payments the imposition of which the U.S. government had supported.²⁸ Put differently: At the time when Faulkner’s novel was published, Haiti – much like the United States in general, and the South in particular – was still quite materially haunted by the unresolved conflicts between its revolutionary heritage and the historical burdens of racism and slavery. The allegory of *Absalom, Absalom!* is thus not, strictly speaking, national; rather, Faulkner’s regionalist novel simultaneously constitutes a truly transnational allegory of the United States and its long-term entanglement in hemispheric policies of racialized injustice.

**Gothic Revisited: Material Haunting and Uncanny Narration**

This notion of material haunting makes it necessary for us to return to the genre of the Gothic and its larger role in Faulkner’s novel, for it is precisely such historical remnants (or revenants) from the past that lie at the heart of this generic tradition. In admirably succinct fashion, Terry Eagleton has outlined how Gothic fiction, “this most subjectivist and supernatural of literary forms,” is also a grossly materialist genre:

> [A]t its centre lie disputed wills and struggles over inheritance, secret legacies and financial double-dealing. [...] Gothic is a form in which the dead take command of the living – in which the clammy hand of the past stretches out and manipulates the present, reducing it to a hollow repetition of itself. The present is awash with spectres and revenants, with transmitted curses and rumours of primordial crimes; but it requires no great labour of decipherment to see in all this how the deadweight of property and inheritance moulds an upper-class world, and the novels are not shy of laying bare these connections themselves. (*Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* 194)

We have already seen how the “deadweight of property and inheritance” affects Thomas Sutpen and his design, as well as, more generally, the Southern States and U.S. American involvement in Haiti. In addition, one of the figures who most haunts Sutpen and his acknowledged son Henry is Charles Bon, the child who returns to reclaim his dynastic inheritance. Further, “secret legacies and financial double-dealing” pervade *Absalom, Absalom!* in the dubious scheme Sutpen proposes to Rosa’s father (who, in consequence, ends his life as a ‘madman’ in the attic), or in the figure of a lawyer hired by Charles’s mother, Sutpen’s first wife (a man whom Charles knows to be scheming for money; see *Absalom*
250). It is, once again, the Canadian outsider Shreve who comments on the importance of such material haunting – on the “defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such,” which constantly remind white Southerners “to never forget” (289). In addition, Shreve’s sly parenthetical question whether it might not be “the niggers that lost” reminds us that the white trauma of defeat in the Civil War, though real, is clearly not the full story. Tellingly, however, not a single black character assumes the role of embedded narrator in Absalom, Absalom!, which in some sense reproduces the practice of segregation on the level of the novel’s narration (much as in Mrs. Dalloway colonial characters tend not to be focalized from within; see chapter 3).

Gothic fiction’s concern with “guilty secrets from communal and family pasts” (Botting 115) is thus a key preoccupation in Faulkner’s novel. As Fred Botting suggests, in the course of the nineteenth century Gothic styles became “domesticated” (123), leading to a kind of “homely Gothic”: no longer set in gloomy castles or sublime Romantic landscapes, these texts focus on “horrors that are much closer to home” (113). One example of such ‘homely horrors’ would be the secret of Sutpen’s abandoned first family. In addition, Rosa at one point evokes the trope of the haunted Gothic home when she tells Quentin about a mysterious presence in Sutpen’s Hundred: “There’s something in that house. [...] Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living hidden in that house” (140). Only later do we learn that this “something” is Henry Sutpen, who has returned in his old age to the house of his father, and who will eventually perish there when it burns to the ground.

