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Faulkner and Historical Fiction:
Redgauntlet and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Unlike most historical novelists, Faulkner does not portray historical figures, rarely explores political life, and seldom tries to depict thoroughly a particular period of time. Most of his novels are set in or near his own lifetime, none at a remote distance, so that when we speak of "the past" in his work we are usually thinking of a time no more than three to four generations from his own, a time that was still partially present for him in the minds of old people, the immediate descendants of the white and black inhabitants of the antebellum South. His novels are historical in the sense that their concern is frequently with characters who are obsessed with a personal, family, or regional past, and with the manner in which the individual consciousness both shapes history and is shaped by it.

In certain significant respects Scott's *Redgauntlet* represents a remarkable foreshadowing of Faulkner's departure from the norms of historical fiction.¹ Unlike Scott's other Jacobite novels, *Waverley* and *Rob Roy*, *Redgauntlet* is not set in the midst of the rebellions of 1745 or 1715 but in 1765, twenty years after the last major attempt to restore the Stuarts to the throne of Great Britain. The plans of the feeble Jacobite party in 1765 do not — as does the action of *Waverley* and *Rob Roy* — come at a crucial turning point in an historical crisis, and the stirring events of 1745 are portrayed in this novel only as a still remembered but rapidly retreating past, a dead time that is evoked in a number of anecdotes and tales.

For the most part, *Absalom, Absalom!* is also set not in the midst of historical events (of the Civil War years) but in the more recent past of 1909-1910, approximately forty-five years after the South lost the war. There is no remaining Confederate party, but characters like Miss Rosa Coldfield remain fixed in devotion to their lost cause and relive the war as well as the years that led up to and followed it. The narrative scheme of *Absalom, Absalom!* is a great deal more complex than that of

Redgauntlet, however, because we must read the conflicting narratives of Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve. It is true that in *Redgauntlet* the facts about the past are gradually presented from various points of view — the letters of two young men, Darsie Latimer and Alan Fairford, through Darsie's journal, and through the remarks of an omniscient narrator — but the historical issues which these facts raise are fairly well resolved. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the very facts about the past are disputed, and though some of these are eventually established and the false information discarded, the issues raised are not permanently resolved. In other words, both novels portray the attainment of historical knowledge as an interpretative process, but in *Absalom, Absalom!* that process is much more of a mental construct arrived at solely through imagination and dialectical dialogue and therefore subject to endless revision and reformation, so that the development of the interpretative process itself becomes an absolutely crucial element in the novel's structure and meaning.

Even so, the two novels are similar in their handling of their characters' obsessions with the past. Like Darsie Latimer, Quentin Compson is the descendant of a family and a society which have fought for a lost cause, but he has not himself participated in historical events, and only knows these events through the memories and speculations of participants and observers. Quentin is less fortunate than Darsie in the sense that he bears the burden of the past, of his family's failure, not only through heredity but also through his upbringing as a Southerner. Darsie, on the other hand, grows up in the Fairford household, which has always been staunchly Hanoverian — on the winning side, so to speak, of the historical forces which have made Darsie's present what it is. He carries on an eager search for his own family's past stimulated by his lonely condition as an orphan who regards his future with considerable anxiety. He is also a quixotic youth with a romantic disposition which is fortunately tempered by his friend, Alan Fairford, who questions and criticizes Darsie's point of view. Quentin does not actively search out his family's past, but is summoned to Miss Rosa's house to hear the Sutpen story (much of which he already knows) in which his own family has played a conspicuous part. Quentin is reluctant to engage himself fully in the story, but he gradually becomes involved in it as Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson give their versions of what happened, and as his own version of what the other narrators have told him is mercilessly cross-examined by Shreve. Even though their personalities and

circumstances are different, Darsie and Quentin have in common the task of understanding themselves by understanding the past. In conjunction with their friends, Alan and Shreve, Darsie and Quentin piece together parts of themselves, as it were, by reconstructing the past events in which their families participated.

In each novel there is a kind of short story which becomes a paradigm of the hero's efforts to come to terms with the presence of the past in his own life. On one of his desultory travels Darsie takes up with Wandering Willie, an itinerant musician whose family has served the Redgauntlets, whom Darsie later discovers to have been forebears. Judging that Darsie is a "young, thoughtless chap",² Willie gives him a "lesson" (I, 224) in the form of a story about what happened to Willie's grandfather, Steenie, in the time of Sir Robert Redgauntlet, a fanatical supporter of Charles II.

