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# William Faulkner, New Orleans, and Europe

Where is Europe in William Faulkner's fiction? Until relatively late in his career, when he acquired what he called "the habit of travel," Faulkner's personal experience of Europe was limited to a five-month visit in 1925. Similarly in his fiction, not until *A Fable*, published in 1954, does Faulkner locate an extended work in Europe, and even then he displaces the setting in time and space, into the western front of a World War I in which he himself did not directly participate. Earlier in his career, near the beginning, some European settings also appear, but they are sparse. Only in a few early short stories, also set in World War I – "Ad Astra," for example, and "Turnabout" – and in a couple of outgrowths of the 1925 visit – an abandoned novel, "Elmer," and a short story, "Divorce in Naples" – does Faulkner directly depict European settings and directly address European experience.

Yet Europe does appear repeatedly in Faulkner's works, not as a geographical reality but metaphorically, displaced into an American setting. Its name is New Orleans. In the American popular imagination, New Orleans, and to a considerable extent Louisiana as a whole, exists in counterpoint to the rest of the nation. The image is familiar: the "Big Easy," "laissez le bon temps rouler," jazz and zydeco music, French and Cajun cuisine, Mardi Gras, an atmosphere of sensual indulgence coded as Latin and black, widespread political corruption. Yet as the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina revealed, underlying this popular image is a complex and troubling reality, at times tragic, at times ennobling. And standing behind this reality in turn is a long history stretching back to the establishment of Louisiana as a French colony in 1718, a history that created in New Orleans and Louisiana a French-derived alternative not only to the dominant Anglo-American culture of the nation as a whole but to the rest of the Deep South. In that alternative, Faulkner found first of all an opportunity to question his early allegiance to nineteenth-century artistic practices and aesthetic dogmas. As his career advanced, he found other opportunities as well – most notably, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, an opportunity to explore both the Jamesian theme of European sophistication and American innocence and an urgent political question facing America and Europe at the time of the novel's composition, of the choice between a politics of authority and a politics of equality.

As a context in which to consider Faulkner's uses of New Orleans in his fiction, it will be helpful to summarize a few of the salient features of Louisiana's history as a colony and as a state. The eighty-five years of Louisiana's existence as a colony, first of France, then of Spain, gave the region a distinctive identity in ethnicity, language, religion, social and cultural practices, and racial relations. Central to the ethnic distinctiveness is the creole population of the region. As Virginia Domínguez has observed, the term "creole" admits of a variety of definitions, some of them politically charged. Does the term extend to all "locally born persons of nonnative origin," whether white or black? Or should it be limited to "persons born of European parents" (14)? I use the term here in its inclusive sense, adding the adjective "white" when speaking of descendants of European colonists, and using the term "afro-creole" for persons born of African or part-African parentage in Louisiana and other French or Spanish colonies in the West Indies. In its inclusive sense, the term "creole" designates the main early population of New Orleans, French-speaking in language, Roman Catholic in religion, oriented toward France rather than toward Great Britain or Anglo-America in its intellectual, philosophical, and cultural interests – and, for the afro-creoles, inheritors as well of African cultural and intellectual traditions.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, after the Louisiana Purchase transferred the territory to the ownership of the United States, the white-creole population of New Orleans faced, and resisted with some success, pressure to assimilate to an increasingly numerous Anglo-American population. In 1803, when the Louisiana Purchase took place, the ratio of French to English speakers in New Orleans was approximately seven to one. Already by the end of that decade, the ratio had dropped to three to one, and in ensuing decades the ratio dropped much further. Between 1820 and 1840, the population of New Orleans grew from 27,176 to 102,193, with the increase fueled primarily by an immigration that was overwhelmingly non-French and non-Creole in composition, an influx made up of Anglo-Americans from other states in the union and of Irish and German newcomers

(Domínguez 110, 115). In this circumstance, it proved impossible for the white-creole population to remain in political control of the city and the state, and the struggle to retain a distinctive French-inflected identity focused instead on cultural attributes – on retaining the Napoleonic Code as the basis for the laws of Louisiana, on continuing to use French as the language of instruction in schools and on traveling to Europe for further education, on retaining Roman Catholicism as the dominant religion in the city, and, alternatively, on participating in the French anti-clerical tradition through the creation of Masonic lodges formed on French models (Domínguez 113; Logsdon and Bell 233-34).

