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THE ARTISTIC ARTICULATION OF THE PAST:
BELOVED AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

But I have to say. ... that there was for me not only an academic interest in Faulkner, but in a very, very personal way, in a very personal way as a reader, William Faulkner had an enormous effect on me, an enormous effect.

I don't really find strong connections between my work and Faulkner's.

Toni Morrison's assessment of William Faulkner in her talk on "Faulkner and Women" (Morrison 296, 297) reveals her complicated response to him on both a personal and a professional level. Personally, Morrison knows Faulkner's work well; her master's thesis at Cornell was entitled "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated." Of course, a knowledge of Faulkner's work does not imply that Morrison automatically utilizes that knowledge in her own writing.¹ And such assumptions clearly frustrate Morrison who, in an interview, exclaims, "I am not like James Joyce; I am not *like* Thomas Hardy; I am not *like* Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me

¹ John Duvall, another critic who has examined links between Morrison and Faulkner, also denies any simple pattern of influence when he avers, "But in positing an intertextual relation between *Song of Solomon* and *Go Down, Moses*, I am not granting the latter any privilege as master text" ("Doe" 95).

sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be *like* something that has probably only been fully expressed in music...” (McKay427).²

In this paper, I would like to suggest that Morrison is indeed like Faulkner, but not in a mechanical sense of certain specific borrowings. Instead, I would assert that the same attributes that attracted her personally to Faulkner are reflected in her own approach to literature and to her writing. Morrison obviously found Faulkner’s works personally appealing so it should not surprise readers to discover that her novels share certain affinities with those of Faulkner; however, affinities do not necessarily mean imitation but perhaps merely a similar approach. With this observation in mind, it would be helpful to look at two novels which seem to have a great deal in common—Morrison’s *Beloved* and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*.³ Exploring these two novels will show that Morrison has not only read Faulkner attentively but critically as well, creating a work that does not merely mimic his earlier novel but comments on it and perhaps even rewrites it.

First, like *Absalom*, *Beloved*’s action revolves around the repercussive aftereffects of the American civil War which seems a natural choice for both writers. Faulkner was interested in exploring his own Southern heritage, while Morrison wanted to examine the heritage of American slavery. In either case, both authors sought to demonstrate how events from the past continue to haunt the present. Each novel incorporates this theme through a particular narrative strategy—the ghost story. In *Absalom*, Quentin Compson is overwhelmed by the presence of a past that existed long before the current day of 1909. This presence pulls at him so strongly that he quite literally feels himself tearing in half:

he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which

² Susan Willis asserts that in comparing Morrison with Faulkner that their “tremendous differences... which include historical period, race, and sex” (41) are more common than any perceived similarities.

³ John Duvall maintains that these two novels enter into a “covert dialogue” (“Authentic” 84).

had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South... (4)

At times, Quentin may feel split in two, but at other times he feels that he has no individual identity at all: “his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names... He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts...” (7).

The haunting power of the old South moves Quentin so intensely because its characters are so vivid. The ghosts are indeed the most compelling figures in the novel; Thomas Sutpen, Charles Bon, Henry Sutpen and eventually Rosa Coldfield all take on a laterally larger-than-life quality that threatens to overshadow the current generation. Even in death, they remain the most alive characters.⁴

Ghosts appear even more laterally in *Beloved* where house number 124 in Cincinnati, Ohio is possessed by the vengeful spirit of a dead baby that the female residents—Sethe, her daughter Denver, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, who eventually becomes a ghostly presence herself—must fight against, “Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (4).⁵

⁴ John Duvall observes, “*Absalom, Absalom!* is densely populated with ghosts...” (“Authentic” 87).

⁵ Actually, the battle against this spiteful spirit reminds readers of the similar maneuvers waged against Thomas Sutpen. For many characters in *Absalom*, Sutpen is the enemy, the intruding presence, that the established community must fight. For example, the aunt of Ellen Coldfield, Sutpen’s second wife, who saw both Ellen’s father and Sutpen as foes, treated each visit as an armed encounter. The narrator describes:

the aunt... cast over these visits [of Sutpen’s] also that same atmosphere of grim embattled conspiracy and alliance against the two adversaries, one of whom—Mr. Coldfield—whether he could have held his own or not, had long since drawn in his picquets and dismantled his artillery and retired into the impregnable citadel of his passive rectitude: and the other—Sutpen—who probably could have engaged and even routed them but who did not even know that he was an embattled foe. (49)

Even after his death, Sutpen’s presence remains a threatening one, creating a path of ruin at Sutpen’s Hundred and drastically affecting the life of Quentin Compson.