The strange supernatural banquet hall in which Steenie is bidden to play a "tune of the pipes" (I, 251) and to drink with his lord and master, a deceased Redgauntlet, is, in effect, an image of the Redgauntlet past demanding obedience from the living. Steenie's partaking of the festivity would mean his consignment to the wretched hell of a dead world. For as Willie points out, though Sir Robert's guests "hallooed, and sung, and laughed" until the "room rang . . . their smiles were fearfully contorted from time to time; and their laughter passed into such wild sounds, as made my gudesire's very nails grow blue, and chilled the marrow in his banes." (I, 250) The banquet brings together everyone who ever served Redgauntlet or was associated with him, as well as many of the most bloody and violent figures of Scottish history:

There was the fierce Middleton, and the dissolute Rothes, and the crafty Lauderdale; and Dalryell, with his bald head and a beard to his girdle; and Earlsall, with Cameron's blude on his hand; and wild Bonshaw, that tied blessed Mr. Cargill's limbs till the blude sprung; and Dumbarton Douglas, the twice-turned traitor baith to country and king. There was the Bluidy Advocate MacKenzie, who, for his worldly wit and wisdom, had been to the rest as a god. And there was Claverhouse, as beautiful as when he lived, with his long, dark, curled locks, streaming down to his laced buff-coat, and his left hand always on his right spule-blade, to hide the wound that the silver bullet had made. (I, 249)

Although these are all figures from the past, they appear to be alive. Their evil still constitutes a menace to Steenie, so that his insistence on his "ain", (I, 253) on his receipt for his rent payment, then becomes a

kind of metaphysical justification for his own independence from the terrible past of the Redgauntlets who have traditionally made all who serve them participate in evil. That Steenie should be able to handle himself in a world that is largely outside of his control is indeed a "lesson" to Darsie who must demonstrate the same policy of patience and firmness in his dealing with his fanatical uncle Sir Hugh Redgauntlet, who allows his nephew no more freedom than Sir Robert would have given to Steenie.

In many ways the story of the French architect in *Absalom, Absalom!* resembles "Wandering Willie's Tale" in that the architect, like Steenie, is confronted with the demonic and overpowering force of Thomas Sutpen, who tries like the Redgauntlets to exert total control over the lives of others in the interests of a cause — in his case the establishment of a dynasty, a line of dukes, as Mr. Compson puts it, which would carry on his name and achievements. Just as Steenie would seem to be the most unlikely figure to check the efforts of Sir Robert Redgauntlet, so the apparently frail and effete architect would seem to be entirely unfit to deter or alter Sutpen's design.

In what Quentin learns from Miss Rosa's account the architect appears as just another member of Sutpen's retinue:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest.³

But the narrator, summarizing Mr. Compson's description of the architect, gives a more subtle picture of the man, showing that he is "alertly resigned" and views his own participation in Sutpen's grandiose plans with a "fatalistic and amazed determination". (35) Indeed, as Mr. Compson learned from his father, General Compson, the architect was more than that, he was an "artist":

only an artist could have borne Sutpen's ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and castle-like magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed, since the place as Sutpen planned it would have been almost as large as Jefferson itself at the time; that the little grim har-

ried foreigner had singlehanded given battle to and vanquished Sutpen's fierce and overweening vanity or desire for magnificence or for vindication or whatever it was . . . and so created of Sutpen's very defeat the victory which, in conquering, Sutpen himself would have failed to gain. (38-39)

By the time we come to the architect's escape from Sutpen we are prepared to accept and appreciate the two day chase in which the architect constantly outwits his pursuers not only with "grim" determination but with exaltation (244), forcing Sutpen to realize "that he would have to hunt the architect down himself if he wanted him back alive probably." (244) When Sutpen finally catches up with the architect, they meet more as equals (both are "grim" and "indomitable" (38, 254, 257)) than as the hunter and the hunted. Although the whole chase reminds us of Miss Rosa's contention that Sutpen is a demon who came with his "wild blacks" and "tore violently a plantation", it is the architect who creates and controls most of the action:

"— a little harried wild-faced man with a two-days' stubble of beard, who came out of the cave fighting like a wildcat, hurt leg and all, with the dogs barking and the niggers whooping and hollering with deadly and merry anticipation, like they were under the impression that since the race had lasted more than twenty-four hours the rules would be automatically abrogated and they would not have to wait to cook him until Sutpen waded in with a short stick and beat niggers and dogs all away, leaving the architect standing there, not scared worth a damn either, just panting a little and Grandfather said a little sick in the face where the niggers had mishandled his leg in the heat of the capture, and making them a speech in French, a long one and so fast that Grandfather said probably another Frenchman could not have understood all of it. But it sounded fine; Grandfather said even he — all of them — could tell that the architect was not apologizing; it was fine, Grandfather said, and he said how Sutpen turned toward him but he (Grandfather) was already approaching the architect, holding out the bottle of whiskey already uncorked. And Grandfather saw the eyes in the gaunt face, the eyes desperate and hopeless but indomitable too, invincible too, not beaten yet by a damn sight Grandfather said, and all that fifty-odd hours of dark and swamp and sleeplessness and fatigue and no grub and nowhere to go and no hope of getting there: just a will to endure and a foreknowing of defeat but not beat yet by a damn sight: and he took the bottle in one of his little dirty coon-like hands and raised the other hand and even fumbled about his head for a second before he remembered that the hat was gone, then flung the hand up in a gesture that Grandfather said you simply could not describe, that seemed to gather all misfortune and defeat that the human race ever suffered into a little pinch in his fingers like dust and fling it

backward over his head, and raised the bottle and bowed first to Grandfather then to all the other men sitting their horses in a circle and looking at him, and then he took not only the first drink of neat whiskey he ever took in his life but the drink of it that he could no more have conceived himself taking than the Brahmin can believe that the situation can conceivably arise in which he will eat dog." (257-258)

Even Sutpen recognizes that the architect is not "apologizing" for his escape. It is the architect who possesses the almost superhuman will that refuses to be subject to any man's domination. As General Compson points out, the motives which urged this man to rebel for over fifty hours are immediately understandable despite the barrier of language and background. It is not necessary for the Frenchman's act to be put in any language for its meaning of the Frenchman's gesture. Words signify nothing except in so far as they reflect the "sound" or tenor of the architect's absolute refusal to accept defeat.

Like "Wandering Willie's Tale", the story of the French architect is, in the final analysis, a fable about humanity itself, applicable to all men, great or small, who are capable of enduring catastrophe with courage and fortitude. Darsie and Quentin, who pass on these fables to their friends Alan and Shreve, show that it is futile for Redgauntlet and Sutpen to suppose that they can ultimately impose their will on events and thoroughly determine their outcome; by suggesting the limitations of these seemingly self-progenitive and indestructible figures, they also remove some of the mystery and obscurity in which Redgauntlet's and Sutpen's motivation are enveloped.

As Willie's and the French architect's stories suggest, the Redgauntlets (of whom Sir Hugh is the latest avatar) and Sutpen have their own internal clocks which seemingly negate the normal functioning of time. Because they deride time, they appear to be superhuman, becoming the subjects of ghost stories. The Redgauntlets are portrayed as still communicating with the living even though they are in hell, and even after his death Sutpen is still said to haunt the Hundred. Sir Hugh Redgauntlet shrugs off the momentous defeat of 1745, and persists in believing that the Stuarts can be restored to the throne. After the holocaust of the Civil War Sutpen resumes an unflagging pursuit of his design, as if he has encountered only a momentary stoppage of his plans. Their view of time is essentially static, but their heroic efforts to recover from defeat make them seem dynamic.

Redgauntlet and Sutpen try to preserve the continuity of their plans through the family, but in fact destroy the family by rejecting the in-

dividual beliefs and feelings of its members. Sir Hugh Redgauntlet would rather kill his nephew Darsie than see him support the Hanoverian monarchy, just as Sir Alberick Redgauntlet, the first of his house, killed his own son because of a difference in political opinions between them. Sutpen is willing to risk his second son Henry's repudiation of the family rather than acknowledge his first son, because Charles Bon, whose mother was part-Negro, is perceived as the "factor" which would destroy the design. Because both men are striving against the processes of time in which their families and societies have been undergoing radical changes, both men live long enough to become anachronisms — Redgauntlet desperately failing to shore up the "sinking cause" of Jacobitism, and Sutpen just as desperately failing in a third effort to rebuild his design.