Accompanying this effort to maintain a distinctive white-creole identity was the presence in Louisiana of a large population of afro-creoles, of particular significance because it was to a considerable extent not slave but free. Before the American takeover in 1803, a fair number of free blacks already resided in Louisiana, a result of the relatively liberal manumission policies of the 1728 "Code Noir" governing treatment of slaves in the colony, policies that included, for example, freedom being granted to a slave who married a free black and to slaves who performed meritorious actions in the service of the state (Sterkx 16-17). The population of this group increased significantly between 1790 and 1810 as a result of direct and indirect immigration from Saint Domingue, the French colony that later became Haiti. Because insufficient numbers of white Frenchmen had chosen to become plantation owners in the French West Indies, there had emerged a population of free blacks who themselves owned plantations and slaves. In Saint Domingue at the beginning of the French Revolution, according to Caryn Bell, free blacks "possessed one-third of the plantation property, one-quarter of the real estate, and one-quarter of the slaves" (10). In the aftermath of the slave uprising leading to the creation of Haiti, many of these afro-creoles immigrated to Louisiana, this despite a determined effort by Spanish and American authorities to prohibit the entry of free blacks, first from Saint Domingue, thereafter from anywhere. As a result of this influx, Louisiana had a free black population far surpassing in numbers that of any other southern state. In the 1860 census, for example, Louisiana had 18,647 free blacks, as compared to 753 in Mississippi and 355 in Texas (Logsdon and Bell 209 fn 15). Further, the majority of these individuals resided in New Orleans, approximately 11,000 out of a total black population in the city of around 25,000 (Foner 45).

Relations between the white-creole and the afro-creole populations were far more permeable before the Civil War than after. During Reconstruction, the rivalry between white creoles and Anglo-Americans slackened, as the sudden emergence of a large population of freedmen caused both groups, in Domínguez's words, to perceive "the entire colored population as a common enemy and [to subordinate] the Creole/American opposition for the sake of fighting together for white supremacy" (136). But before the war, many white- and afro-creoles perceived themselves as belonging to a "racially undifferentiated social category," united by heritage and by shared cultural and political aspirations (141) And this perception was aided by the distinctive characteristics of the afro-creole community itself. As Eric Foner observes,

> [t]he wealth, social standing, education, and unique history of the [free black] community [in New Orleans] set it apart not only from the slaves, but from most other free persons of color. The majority were the light-skinned descendants of unions between French settlers and black women or of wealthy mulatto emigrants from Haiti, and identified more fully with European than American culture. Many spoke only French and educated their children at private academies in New Orleans, or in Paris. Although barred from suffrage, they enjoyed far more rights than free blacks in other states, including the right to travel without restriction and [to] testify in court against whites. (47)

Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that there emerged a distinct set of creole social practices: mixed black-white balls, for example, and the custom of *plaçage*, wherein an afro-creole woman entered into a marriage of convenience with a white man, usually a white creole, with contractual guarantees provided for the financial support of the woman and of any children born of the union (Bell 112; Sterkx 250-51).

These practices and other integrated social practices, such as the existence of mixed-race Masonic lodges, declined after the war, as the white- and afro-creole communities grew apart from one another. A further outcome of the war was the emergence of a self-consciously separate tradition of afro-creole political activism. Unable to engage in political efforts on behalf of a racially undifferentiated creole population, the afro-creoles faced the question of whether to amalgamate their political aspirations with those of the recently freed slaves. An older tradition of scholarship emphasizes the reluctance of the afro-creoles to answer this question positively, viewing them instead as "aristocrats of color who identified with [Louisiana's] slaveholding elite" (Bell 4). But more recent commentators have demonstrated that this view did not "define the general attitudes of the overwhelming bulk of the black creole community and its leaders" (Logsdon and Bell 218). These commentators have emphasized instead the existence "in [New Orleans's] Afro-Creole leaders . . . [of] a well-developed philosophy of political radicalism . . . [r]ooted in the egalitarianism of the age of democratic revolution, a [Roman] Catholic universalist ethic, and Romantic philosophy." They have emphasized as well the contribution of this group to the creation during Louisiana's constitutional convention of 1867 of "arguably the Reconstruction South's most radical blueprint for change," one which "alone among Reconstruction constitutions explicitly required equal treatment on public transportation," and one which joined only South Carolina's in forbidding "segregation in public schools" (Bell 3-4, 1).

