allegiance to the values and commitments that have governed all the characters' lives.

The yearning for permanence may also be observed in the activity of Wash Jones, whom Quentin envisions in an afterlife similar to the one Mr. Compson constructs for Rosa. Quentin imagines Wash and Sutpen in "the same place" after death

talking together amicably, perhaps drinking as they had in life, with only the faintest recollection that something important had happened between them, and neither of them remembering what it was. "Then the shadow would fade, the wind die away until at last Jones would say, serene, not even triumphant: 'They mought have kilt us, but they aint whupped us yit, air they?' " The theme of *not knowing, not remembering*, not being able to take intellectual possession of one's own experience continues after death here. This is, of course, Quentin's vision and chiefly reveals the state of his mind, yet this depiction of business as usual on the other side of the grave serves as an ironic backdrop to the subsequent interpretations of Wash's life offered by Quentin and his father. Mr. Compson believed that for Wash the real world was "just a dream and an illusion" and the actual world was the one where Sutpen rode his great horse, looking to Wash like God Himself. Like God, Sutpen is "forever and forever immortal" to Wash, but this revelation comes just before Sutpen insults Wash's granddaughter and is cut down forever. Quentin then visualizes Wash immediately after the murder stripped of his illusions, as he waits fatalistically for the sheriff and his men to come, knowing "that if he ran he would be fleeing merely one set of bragging and evil shadows for another, since they (men) were all of a kind throughout all of earth which he knew. . . ." There are no more distinctions to be made between men now; human life is a stretch of meaningless time, a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing: "the murmuring of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beyond the immediate fury."

Of course, Wash's story comes to us filtered through the consciousnesses of Quentin and Mr. Compson, and it is their struggles for meaning and permanence, together with Sutpen's, which occupy the center of *Absalom, Absalom!* The most important gesture toward eternity that the novel records is the act of storytelling itself, already glimpsed in Rosa's futile yearning, further reflected in Judith's handing on of Bon's letter to Quentin's grandmother, and fully dramatized in Sutpen and in three generations of Compsons. Yet, it is far from Faulkner's purpose to glorify the act of fictionalizing, to say that life gains

significance through being analyzed, ordered, reconstituted for dramatic or historical purposes. The act of interpreting experience is possibly the highest of which man is capable, but it is simply another of his futile efforts to transcend finite limits, important only because of the struggle and ambition it involves and reveals, not because of its achievement. Storytelling is of necessity falsification, not a method of getting at the facts but a means of satisfying the innate human desire for logic and coherence. In the middle of Sutpen's recital of his early life to Quentin's grandfather, Quentin records his ancestor's dissatisfaction with a narrative that showed no "regard for cause and effect" and his insistence that Sutpen start over again. Even when Sutpen does begin again, however, Quentin goes on, "it was not absolutely clear—the how and the why he was there and what he was—since he was not talking about himself. He was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night." What is this "same story" that would have applied to "any man or no man"? Is it not the very search for and failure to find some lasting significance in life that every character in the novel is engaged in and that the telling of the story—from Sutpen to Quentin's grandfather to Mr. Compson to Quentin to Shreve—itself reflects? We never learn the how and the why and the what; Quentin says of Sutpen, "So he knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why," and the statement applies to everyone else in the novel. It is in this sense that "that best of ratiocination" undertaken by Quentin and Shreve is "after all . . . a good deal like Sutpen's morality and Miss Coldfield's demonizing." Each man searches for logic, for cause and effect, for meaning, and none is successful.

The fact remains that as we read through the book for the first time, desperately looking for "answers," we feel that we keep getting nearer and nearer the truth. But this feeling actually depends upon the emotional convictions of the successive narrators, not on any objectively verifiable information. The

account of the first narrator, Rosa, is full of admissions that nothing makes sense, that the motives of all the actors in her drama, including her own, are indecipherable, irretrievably lost. Because of this and because of her hysterical demonizing, the reader forgets that she is the only interpreter whose story is based upon firsthand observation and that her old-fashioned, theological view of the events is as plausible as any of the other attempts to order and explain them.