On the other hand, Darsie joins forces with his alter ego, Alan, in order to reaffirm the continuity between past and present which Redgauntlet (their contemporary) threatens to destroy; and Quentin and Shreve work out a joint interpretation of the manner in which Sutpen destroyed his family's future. Moreover, Darsie is gradually learning about his aristocratic family's historic commitment to lost causes, a commitment which has always prevented it from maintaining its superior position in society, and Quentin is being forced to rehearse how the aristocratic General Compson helped the "underbred" Sutpen establish himself in Jefferson. In both instances Alan and Shreve provide the support for Darsie's and Quentin's confrontation with a past that seems to have a mysterious hold over the present.

Alan and Shreve typify the new order which seems to have no place for the outmoded Redgauntlets and Compsons: they come from the bourgeois class of professional men who take an increasingly active part in determining the course of the modern world. At first, Shreve is so removed from Quentin's way of life in the South that he regards the Sutpen story as some kind of romantic epic of the past, a spectacle or theatrical performance like *Ben Hur* which has little relation to reality — that is, to the world in which Shreve is living. Much more is made of class distinctions in Scott's novel, and of the fact that Redgauntlet despises the Fairford family because of its middle class background and commercial connections. Darsie himself initially leaves the Fairford household because he cannot seem to fit into the mundane pattern of bourgeois urban life.

But by linking Darsie to Alan in the intimate bonds of friendship, and Quentin to Shreve in the intense and ever growing intimacy of the interpretative process, Scott and Faulkner are able to highlight the narrowness and provinciality of Redgauntlet and Sutpen against the broader and to that extent more sophisticated synthesis of the four youths. For it is Alan and Shreve who demand the explanations from Darsie and Quentin which make the latter two accountable to other points of view, in contradistinction to Redgauntlet and Sutpen who deem themselves answerable to no one. Alan, the fledgling lawyer, and Shreve, the future doctor, are sober-minded but lively and imaginative young men who correct, but also sympathize with, their more dreamy, impractical friends. Initially they are sceptical and sometimes intolerant of Darsie's and Quentin's stories. Alan, for example, ignores the ominous implications of Darsie's first letter, attributing them solely to his friend's romantic imagination. Shreve parodies parts of the Sutpen legend and implies that its bizarre quality has more to do with Quentin's Southernness than with the meaning of the legend itself. But Alan must abandon his position as the objective critic of Darsie's activities and place himself directly within the unravelling pattern of action that reveals Darsie's true ancestry. On his journey to find his friend and to release him from captivity, Alan also hears an account of Darsie's Redgauntlet forebears. He too suffers from illness and is caught within the net of conspiracy spread by Sir Hugh Redgauntlet who plans to use his nephew to persuade other noble families to revolt against George III. Like Darsie, Alan is "overawed" by the audacity of a "demon" who would by force of will bend an entire kingdom to *his* reality. Similarly, Shreve feels compelled to recapitulate the events of the Sutpen story in his own fashion, but at the same time he takes up Miss Rosa's fascination with the "demon". Then he begins to reinterpret the Sutpen story, laying special emphasis on the relationship between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon which so fascinates Quentin, and finally, cooperates with Quentin in actually recasting the whole story so that it accords with their joint analysis of what actually happened, and with the meaning both young men now attach to *their* story. Thus both Alan and Shreve find that they must project themselves emotionally and intellectually in their friends' problems, and it is this growing sense of identification between Darsie and Alan, Quentin and Shreve, that provides the impetus for the reassessment of the past in the two books.

The identifications between these young men and their reassessments of the past are simultaneous processes that are carried on with great intensity. Darsie and Alan are obliged to respond carefully to each other's letters, criticizing and clarifying each other's points of view. By this means Alan correctly diagnoses Darsie's confusion between appearance and reality. He suggests that Darsie commits himself to acting in complicated situations before he has adequately analysed them from all possible perspectives. Although he does not know it, Alan has pointed to a defect in the Redgauntlet family, which has tended to throw itself into causes with an enthusiasm and fanaticism far in excess of what the causes themselves deserved. As a result, these profound emotions, feeding upon themselves, become purely subjective, and ultimately self-destructive and suicidal. Through Alan's help Darsie learns to keep such emotions in check by inquiring into whether they are appropriate to the conditions in which they arise.