For both the white- and afro-creole communities in New Orleans, the period after Reconstruction was characterized by a rapid, but never entirely complete, submergence of creole identity into the dominant Anglo-American culture. As white creoles, "overwhelmed by demography and history, fiercely [asserted] their 'whiteness' at the dawn of the Jim Crow era" (Hirsch 318), they also sought to preserve their cultural distinctiveness. The emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of a number of white-creole cultural organizations can be understood as a rear-guard action, an attempt to promote the use of the French language and an appreciation of French culture in the face of the realization that many younger members of the community had "lost the ability to speak French or to read French literature and history" (Logsdon and Bell 259). Yet the persistence of the white-creole community in creating these organizations, with new ones coming into being as late as 1929 and 1930, speaks also to the continuation of a distinct identity and ethos (Domínguez 147). For the afro-creole community as well, the years after Reconstruction were a period of struggle to resist assimilation, in this instance into a degraded and segregated status. It is no accident that Homer Plessy, the plaintiff in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1893 lawsuit whose unsuccessful outcome inaugurated the "one drop" rule, was an afro-creole, or that the funding for the lawsuit came almost entirely from the afro-creole community in New Orleans. In this instance, as in many other political struggles and cultural efforts, extending all the way up to the election in 1978 of Ernest "Dutch" Morial, an afro-creole, as the first black mayor of the city, the Anglo-American attempt to impose a binary system of racial classification on New Orleans never completely succeeded in eradicating the afro-creole population's sense of its distinctive identity.

When Faulkner resided in New Orleans for a time, first in 1925, then again in 1926, he would have found in the city an evocative alternative to the small-town life that he had hitherto mainly known. The profound impression that the city made on him reveals itself primarily in creative works from two periods in his artistic career: 1) a series of vignettes and sketches and the novel *Mosquitoes,* written during the time of the first visit and shortly thereafter; and 2) three novels – *Pylon, Absalom, Absalom!*, and *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (originally entitled *The Wild Palms*) – written in the mid-1930s. In the first of these groups, although the diversity of the city clearly fascinated Faulkner, the distinctive history and population sketched above scarcely reveal themselves. In the series of brief vignettes entitled "New Orleans," published in the literary magazine *The Double Dealer*, there appears, as James G. Watson observes, "no named street or restaurant or park, no historical monument or person or event, that is specifically associated with the city or that might call the city specifically to mind" (217). In the longer sketches, published in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, and in *Mosquitoes,* this lack of geographical specificity is mitigated, but only slightly. In both the sketches and the novel (the novel especially), street names and a few landmarks – the Cabildo, Jackson Square and its statue of Andrew Jackson, St. Louis Cathedral – are mentioned. But the impression remains, as Watson says, that at this point in his career, "Faulkner was . . . more concerned with states of being than with an actual place" (217). Similarly, the vignettes, the sketches, and the novel depict the city's non-Anglo population not as creoles, white or black, but in a more contemporary guise, as a population of recent immigrants, mainly south European in origin.

The lack of attention in these early works to the city's history and its creole population results in part from changes that the city itself had undergone by the 1920s. During his stays in New Orleans, Faulkner resided in the French Quarter, which by then had largely been abandoned by the city's creole population. A raffish slum, the home of much of the city's criminal element, and the center of its artistic life, the French Quarter provided Faulkner with a rich array of character types – racetrack touts, beggars, bootleggers, artists and their hangers-on – to depict, but not with first-hand knowledge of the city's racial and ethnic diversity as historically formed (McKinney 51-54; Holditch 21-39). There is also a more pervasive reason for this inattention, which is the role played by European literary antecedents in Faulkner's artistic apprenticeship. As various commentators have shown, the New Orleans vignettes and sketches are the work of a writer heavily influenced by nineteenth-century Romantic, Victorian, and *fin de siècle* artists and artistic traditions. The Wealthy Jew's claim in "New Orleans" (echoed in *Mosquitoes*) to "love three things: gold; marble and purple; splendor, solidity, color" (3) quotes Theophile Gautier's *Mlle. de Maupin*; the sketch entitled "The Priest" quotes and revises Swinburne's "In the Orchard," and the sketches as a whole are formed on models derived from Stéphane Mallarmé and Oscar Wilde (Watson 220-23; Millgate 300 fn 95). At the heart of this literary inheritance, as Faulkner understood it at the beginning of his career, is a view of art as a realm of the spirit separated from mundane reality. Hence the vignettes depict time not as history or memory but as mutability, and the sketches of life in the French Quarter depict their characters more as types, usually lacking either first or last names, than as individuals.