Mr. Compson seems to us at first more reliable than Rosa because he makes up for his personal distance from the legend by theorizing and philosophizing about it, and he compels our temporary credence by the passion and carefulness of his rendition. Although he admits that his explanation of Henry's reasons for leaving Sutpen's Hundred is unsatisfactory, he is as committed to the art of storytelling as are Quentin and Shreve later. His narrative of Henry and Bon in New Orleans is elaborately circumstantial and detailed and based upon the kind of psychological explanation of motives that we look for and believe in when we read conventional fiction. We are perfectly content to accept Mr. Compson's interpretation until Shreve and Quentin fabricate an even more compelling version.

When we hear from Quentin's grandfather, we feel we have moved even nearer to verifiable fact because his knowledge comes straight from the horse's mouth. We tend to forget that this is Sutpen's "story," not his biography, and to overlook all the reminders of its arbitrariness and subjectivity. The narrative is riddled with unremembered details, unknown facts, and withheld information. It is only when we come to Shreve's and Quentin's account, which is nothing but fantasy, that we have left ambiguities and uncertainties behind altogether. As if to answer all those who did not know or did not remember, the young men insist on full awareness of all motives and circumstances by all the actors in their story. Compare, for instance, Mr. Compson's version of the ride away from Sutpen's Hundred in 1860—"Bon was riding beside [Henry], trying to find out from him what had happened"—with Shreve's and Quentin's reconstruction of the meeting of Henry and his father in the Confederate camp: "*To* [Henry] *it is logical and natural that*

their father should know of his and Bon's decision: that rapport of blood which should bring Bon to decide to write, himself to agree to it and their father to know of it at the same identical instant, after a period of four years, out of all time." *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates the paradoxical truth that only when the imagination is totally freed from the tyranny of known facts, from the chaotic puzzle of lived experience, is it able to create a picture of reality that is totally consistent, plausible, and convincing. The reckless bravado and assurance of Shreve's dramatization dare us to question any of its particulars. The young men draw us step by step into their imaginary world, until we actually enter their vision of the Civil War completely, with no narrative voice between us and the events chronicled. Have we not finally reached and recovered the past here?

The answer is *no*. We are still observing the anguished attempts of the living to explain the activities of the dead. Faulkner is careful to warn us at the beginning of the young men's fantasy that we are not to look for facts and objective truth from them. They start by imagining Bon and Judith pacing in the garden among the luxuriating and exotic blooms of the South, and Faulkner comments: "It would not matter here in Cambridge that the time had been winter in that garden too, and hence no bloom nor leaf. . . . But that did not matter because it had been so long ago . . . and that not mattering either: what faces and what names they called themselves and were called by so long as the blood coursed. . . ." What matters is the present, not the past, and what the boys record is the behavior they imagine they themselves would have performed had they been Bon and Henry. Shreve's whimsical insistence upon calling Rosa Coldfield "Aunt Rosa"—a label Quentin finally stops objecting to—not only suggests her mediate position between the Sutpens and Compsons and her close similarity to Quentin, but identifies Quentin with Henry Sutpen, whose aunt really was Rosa Coldfield. In several other ways Shreve's reconstruction of the Henry-Judith-Bon triangle recalls the Quentin-Caddy-Ames tangle described in *The Sound and the Fury*, which was perhaps already familiar to Shreve. Faulkner insists on reminding us that it is Shreve and Quentin who ride through