Though the baby is the most literal ghost in *Beloved*, the vengeful infant is not the novel's only haunting presence. As in *Absalom*, many of the book's characters belong to the past—Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the men from Sweet Home, Schoolteacher, and even Sethe's own mother. In fact, for Sethe, the baby's presence is actually easier to face than that of the other ghosts that surround her. When one of the Sweet Home men, Paul D, comes back into Sethe's life, he drives away the baby's spirit but brings other, more threatening, memories, such as what happened to her husband, Halle; "he had beat the spirit away the very day he entered her house and no sign of it since. A blessing, but in its place he brought another kind of haunting: Halle's face..." (96).

Like Faulkner, Morrison uses the strategy of the ghost story to illustrate the past's continuing presence; however, she does vary that strategy somewhat. While Quentin Compson is haunted by a past he never even experienced, Sethe at least confronts the ghosts of her own past. Furthermore, while the baby's spirit interferes with the normal social relationships that Sethe and Denver might be expected to develop, it also makes them both strong, independent women. The same positive effect cannot be attributed to Quentin Compson.

Despite differences in the application of the ghost story, in both *Absalom* and *Beloved*, the real importance of the haunting apparitions is to demonstrate how much the past continues to influence the present. Try as they might, characters in both novels are consumed by previous events; the central characters in each—Quentin Compson and Sethe—find themselves overwhelmed by the past, even to the extent that their pasts are of ten more "real" than their presents. For Sethe, "her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (70) Quentin experiences the same sensation, leading a life consumed with events that occurred long before his birth.⁶ Even when he heads north to attend Harvard University, Quentin cannot leave Sutpen's Hundred behind him. Rather than getting involved in campus life, Quentin draws his roommate, Shreve, into the story of Thomas Sutpen and his children. Neither Sethe nor Quentin can seem to break free from the past which leaves them unable to function effectively in the present.

⁶ Carl E. Rollyson observes, "Quentin's tragedy lies precisely in this fact that his vision of the past has usurped all of his emotional and intellectual faculties. He now can see life only in terms of the past..." (64).

In fact, the lives of both of these characters revolve around a crucial past event which they feel compelled to come to terms with. In that respect, each novel, besides being a ghost story, is also a mystery.⁷ At the heart of each rests an obscured pivotal event which must be explored in greater depth. In *Absalom*, the central event is the murder of Charles Bon, a suitor to Sutpen's daughter, Judith, who is killed by Henry, Sutpen's son, at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred. This event serves as the primary mystery that continues to enthrall members of the community years after it occurs. Miss Rosa Coldfield, the only surviving member of the town who actually knew many of the participants in the story, complains that no action is ever truly completed. She says, "*it [is] not the blow we suffer from but the tedious repercussive anti-climax of it*" (121). Quentin comes to share a similar view, thinking, "Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading..." (210). The saga of Sutpen and Bon continues to intrigue subsequent generations.

However, these subsequent generations are not so interested in facts but in motives. They want to know more than that Henry Sutpen killed his friend Charles Bon; they want to know why. This detective story occupies Quentin, his father, and Shreve. At first, they surmise that Bon's mistress and child offended Henry. Such an explanation, though, does not seem compelling enough; even Mr. Compson is forced to admit that "even for the shadowy paragons which are our ancestors born in the South and come to man-and-womanhood about eighteen sixty or sixty-one. It's just incredible. It just does not explain" (80). As Quentin and Shreve probe further into the case (and as Quentin eventually discovers the aged Henry Sutpen hiding out at Sutpen's Hundred) they come to discover that Bon was Sutpen's child from a prior relationship. Therefore, a marriage to Judith would be incestuous. Still, even a brother-sister relationship appears not to be the ultimate breaking point for Henry; miscegenation (Bon's mother was black) not incest seems to prompt the murder of Bon (at least in

⁷ Frederick J. Karl concurs: "Yet while *Absalom, Absalom!* moves on several levels, social, historical, personal, it comes... through secret passageways, by means of hiding necessary information, by using divulgence as a psychological weapon... [It is] a detective story of sorts..." (210).

Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of events).⁸ This reconstruction serves an important purpose for Faulkner because it allows Quentin to realize the injustice and hypocrisy at the heart of Southern society. His last lines in the novel illustrate the weight of this realization when he exclaims about the South, "*I dont hate it... I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (303).

In *Beloved*, Morrison develops a similar mystery: why does a baby's spirit haunt Number 124? Although readers learn early in the narrative that the baby's throat was cut, who did it and why remains shrouded in mystery. As the novel progresses, readers slowly discover that the baby's mother, Sethe, had escaped from slavery, crossed the Ohio, and had made her way to freedom in Cincinnati. Only midway through the novel does the reader finally learn that Sethe's owner had followed her across the river and, Sethe, rather than let herself or her children be recaptured, attempted to kill them, but succeeded only in killing her little girl.⁹

During the rest of the novel, Sethe must come to terms with this violent act, and once again, facts are not as important as motives. Sethe must confront the circumstances that would lead her to attempt to murder her own children. To do this, she has to face not only the murder but her life as a slave. Both memories become harder and harder to repress, particularly when Paul D arrives followed shortly thereafter by a mysterious young woman whom Sethe comes to believe is her daughter. *Beloved* becomes the physical embodiment of the past and her presence nearly destroys Sethe. Oddly enough, Sethe is rescued by the same coalition of neighborhood women who had

⁸ Eric J. Sundquist explains that "it is... the debacle of miscegenation, which the novel so continually engages as the curse and sin that brings Sutpen's design, like that of the South itself, to collapse. It is the debacle that makes Clytie neither slave nor free... and makes Charles Bon neither slave nor son and brother" (114).

⁹ A corollary mystery is explored by Stamp Paid who wonders why Baby Suggs declines and dies, and finds his first explanation unsatisfactory. At first, "he believed that shame put her in the bed. Now, eight years after her contentious funeral and eighteen years after the Misery, he changed his mind" (177). He decides instead that "her marrow was tired... she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed" (180). Like Quentin in *Absalom*, Stamp Paid gradually comes to reinterpret the past.

There are also further mysteries in *Absalom* such as why Rosa Coldfield rejects Thomas Sutpen and why Wash Jones would kill him.

deserted her before; they feel, “Whatever Sethe had done, [they] didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (256).

Unlike Henry Sutpen or Quentin Compson, Sethe has the opportunity to relive the moment of so many years before and choose another alternative. When a white stranger once again approaches her home, she lashes out at him rather than at herself or her family. Even though her action is mistaken, it allows her to break free from her past.¹⁰ Differing from both Quentin, who ends his tale with a litany of hate against the environment which seemed to trap him, and Henry, who ends his days quite laterally entombed in his father’s house, Sethe may be able to break the pattern and establish a different future for herself.¹¹

Despite their variations in treatment, both Faulkner and Morrison demonstrate their concern with the past’s centrality to the present. In so doing, they employ similar narrative strategies—using elements from the ghost story as well as the detective story. However, as these approaches indicate, the major emphasis in each novel lies not so much in the past itself but in the *telling* of that past. Both *Beloved* and *Absalom* are filled with characters who spend a large part of their time recounting tales of past events. These stories serve several purposes: they give characters a sense of community (recounting a tale creates a relationship), they allow characters the opportunity to probe the past imaginatively (trying to discover the motivations behind the bare

¹⁰ David Cowart points out that another Morrison novel, *Song of Solomon*, also has a more optimistic view of the future:

“Unlike Faulknerian history, which—at least at the personal level—can tend to be a terrible revelation, the past that Milkman Dead comes to know liberates him, once he has risen above a dream of easy riches in the form of recovered treasure” (89).

David Lawrence adds, “In *Beloved*, Morrison suggests a way through the door of memory, even if that way entails a precarious balancing act between the danger of forgetting a past that should not be forgotten and of remembering a past that threatens to engulf the present” (200).