Already in these novice works, though, and more fully in *Mosquitoes*, Faulkner had begun to move toward the understanding of art exhibited in his mature fiction. The New Orleans sketches show a nascent interest in the use of dialect and of interior monologue and in the rendering of events from multiple perspectives, and they introduce a number of characters and situations – most notably, the idiot clutching a broken narcissus in "The Kingdom of God," who foreshadows Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* – that reappear in Faulkner's later fiction (Singal 59; Faulkner, *Sketches*, Introduction xxviii). In *Mosquitoes*, this move forward entails a disavowal, through satire, of Faulkner's earlier investment in nineteenth-century aesthetic dogmas. Mrs. Maurier (whose name echoes that of the nineteenth-century Romantic novelist, George du Maurier) and her epigone, Ernest Talliaferro, are depicted as fatuous devotees of a belief that "[t]he Soul's hunger . . . is the true purpose of Art," and that art and beauty (usually capitalized in their representations) are unrelated to "the grosser appetites" (184). In contrast to this spiritualizing conception, the novel as a whole advances a view of art as needing to force its way past repression, into the "park of dark and rootless trees which Dr. Ellis and your Germans have recently thrown open to the public" (251). This movement is dramatized in a shift undergone by the sculptor, Gordon, who is the most fully authentic artist among the novel's cast of characters. At the outset of the book, Gordon is engaged in sculpting the headless torso of a breastless, virginal young woman, whereas at the end he displays a clay head of Mrs. Maurier in which the "eyes were caverns thumbed with two motions into the dead familiar astonishment of her face; and yet, behind them . . . there was something else – something that exposed her face for the mask it was, and still more, a mask unaware" (322).

As André Bleikasten has observed, the contrast between the two sculptures encodes a move from a "romantic impulse to sever art from life" to a "wish to relate it back to life." Even the material of the two artefacts expresses this difference, for whereas the statue embodies in the "cold purity and hard splendor of marble . . . a solitary dream of sexless beauty and timeless youth," "[t]he grey earthiness of clay . . . reveals the humble truth of [an aging] human face" (Bleikasten 27). Within this overall shift, the New Orleans setting of the prologue and epilogue of the novel gains, if not direct engagement with the city's distinctive history, at least symbolic amplitude. Mrs. Maurier and Ernest Talliaferro's understanding of art as genteel and refined comes accompanied by a personal fastidiousness that leads Ernest, for example, to spread his handkerchief before sitting down in Gordon's atelier and to view the empty milk bottle he has been sent to replenish as "unbearably dirty" (12-13). By comparison, "New Orleans, the vieux carré," is depicted as "an aging yet still beautiful courtesan," and its tawdriness is depicted positively, as consisting of "old iron lovely as dingy lace, and shrieking children from south Europe once removed and wild and soft as animals and cheerful with filth; and old rich food smells, smells rich enough to fatten the flesh through the lungs" (10, 294).

This depiction presents the French Quarter as a material embodiment of the novel's aspiration toward an alternative to a nineteenth-century view of art, one in which beauty can be understood, in the words of the character identified only as the Semitic man, as "a thing unseen, suggested: natural and fecund and foul" (335). The association of beauty with fecundity, dirt, and south European immigrants – Pete's brother's restaurant is described as having formerly been "a dingy room fecund with the rich heavy odor of Italian cooking" (296) – also functions in an American and regional context, as an alternative to the bucolic and optimistic view of art espoused by Dawson Fairchild, the character in whom Faulkner gently parodies Sherwood Anderson, his former mentor. Fairchild, the Semitic man says, will "always be a babe in that wood" opened to view by "Dr. Ellis and your Germans" (251); Fairchild's writing seems fumbling, he says, "because of [Fairchild's] innate humorless belief that . . . life at bottom is sound and admirable and fine" (242). Hence it is significant that the Semitic man's ecstatic rhapsody about beauty as fecund and foul and about wanting "[t]o look into all the darkened rooms in the world" (336) ends with the sculptor Dawson entering such a room, a brothel, and with Fairchild instead "leaning against a dark wall, vomiting" (340).