Quentin and Shreve are incarcerated in one room where in a matter of hours they can readily cross-examine and evaluate each other's judgments. In this way Shreve forces Quentin to tell the Sutpen story clearly and completely, stipulating that Quentin specify the relationships between himself and such characters as Rosa, Clytie, and Jim Bond, and that he set down the sequences within which these relationships arose. Shreve is unwilling to credit all of Miss Rosa's and Mr. Compson's explanations, and his moments of levity, like Alan's refusal to take Darsie too seriously, may act as a kind of cleansing agent which prevents Quentin from becoming totally mired in Miss Rosa's demonic and Mr. Compson's tragic versions of Sutpen's career. Through this integration of effort these younger men provide a strenuous and comprehensive alternative to the relentless and reductive designs of Redgauntlet and Sutpen. The understanding of the past shared by Darsie and Alan and by Quentin and Shreve is progressive and cumulative. They cannot take their version of reality for granted but must create it together and test its validity against each other's perceptions.

In *Redgauntlet* Darsie and Alan successfully oppose the Redgauntlet tendency to isolate the family from reality and from the movement of history, for throughout the novel these two young men see their destinies as complementary but not identical, requiring that they try to reconcile their differences but not restrict their independent courses of action. The Redgauntlets, on the contrary, have nearly destroyed their family line by insisting on the undeviating uniformity of the family's actions

and point of view. In *Redgauntlet*, therefore, a family line is retraced, the causes of its degeneration are discovered, and the past is redeemed — in the sense that it is refashioned into a coherent constituent of the present, rather than remaining as simply a mysterious and fearful force.

At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, Quentin and Shreve dissolve their partnership. Quentin retreats into the world of the past and into his ambiguous attitude toward the South, while Shreve reverts to the cocky and flippant summarizing of the Sutpen story that had marked his attitude at the beginning of their discussion. Sutpen's family line has finally degenerated into the idiot Jim Bond, who has no consciousness of the past. The "Genealogy" at the end of the novel informs us that Quentin will die in 1910, the very year in which he and Shreve have reclaimed and reinterpreted the Sutpen story. And Shreve adds to Quentin's burden by suggesting that Jim Bond stands for the unresolved part of the Sutpen story:

"You've got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you can't catch him and you don't even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Don't you?"

"Yes," Quentin said. (378)

As the novel has frequently shown, Quentin would like to avoid the Sutpen story, but it keeps welling up in his consciousness; now Shreve suggests:

"in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won't quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won't show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?" (378)

Shreve makes no explicit connection between his last question and his forecast of the future, but their juxtaposition implies that the blending of black and white that Sutpen felt was inimical to his design, and the blending which his son Henry seems to have abhorred in and of itself, is part of an historical process in the western hemisphere that will

ultimately affect Shreve himself. Thus it seems that Shreve is ultimately asking Quentin why he hates the South when what he hates is really the future of the western world, a grim future in which the Jim Bonds "will bleach out again" — become uniformly white and lose their black identity — but "will still be Jim Bond", that symbol of an alienated and degenerate family line.

Although Shreve is speculating in a rather grandiose and sophomoric fashion, his interpretation of the Sutpen story has revealed that the human conflicts of the past are still part of the present and probably part of the future too. Quentin cannot bear to think that what he and Shreve have uncovered is part of an endless continuum, but thinking, consciousness itself, brings Quentin to the conclusion that he will have " 'Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore Nevermore Nevermore.' " (373) Thus the ending of *Absalom, Absalom!* reinforces the novel's sense of history as an ambiguous and unceasing product of the human predicament — a predicament which Quentin and Shreve have brilliantly explored and explained but which they have not resolved.

NOTES

1. A number of critics have pointed out similarities between Scott and Faulkner: Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 18; Bruce Harkness, "Faulkner and Scott," *Mississippi Quarterly* 20 (1967): 164; Elmo Howell, "William Faulkner's Caledonia: A Note on *Intruder in the Dust*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 3 (1966): 248-251; Elmo Howell, "Faulkner and Scott and the Legacy of the Lost Cause," *Georgia Review* 26 (1972): 314-325; Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 314; Millgate, " 'The Firmament of Man's History': Faulkner's Treatment of the Past," *Mississippi Quarterly* 25 (1972): 25-26; Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 923.
2. *Redgauntlet. A Tale of the Eighteenth Century. By the Author of "Waverley."* In *Three Volumes* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1824), I, 224. Page references to this 1824 first edition are subsequently incorporated in the text within parentheses.
3. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 8. Page references to the 1936 first edition are subsequently incorporated in the text within parentheses.