¹¹ Craig Werner points to this difference between Morrison’s and Faulkner’s characters when he observes, “An increasing perception of the extent and inevitability of that identification [with the past] liberates the Afro-American protagonists, paralyzes Faulkner’s” (725).

historical events), and they demonstrate that no one version of the past is sufficient.¹²

First, telling stories together forges relationships between characters. In *Absalom*, a number of characters are linked through recounting Sutpen's story. It is ironic how the divisive Sutpen character manages to unify many subsequent characters who attempt to come to some understanding of the meaning and relevance of his story. In fact, Sutpen's saga even brings together such seemingly disparate characters as Quentin Compson from the deep South and his Harvard roommate, Shreve, a Canadian. They become "two who breathed not [as] individuals now yet mething both more and less than twins." (236). In *Beloved*, Denver develops a similar sense of companionship when she begins telling stories about her birth to Beloved; "The monologue became, in fact, a duet." (78). Denver gets something she desperately needs—a companion—and she also finds, in retelling this story, added insight. Sethe also discovers a similar relief in her storytelling experiences with Beloved. Learning "the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling" (58), Sethe becomes more comfortable talking about herself and her past, even to the extent of revealing aspects about her former life she had previously thought were "unspeakable" (58). In fact, "she found herself wanting to [tell the past], liking it" (58). This ability to share her past brings Sethe a great deal of comfort. In talking to Paul D about events at Sweet Home, Sethe realizes that "her story was bearable because it was his as well—to tell, to refine, and tell again" (99).

In both *Absalom* and *Beloved*, the act of storytelling, of entering imaginatively into the past, gives characters new ways of understanding former events. Denver, for example, through telling the story of her own birth to Beloved begins to realize the difficulties of her mother's situation: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it

¹² Andrew Levy sees story telling as the principal action of *Beloved*, observing, "Beloved constitutes a catalog of these ways [of telling the story of self], represented from different characters' points of view. Individually, no single 'trajectory' appears entirely successful. But if no individual can tell the story, Morrison appears to suggest, then perhaps the story is meant to be told multivocally, as a fluid amalgamation of many individual perspectives—the community of narrative voices, for instance, that constitutes *Beloved* itself" (115).

must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat” (78). In *Absalom*, Quentin and Shreve also identify strongly with the young men in their tale—Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon: “So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve, four of them and then just two—Charles–Shreve and Quentin–Henry...” (267).

At this point, history and art intersect;¹³ being a storyteller does not mean recounting a body of established facts but endeavoring to discover the meaning of events through an act of imagination. The “true” story may never be really known; at best, characters can only try to discern the most satisfying explanation possible.¹⁴ In *Absalom*, when Quentin and Shreve try to discover why Henry Sutpen would kill Charles Bon, in the absence of direct evidence, they must create their own scenario. Shreve, for example, in trying to flesh out the relationship between Henry and Charles, creates Bon’s home in New Orleans, “[a] drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence... which was probably true enough...”(268).

For characters in both *Beloved* and *Absalom*, the real interest lies not in discovering exactly what happened but in telling the story itself. Ultimately, it matters less what was said and more that it was said at all. The story, indeed the stories, are the important thing. In *Absalom*, every character may have a different reason for telling the tale of Sutpen and his family; for example, Rosa Coldfield begins the process by recounting her story to Quentin Compson, presumably to justify her behavior and her hatred of Sutpen. Of course, Quentin realizes early that Miss Rosa spends time discussing the past with him “because she wants it told” (5). However, once Quentin enters into the tale, the story takes on more than Miss Rosa’s limited perspective. As

¹³ Frederick B. Karl asserts, “Wherever history lies, it is driven by individualized narrative transmission...” (214).

¹⁴ Morrison, in fact, based *Beloved* on the actual story of Margaret Garner who “attempted to kill her children rather than have them reenslaved when they were all captured in Ohio in 1850” (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 95). While Morrison does not try to recreate Garner’s story precisely, she uses it as a departure point for her own artistic endeavor.