Faulkner's use of the New Orleans setting in *Mosquitoes* does not extend very far beyond these attempts to express, through temporal and regional polarities, an alternative to his inherited aesthetic beliefs. Part of the rich potentiality of Faulkner's later location of his fiction in a Yoknapatawpha setting is the variety of cultural alternatives that that location allows him to explore: not only the contrasts between Europe and America and between the American north and south but contrasts within the south itself, between a provincial north Mississippi and a tidewater aristocracy on the one hand and a creole New Orleans and Louisiana on the other. The second of these southern contrasts makes a slight appearance in *Mosquitoes*, in Ernest Talliaferro's fear that his true identity, as a parvenu émigré from northern Alabama whose real name is Tarver, will be discovered (32-33). And the creole heritage of New Orleans makes a slight appearance as well, in the account of Mrs. Maurier's past, wherein we learn that after arriving from New England she had fallen in love with "a young chap," apparently a creole, "penniless but real people, who led cotillions and went without gloves to send her flowers and glacé trifles from the rue Vendôme," only to be forced instead into a loveless marriage with an arriviste older man, who before the Civil War had been the overseer of a plantation that after the war he managed to acquire (324-25). But these further appearances of the New Orleans setting are only hints. Not until Faulkner revisits New Orleans in his novels of the mid-1930s, when region and history had become fully functional elements in his fiction, will the city's historical and regional singularity truly manifest itself.

Nowhere is this revisitation of greater complexity than in *Absalom, Absalom!* In the other two of his novels of the mid-1930s in which New Orleans appears as a setting, Faulkner basically reconfigures contemporary events: in *Pylon*, he depicts the 1934 opening of Shushan Airport, renamed here as Feinman Airport in a New Orleans renamed as

New Valois; and in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem,* he revisits the great 1927 Mississippi River flood, including as the climactic event of the "Old Man" sections of the novel the dynamiting of the levees south of New Orleans, an action taken to protect the city from inundation. These representations are of interest both as artistic achievements and as measures of the degree to which by this point in his career Faulkner had become committed to a fictional method in which symbolism arises out of, rather than is opposed to, representations of quotidian reality. But as a considerable body of criticism has shown, New Orleans and related settings play a more intricate and far-reaching role in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Richard Godden, for example, argues that in depicting Thomas Sutpen's suppression of a slave insurrection in Haiti in the late 1820s, thirty years after the nation's independence, Faulkner engages in a deliberate anachronism, a way of introducing into his novel the fear of slave insurrections that Haiti came to symbolize in the pre-Civil War South (50-53; cf. Railey 135-36). And as Barbara Ladd has shown, the shifts in the various narrators' understandings of Charles Bon's creole identity can be read as embedding each of their narratives in a specific Southern and national historical context (*Nationalism* 141-55).

My focus here will fall on the novel's narrative rhetoric and, more broadly, on that rhetoric's political implications. For this purpose, the most important references to New Orleans in the novel are its two appearances as an imagined setting, first in Chapter 4, in Mr. Compson's account of Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen's visit to the city in 1860, then again in Chapter 8, when Shreve McCannon and Quentin Compson first imagine Charles's early upbringing in the city, then offer their alternative version of his and Henry's visit. Central to Mr. Compson's account is Charles's introduction of Henry to the custom of *plaçage*, which has led Charles to participate in a morganatic marriage ceremony with his octoroon mistress. As depicted by Mr. Compson, Charles's slow revelation of the fact of the marriage and of related customs, such as New Orleans dueling practices, reconfigures the Jamesian theme of American innocence and European sophistication in a southern setting, as an encounter between a "monotonous provincial backwater" and a "city foreign and paradoxical" (86). Throughout the section, Charles is depicted as himself foreign, wearing a "slightly Frenchified cloak and hat" (76) and contemplating the "fetich-ridden moral blundering" of Thomas Sutpen's opposition to his and Judith's betrothal and of Henry's reaction to the news of the prior marriage from behind a "barrier of sophistication in comparison with which Henry and Sutpen were troglodytes" (74). Charles exhibits, Mr. Compson says, "an air of sardonic and indolent detachment like that of a youthful Roman consul making the Grand Tour of his day among the barbarian hordes which his grandfather conquered" (74).