the Mississippi countryside, and, thus, when the italicized passages of direct depiction occur, he makes sure that we know these are continuations of the boys' "game," not literal events. During the unforgettable scene of Henry's meeting with his father, Sutpen is made to say, "*You were hit at Shiloh, Colonel Willow tells me,*" thus picking up Shreve's conjecture that it was Henry, not Bon, who was wounded at Shiloh. This was one of Shreve's frankly fabricated notions, offered because it simply "had to be," given the premises of his theory. As such, it fits beautifully into the total scheme, and we are bludgeoned into accepting the scene of the father-son confrontation by the boys' insistence upon Henry's complete and conscious mental grasp of the experience: "*Nor did Henry ever say that he did not remember leaving the tent. He remembers all of it. He remembers. . . .*" The verb "*remembers*" keeps echoing throughout the passage. This compulsive stress upon the act of recalling is picked up again in the scene where Henry's counterpart, Quentin, goes to Sutpen's Hundred. Yet, even with these assurances of intellectual possession and after all their fanciful literary reconstructions of the past and their extraordinary investment and commitment of imagination, Quentin is forced to admit to Shreve that he is hopelessly confused. To Shreve's question whether he understands the South, Quentin answers, "I don't know. . . . Yes, of course I understand it. . . . I don't know." Their theory about the Sutpen legend is most ingenious and attractive, but it doesn't answer any of the really important questions raised by the known facts. If there is such a simple, neat, "logical" explanation for the Sutpen mysteries, what is to be learned from the legend? Why is Quentin still so vexed and dissatisfied in the last section of the novel? Why is there no sense of exultation and achievement at having "cracked" the mystery? Shreve's comment, at the end of his exhausting recital, is, "Let's get out of this refrigerator and go to bed." What has been accomplished by all the ratiocination and the passion?

Once again, Faulkner stresses that it is the struggle, not the achievement, that is memorable. No single human act, however profound or significant, can hold the attention for very long. Having amused himself with the foibles of these queer Southern-

ers for a while, Shreve, at least, is ready to move on to something new. Quentin's position is more complicated. He seems doomed to keep haunting the places where his honor died, but his final assertion that he doesn't hate the South suggests that he is not yet ready to throw himself into the Charles. However, *Absalom, Absalom!* has provided sufficient material to explain the inevitability of that final act. Quentin has not only observed and articulated the failure of all the attempts to assert a more than momentary significance, but he too is engaged in the same hopeless task through an imaginative projection of his own obsessions upon the historical personalities he is trying to recreate. In response to Quentin's desire to see *love* exemplified in the Bon-Henry-Judith story, Shreve imagines Bon to be interested in Judith in language nearly identical to that Quentin used to express his passion for his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*: "And who to say if it wasn't maybe the possibility of incest, because who . . . has been in love and not discovered the vain evanescence of the fleshly encounter . . . but maybe if there were sin too maybe you would not be permitted to escape, uncouple, return.—Aint that right?" To this Quentin, after a long silence, replies, "I don't know." Then Henry, in one of the italicized passages of direct dramatization, is imagined by both boys to be grateful for Bon's decision to marry Judith "*not for the incest of course but because at last they were going to do something, at last he could be something even though that something was the irrevocable repudiation of the old heredity and training and the acceptance of eternal damnation.*" Even in the world of his imagination, where everything is possible, Quentin cannot so contradict the facts of human experience as to give Henry that eternal achievement. Indeed, one reason why he is so devastated by the meeting with Henry at Sutpen's Hundred is the revelation of the literal, squalid reality to which Henry and his own romantic fantasy have been reduced. Once again, the limits of significant and heroic action and meaningful choice have shrunk to nothing. Quentin and Henry, like all those who have gone before them and all those who will come after, are committed irrevocably to this world of adventitiousness, impermanence, chance, and change. Quentin

can imagine making gestures to defy time, but he cannot actually perform them, much less conquer time itself.