Quentin begins to reconstruct the story, his interests lie not so much with Sutpen as with his progeny, particularly Henry and Bon.¹⁵ For Quentin, and perhaps for Faulkner, the real fascination seems to be solving the enigma of Charles Bon. Bon's shadowy presence comes to dominate the novel; in a very real way, *Absalom* stands as a monument to someone history threatens to forget—the bastard child who was refused his heritage just because he had some Negro blood. Faulkner thus uses his novel to explore the racial injustices that allow a father to deny a son and a brother to kill a brother¹⁶—the legacy, in fact, of the Civil War.¹⁷

The same may be said of *Beloved* where Beloved herself comes to represent the thousands of black women who perished anonymously in the chains of slavery. In the final chapter of the novel, the narrator asserts, “Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (274). Like Charles Bon, Beloved remains a nebulous figure whose true history is never known. While Thomas Sutpen will be remembered, as will Sethe and Baby Suggs, Bon and Beloved are those that history tends to overlook. However, Morrison, like Faulkner, sets about in her novel to redress that oversight. Although the narrator in *Beloved* chants the refrain, “This is not a story to pass on” (275), the story does continue and Beloved is remembered.¹⁸

¹⁵ These multiple voices also suggest, as mentioned earlier, that no one version of the tale can claim total authority.

¹⁶ John Duvall points out that “it is in these moments of non-recognition that *Absalom*’s ghosts emerge” (“Authentic” 89).

¹⁷ Eric J. Sundquist maintains, “What he [Faulkner] discovered were the visionary powers the problem of race was capable of engaging as it became, over the course of his career, the definitive crisis of twentieth-century American social history and the violently explicit subject of his fiction” (ix).

¹⁸ Morrison has another historical oversight to redress as well. Not only does she want to speak for those, like Beloved, who never had a voice, but for those who actually wrote accounts of their slave experiences and had to censor themselves in order to be accepted by their audience. Morrison claims, “‘My job becomes how to rip that veil’ behind which the slave narrator was forced to hide” (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 97).

Faulkner and Morrison both seek to critique a society that forces parents to deny and even murder their children.¹⁹ Since Bon, a child with a mixed bloodline, threatens his father's "grand design" of success and upward social mobility, Sutpen denies him—with tragic results both to Bon and to his "legitimate" children. Since *Beloved* faces a future as a mere piece of property, Sethe chooses to kill her rather than allow her to return to slavery. Once again, this action also has dire consequences for Sethe's remaining family—Baby Suggs declines and dies, her sons leave her, and Denver fears her.²⁰ The past—particularly the past of the slave-holding South—continues to exert its devastating influence into the present.

These comparisons between *Beloved* and *Absalom* show that while Morrison shares similar preoccupations with Faulkner, she does not always draw the same conclusions.²¹ Yet, even though she of ten presents different alternatives, Morrison joins Faulkner in exploring the relationship between history and art. She explains her own attraction to Faulkner's works: "My reasons, I think, for being interested and deeply moved by all his subjects had something to do with my desire to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do" ("Faulkner and Women" 296). Like the major characters in their

¹⁹ Both Thomas Sutpen and Sethe, despite their own experiences, become oppressors. Sutpen, who had felt the pain of rejection when he had been forced to go to the back door, does exactly the same thing to his own son. Sethe, who had felt the pain of being the possession of another without any will of her own, deprives her own daughter of any choice when she takes her life. Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems observe, "we are left with the frightening realization that Sethe, by trying to destroy the monster that had deprived her and her family of their humanity, had herself become one..." (111).

²⁰ Denver admits, "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it.... All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again" (205).

²¹ David Cowart observes, "... Morrison is no epigone. If Joyce and Faulkner figure as presences in this novel [*Song of Solomon*], they do so without impairing or qualifying Morrison's ultimate originality and autonomy" (95). He continues, "The presence of her precursors does not qualify her originality and artistic autonomy—it merely guarantees that she will produce not black literature but literature" (100).

novels, both Morrison and Faulkner choose the role of storyteller rather than historian. They seek to explore moments (and people) that history either ignores or merely reports. Examining motives as much as actions, they attempt, through literature, to understand the *whys* of history as fully as the *whats*. Perhaps even most importantly, Morrison creatively explores her own literary past by reconstructing and recreating Faulkner's earlier work.

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