It is worth asking whose sardonic and indolent detachment is on display in this account. In comparison to his characterization in *The Sound and the Fury*, Mr. Compson appears in *Absalom, Absalom!* almost entirely as a voice. Only when his hand is described as "looking almost as dark as a negro's against his linen leg" (71) are we given even a partial visual image of him; and accompanying this absence is the absence as well of the various behaviors – the alcoholism, the economic fecklessness, the failure to provide fatherly guidance – that provide a basis for a negative judgment of his moral character in the earlier novel. In this circumstance, as Stephen Ross has argued in a Bakhtinian analysis, Mr. Compson's voice functions as "a monological 'overvoice'" which merges with the idea of fatherhood, and in which "the word 'father' means a principle of authority far greater than Mr. Compson" himself (Ross, "Oratory" 79). Because this voice, as Ross argues elsewhere of all oratory, is "intended to imprison, to subjugate or mesmerize the reader-listener, and thus to inhibit interpretation" (Ross, *Voice* 209), only by an effort of will can readers recognize the extent to which Mr. Compson's narrative is a work of fiction, arising not only from the factual reality of Bon's relationship with his mistress and of the trip to New Orleans, but from his own subjective need.

When we make this effort, however, the nature of the need emerges from beneath Mr. Compson's efforts at obfuscation. From the moment near the outset of the chapter when he describes the characters in the story he is about to relate as "victims too as we are" (71), Mr. Compson aligns his own fatalism with the fatalism he ascribes to Charles Bon. It is a short step from noticing this alignment to recognizing a larger process of identification at work in which Bon, "the curious one to me" (74), serves as a fictional surrogate for Mr. Compson's sense of himself as someone too sophisticated for the provincial backwater in which he lives, yet doomed to live there nonetheless. And it is a short step as well to recognizing the element of resentment at work in his characterization of "Sutpen and Henry and the Coldfields" as "people . . . who have not quite yet emerged from barbarism" (75), a resentment fueled, if we invoke the knowledge of Mr. Compson we gain from *The Sound and the Fury*, by the contrast between Mr. Compson's turn-of-the-century economic failure and Sutpen's pre-Civil War arriviste success. Yet because Mr. Compson does not understand the historical sources of both his fatalism and his failure, their origin in the straitened economic and social circumstances of the post-Reconstruction South, the meaning of the story he tells is available to us as readers but not to him. Mr. Compson's willingness to rest content with a version of the story of Charles and Henry that "just does not explain" (80) arises not only from his fondness for paradox but from the protection that paradox affords him. Like Rosa Coldfield's willingness to think of Judith's marriage as "forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" (12), Mr. Compson tells a story that fails as convincing narrative in order to succeed as psychological self-defense (cf. Kartiganer 81-84).

Viewed in this light, Mr. Compson's allegiance to a Europeanized sophistication, coded as New Orleans, serves to protect an underlying innocence, one consisting of a lack of self-knowledge. As the novel advances, the representation of the nature of that innocence expands, not only in Mr. Compson's subsequent acts of narration but in the account of Thomas Sutpen's history as well, until it entails what Judie Newman has called the amnesia that is America's second name, the effort to deny the malign influence of the trauma of slavery and racism on Southern – and American – society, culture, and politics. When Quentin and Shreve revisit the story of Charles Bon in Chapter Eight, they confront this effort at denial. In doing so, they exhibit the same subjectivity as characterizes the earlier first-person narratives. Quentin and Shreve's narrative consists of an at times fevered adolescent fantasy in which a lawyer is invented who appears nowhere else in the novel and in which equally imaginary encounters between Charles Bon and his mother and Charles Bon and the lawyer are also depicted. The subjectivity of this and of the other first-person narratives in *Absalom, Absalom!* has led some commentators to view the novel as a celebration of indeterminacy in which history figures as a series of competing narratives for which no recoverable referent exists. But as Richard Gray has argued, following Frederic Jameson, the fact that history can only be understood as a series of narrative constructions does not lessen its power to constrain "our present experience," to render that experience not exclusively "a product of our own making, but . . . a consequence of the actions of past human agents" (209).

If this is so, then it follows that while we cannot avoid existing in relation to the past, we will necessarily interpret that relation in various fashions. And it follows as well that acknowledging the subjectivity of the competing narratives in *Absalom, Absalom!* should not lead to the conclusion that they are of equal value. Central to the interpretation being advanced here is the belief that Quentin and Shreve's Chapter Eight narrative is "better" than Rosa Coldfield's and Mr. Compson's earlier efforts, and even than their own in Chapters Six and Seven – not better in the sense of being more truthful, although the additional information garnered by Quentin during his encounter with Henry Sutpen allows for a richer explanation of the novel's central mystery than the ones provided in the earlier attempts, but better ethically. In a famous passage early in the chapter, the third-person narrator speaks of Quentin and Shreve as preparing to "overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false" (253). At a personal level, their narrative overpasses to love because they do not make of the story they construct simply a vehicle for personal grievance, and hence for self-justification, as do Rosa and Mr. Compson, but instead identify empathetically with the emotions of the characters whose story they tell. In broader social and political terms, the overpassing to love consists of a willingness on their part to confront the reality of racism and to explore ways in which that reality might be challenged and perhaps ameliorated.