The text of *Absalom, Absalom!* ends with Quentin's recognition of his hopeless impasse, but Faulkner has not finished demonstrating the futility of our quest for objectively verifiable truth and certainty. He has additional jokes to play upon our lust for logic or for what he calls, with respect to Sutpen's motivating drive, some "formula and recipe of fact and deduction." All printings of the novel, beginning with the original Random House edition of 1936, provide a "Chronology" and "Genealogy" after the text. This material is not like the "Appendix" Faulkner wrote many years later for *The Sound and the Fury*, but an integral part of the experience of reading *Absalom, Absalom!* Indeed, Bernard De Voto, one of the original reviewers of the novel, felt that the ordering provided by the chronology and genealogy was an essential aid to the reader, and that this material should be studied first so as to facilitate understanding of the Sutpen legend. This facetious notion stems not only from a misconception of the novel's purpose but from a careless reading of the two lists. Far from helping to unscramble the confused events of the narrative, these appendices add to our uncertainty because of the numerous discrepancies between their details and the text. Faulkner must have been aware of these inconsistencies, and have intentionally included them in order to develop his theme still further at the expense of the reader's expectations. The chronology, in particular, reads like the lucubrations of some crazy and drunken Kinbote wilfully misinterpreting his Southern Shade. Not only are the birth and death dates of Ellen Coldfield and the birth date of Charles Bon different from those in the text, but Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon's name is spelled here St. Velery and barbarized in the genealogy as Charles Etienne de Saint Velery. All of these details could have been easily squared with the text by a quick check of the passages describing the tombstones in the Sutpen graveyard. The dates labeled 1910 in the chronology should be corrected to read 1909. The misdating is precisely the sort of mistake a careless reader would make, but it is hardly likely

that Faulkner did so unintentionally, since he correctly records in the genealogy that Quentin died in 1910.

The most interesting errors have to do with Sutpen's early life. The birth date, for instance, is given as 1807, though Shreve estimates it to have been 1808. Since he is figuring backward twenty-five years from 1833, and since we don't know the month of birth, 1807 is as plausible a suggestion as 1808, though one wonders on what authority it was chosen. When we recall that Sutpen himself "did not know within a year on either side just how old he was," the date begins to seem completely arbitrary. Our suspicions are confirmed upon reading in the chronology under 1820: "Sutpen ran away from home. Fourteen years old." Not only does this contradict the text, which says he went to sea in 1823, but it cannot possibly be squared with the time scheme of the chronology itself. There was no reason for Faulkner to call attention to such a discrepancy by inserting "Fourteen years old"—a kind of dating used nowhere else in the chronology—if he wanted the material to seem authentic.

The fact is, of course, that a reliable and objective time-schedule would run counter to all the intentions of the novel. It would suggest that some kind of logical, rigid pattern that makes absolute sense can be imposed upon human experience and that an ordering of events in the form of a timetable will actually tell us something about the lives whose dates it records. The odd chronology Faulkner provides is the product of more-than-usually fallible human ingenuity working upon the hints and conjectures contained within the text. One can imagine the fun Faulkner had compiling this idiotic chart, the sort of fun he has throughout the novel mocking our attempts to find logical connections between events (and there is considerably more wry humor in *Absalom, Absalom!* than is generally recognized). Not only does the chronology contradict the text and itself, but it contains a great deal of whimsically irrelevant information that contributes nothing to our understanding of the saga and simply adds to the burden of meaningless and unassimilated "facts" of which we have far too many already. The chronol-

ogy, in fact, should make us question whether we have any of the facts straight about the Sutpen legend. Who knows how Charles Bon's son's name should be spelled, or even if the child taken in by Clytie and Judith *was* Bon's son, since the boy himself doesn't know? Who knows if Bon was born in Haiti, since Judith, who ought to know better than Shreve or Quentin, put on his tombstone that he was born in New Orleans? One thing is clear: the list can obviously not be used to corroborate any of the suppositions provided by the narrators since they are so wilfully confused themselves.