Quentin and Shreve engage in this confrontation in part by revisiting and revising Mr. Compson's depiction of Charles Bon's creole identity. If we ask why they feel the need to invent the lawyer, the most obvious answer is that they require him as a surrogate father against which to project a narrative of a son's rebelliousness and yearning for acknowledgment by his true father. When considered in broader terms, creating the lawyer reveals a further purpose. It allows Quentin and Shreve to lend a political coloration to their narrative, for the lawyer enacts in miniature the dominance of Anglo-American over creole culture in pre-Civil War New Orleans. In order to "farm" his "private mad female millionaire" (241), the lawyer devises stratagems that take advantage of Eulalia Bon's cultural otherness, writing letters "in the English she couldn't read" (244) in which he pretends that the pursuit of Thomas Sutpen is nearing success. Here, Eulalia's monolingualism, her ability to read – and presumably to speak – only French, serves to signify not her cultural distinctiveness but her subaltern status. Similarly, though with a reversed emphasis, the final encounter between Charles Bon and the lawyer that Quentin and Shreve imagine enacts a fantasy of creole retaliation against Anglo-American "barbarism," as the lawyer's crude reference to Judith Sutpen as "a nice little piece" (270) leads to his being slapped by Bon and then being offered an opportunity for satisfaction in the form of a duel. And this offer leads in turn to the lawyer's abject acknowledgment that "I would not be your equal with pistols . . . [n]or knives or rapiers too" (271). Yet as Bon recognizes, his victory over the lawyer does not extend beyond his expertise in the dueling practices necessitated by allegiance to a creole code of honor. For in a broader venue – the realm of language and law within which Anglo-American immigrants to New Orleans had come to dominate the original creole inhabitants – as Bon says, "he would still beat me" (271; italics omitted).

In their use of the New Orleans setting, Quentin and Shreve evoke a different, more politically charged, historical specificity than that evoked by Mr. Compson in his depiction of the custom of *plaçage*. Their engagement with the thematics of race occurs not only through this evocation (and through allusion to the social realities of the 1910 setting of their act of reconstruction) but by their modeling the large-scale political struggle of the era in which the novel was written – the struggle, that is, between a politics of the right and of the left, a politics of authority and a politics of equality. The effort to embed Faulkner's novels in the contexts of the time of their composition has benefitted in recent years from the emergence of cultural materialist modes of analysis, an emergence that "affords," in the word of a recent practitioner, "a view of Faulkner as ideologically responsive to cultural politics rather than [as] far removed by the conditions of modernist solipsism or regional isolation" (Atkinson 7). In *Absalom, Absalom!* these interpretations have begun to see in Thomas Sutpen's single-minded effort to complete his design "echoes of the popular conception of the fascist dictator" (Brinkmeyer 91), whether in its European embodiments of Hitler and Mussolini or, nearer to home, in another evocation of Louisiana, in Huey Long, the United States senator and former governor whose control of Louisiana politics in the early 1930s led to frequent charges of demagoguery and fascism and whose assassination in 1935 occurred midway through Faulkner's drafting of the novel.[1] When considered in less directly mimetic terms, the presence in the novel of a politics of the right can be detected in that "monological overvoice" of which Stephen Ross speaks, the voice of fatherly authority that aligns on the one hand with the southern patriarchal social order and on the other with European and American fascism, with its ubiquitous rhetoric of "fatherland" and "fatherhood."

Where is a politics of the left in *Absalom, Absalom!*? A brief answer is that it resides in New Orleans' creole culture, where, as Mr. Compson says, Charles Bon's son, Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon, "could neither have heard yet nor recognized the term 'nigger,'" and where "pigmentation had no more moral value than the silk walls" of the "vacuum cell" where he "had been born and grown up" (161).[2] More broadly, the answer is in Charles Bon himself, whose shifting identity, at first white, then black, belies the rigid binarism supposedly enforced by the one-drop rule. More broadly still, as I have argued elsewhere, it resides in Quentin and Shreve's effort to replace Mr. Compson's rhetoric of fatherhood with a rhetoric, itself widespread in left-wing circles in the 1930s, of brotherhood. In the sixth and seventh chapters, when Quentin and Shreve tell a version of the Sutpen story primarily focused on Sutpen himself, Quentin says that Shreve "*sounds just like Father*" and that "*[m]aybe nothing ever happens once and is finished*" (147, 210). But when in the eighth chapter they shift their focus to Charles Bon, a voice distinguishable from Mr. Compson's emerges. At one level, in its "protective coloring of levity," its repeated reference to Sutpen as "the old man" and to Mr. Compson as "your old man" (225, 235, 274), the voice is identifiably Shreve's. But at another level, the voice expresses more than Shreve's individuality, for it seeks to become "the heart and blood of youth . . . strong enough and willing enough for two, for two thousand, for all" (236). It seeks to articulate a vision of human possibility in which the "ambiguous . . . dark fatherhead" could be "eluded" and "all boy flesh" could be "brothered perennial and ubiquitous everywhere under the sun" (240; Zender 21-22).

Faulkner's central trope for this vision of universal brotherhood is the process of imaginative identification that begins with Shreve paired with Charles and Quentin with Henry and that culminates with the four of them "compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither" (280). Considered socially and politically, this moment of cross-regional and cross-racial identification can be assigned a variety of names – hybridity, multi-culturalism, or, as Edouard Glissant would have it, creolization, where the word "creole" expands beyond its literal meaning to signify a broad-scale process of racial and ethnic interpenetration (270; cited in Ladd, "William Faulkner" 32). In the seventy years since the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* American society has moved, if at times grudgingly, toward replacing its former racial self-understanding with this more inclusive view. But within the novel itself, for Quentin at least, the moment of cross-racial contact is merely momentary. It extends only to a retelling of Charles Bon's story in which the quest for universal brotherhood is subordinated to Bon's yearning for fatherly acknowledgment. And it culminates in an imagined act of silent self-sacrifice on Bon's part, one that has the effect of concealing from anyone's view but Quentin and Shreve's the political meaning that their counter-narrative has struggled to articulate.

Why Quentin cannot maintain this cross-racial identification, why he cannot see in creolization a positive political and social destiny for the south and for America as a whole, is a question beyond the scope of this essay. Here I will say only that Quentin's failure does not end the novel. Beyond Charles Bon stands his grandson, Jim Bond, who despite the racist caricature of his depiction – a "hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy" with an "idiot face" (173, 296) – embodies more realistically the challenge to social progress presented by the history of racism in America than did his aristocratic grandfather. And beyond Quentin himself stands Shreve, who is able to see through the caricatured depiction to the possibility of that challenge being met, as he envisions a time when "the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere" and "I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (302). In the Genealogy at the end of the novel, Faulkner describes Shreve as having been born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Associating Shreve's sardonically expressed yet hopeful vision with Alberta evokes a history parallel to the history of Louisiana, for the French voyageurs who originally entered the area as fur trappers were soon outnumbered by British immigrants, as were the creoles in Louisiana by Anglo-Americans. In this fashion, Faulkner reconfigures the geographical polarities with which this essay began. As New Orleans, Louisiana, and, at a further remove, Europe, provided Faulkner with locations from which to view aslant the history of his own region, so here does Canada, and not only of north Mississippi or the South but of the nation as a whole. The location where the observer stands may change, but the need for America to see an alternative to itself yet remains.

## Notes

[1] As Atkinson observes, during his time in Hollywood in the mid-1930s Faulkner would have met European artists and intellectuals, such as Thomas Mann, who had immigrated to America in the wake of Hitler's accession to power (37). In 1938, in a rare overt political gesture, Faulkner donated the manuscript of *Absalom, Absalom!* to an organization raising relief funds for Spanish loyalists and signed a statement opposing fascism.

[2] As depicted by Mr. Compson in Chapter 6, Charles Etienne's career at Sutpen's Hundred limns a bleak version of the history of afro-creoles in the post-reconstruction era. His sleeping position when he first arrives, in a trundle bed halfway between Judith above and Clytie below, enacts his anomalous identity, and his decision to marry a "coal black and ape-like woman" (166) does the same for the submergence of that identity into the larger category of "negro" under the pressure of Anglo-American racial binarism.

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