Faulkner pursues his Nabokovian game to delightful ends in the "Genealogy," where he continues to pretend at times that he is a literal and not very bright reader, while he plays at being God at other times. By filling us in on the activities of Shreve after the novel closes and on his present whereabouts, for instance, he reminds us that our knowledge is hopelessly limited and that he has not allowed us to share more than a tiny portion of the vast and wonderful material he has at hand. The technique of the whole novel and the attitude of each of the narrators suggest that the different interpretations are drawn from a great reservoir of material which is all known beforehand and which needs only the proper ordering and perspective for its full significance to be revealed. Of course, that perfect insight is never provided, but Faulkner undercuts even the possibility of such a solution by suggesting through his chaotic appended details that there is no rounded and complete whole within which the meaning of his novel can be contained. The effect of his genealogy is to evoke the capriciousness of human experience and the arbitrariness of structuring it in ordered works of art. This was the effect Gide aimed at in *The Counterfeiters* and stressed by including an "Appendix" of factual material upon which his story was based, though Faulkner's purpose is not so specifically spelled out nor so schematically pursued.

In all the ways examined in this study, *Absalom, Absalom!* represents a radical questioning of the ability of the human mind to deal adequately with its own experience. The very title suggests that none of the attempts to explain the Sutpen story is accurate or at least complete. The Biblical story of David,

Absalom, and Amnon stresses quite different relationships and aspects of the legend from any given prominence in the novel. Out of the chaos of conflicting opinions and forgotten facts that form the subject of the work, however, one idea continues to be articulated and to resonate in harmony with the structure and central theme. This is the idea that the mind, for all its arrogance and self-regard, is merely an instrument altogether inferior in strength, accuracy, and refinement to the body and the physical senses. Bon expresses this notion in his letter to Judith about the hardship and privation of the war, to which, he says, man never becomes really inured: ". . . *it is only the mind, the gross omnivorous carrion-heavy soul which becomes inured; the body itself, thank God, never reconciled from the old soft feel of soap and clean linen and something between the sole of the foot and the earth to distinguish it from the foot of a beast.*" Rosa echoes him in her fierce recital of the meeting with Clytie after she has learned of Bon's death. She speaks of the "*touch of flesh with flesh*" that reaches to "*the citadel of the central I-Am's private own: not spirit, soul; the liquorish and ungirdled mind is anyone's to take in any darkened hallway of this earthly tenement. But let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too.*" Shortly afterward she describes in a very moving passage the end result of all her disillusionment about Judith's grief for Bon, the end of the agonizing process by which the mind—her own mind—confronts and comes to terms with its own fantasies. What is left is not the mind at all, nor anything to do with it, but some residue of physical sensations: "*That is the substance of remembering—sense, sight, 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. . . . Ay, grief goes, fades; we know that—but ask the tear ducts if they have forgotten how to weep.*" These beautiful words may serve as an epigraph for the entire novel, and they should be set beside the speech Quentin and Shreve attribute to Bon as the Civil War is drawing to its close: ". . . *if you haven't got honor*

and pride, then nothing matters. Only there is something in you that doesn't care about honor and pride yet that lives . . . that probably even when this is over and there is not even defeat left, will still decline to sit still in the sun and die, but will be out in the woods, moving and seeking where just will and endurance could not move it, grubbing for roots and such—the old mindless sentient undreaming meat that doesn't even know any difference between despair and victory. . . ." This, tentative as it may be, represents the affirmation of the novel, the idea summed up in the word that is repeated over and over throughout the text, "undefeat." The restless struggle and dissatisfaction, the refusal to acknowledge defeat, exemplified by all the characters, is a form of that permanence for which they all seek, yet, ironically, the form none of them is willing to accept. Any other achievement satisfactory to the restless intellect the novel proves to be a dream and a delusion. *Absalom, Absalom!*, like *The Sound and the Fury*, asserts that the old, mindless, sentient, undreaming meat endures. Yet, both novels are composed of and dedicated to the *mind's* search for purpose, meaning, and truth; how, then, one may ask, is the *body's* endurance relevant to that search?