Sutpen’s Hundred, which had always been an ‘unhomely’ home, thus also becomes decidedly uncanny. As we saw in the introductory chapter, Freud argues that the uncanny arises from a return, in alienated form, of something repressed but long familiar (“The Uncanny” 148). In Absalom, Absalom!, the figures of Charles Bon and Henry are among the instances of this return of the repressed, as is the way in which Sutpen functions as a reminder of the inherent violence of slavery for the older and more established planters. More broadly, themes such as homoeroticism (Charles and Henry, as well as Quentin and Shreve) or incest and miscegenation (Charles and Judith) constitute a return of what has been repressed culturally in “Western history’s long tradition of sexism, heterosexism, and racism” (Norman W. Jones 343). In staging these returns, Faulkner’s novel plays on the “terrors and horrors of transgression” that Jeremy Tambling associates with the Gothic as a genre (7).
Crucially, beyond such uncanny returns on the level of content or theme, *Absalom, Absalom!* is also told in a style that can best be described as uncanny narration. What this means is that the text uses particular stylistic techniques to create, within readers’ minds, a rough equivalent to a repressed but long familiar knowledge, thus heightening the novel’s emotional impact. The way in which this is done is, in part, through a combination of two techniques that we may call ‘perceptual overload’ and ‘fragmentary exposition.’ Consider, for instance, the following sentence, which appears toward the very beginning of the novel and which focuses on Quentin’s familiarity with the story of Thomas Sutpen:

It was a part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town’s – Jefferson’s – eighty years’ heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed between this September afternoon in 1909 and that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing and married Ellen Coldfield and begot his two children – the son who widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride – and so accomplished his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end. (7)

In hindsight, we recognize that the passage already hints at the fact that Henry will kill the suitor of his sister, Judith, for the text mentions “the son [i.e. Henry] who widowed [i.e. killed the husband-to-be of] the daughter [i.e. Judith].” Moreover, a few pages later, Henry is described as a “murderer and almost a fratricide” (10), so that one could even guess that the prospective husband is Henry’s half-brother. However, because these bits of expository information are dispersed throughout the text and often cryptically expressed (e.g. without the use of proper names, and formulated in an extremely circumlocutory manner), most readers are unlikely to be able consciously to process or remember the information.

This problem is exacerbated, moreover, by the incredibly long sentences characteristic of Faulkner’s novel, which are so complex that, as readers, we struggle to understand the main point of the narrative and therefore miss a great

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29 While Samuel Kimball uses the term *uncanny narration* in an article on *Moby-Dick* (see chapter one), he defines it in a much more general sense, noting that “‘narration’ and ‘canny’ share the same Indo-European root, *gno*-, meaning to know. Thus narration is in some sense a trope of the canny, a knowing how to tell, a telling knowledge; and to narrate includes the other side of the uncanny, the homeness of homelessness” (544–545).
deal of incidental information. At the same time, this ‘superfluous’ or excess information is arguably not simply lost altogether, but perceived and processed subliminally; it by-passes the conscious mind and is stored unconsciously, waiting to be (re)activated later on. The technique of uncanny narration thus first presents us with story fragments that are related to each other but dispersed throughout the text, subliminally familiarizing us with all the important information even as we fail to connect the dots consciously. The text then confronts us with the full story at some later stage, leading to the uncanny realization on our part that this ‘unknown’ story is in fact already familiar.

Perhaps the best example of this technique of uncanny narration is the way in which we learn that Charles’s mother was “part negro” (283). Before this crucial truth is revealed, fragments of information appear in no fewer than ten different passages dispersed throughout the novel. To understand more clearly how the technique of uncanny narration works, we need to examine some of these lengthy passages in detail, as it is their cumulative effect that makes uncanny narration possible:

(a) [Sutpen] told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside, like eleventh and twelfth century kings did: ‘I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.’ (194)

(b) [Grandfather Compson described how Sutpen] granted that by certain lights there was injustice in what he did but that he had obviated that as much as lay in his power by being above-board in the matter; that he could have simply deserted her, could have taken his hat and walked out, but he did not: and that he had what Grandfather would have to admit was a good and valid claim, if not to the whole place which he alone had saved, as well as the lives of all the white people on it, at least that portion of it which had been specifically described and deeded to him in the marriage settlement which he had entered in good faith, with no reservations as to his obscure origin and material equipment, while there had been not only reservation but actual misrepresentation on their part and misrepresentation of such a crass nature as to have not only voided and frustrated without his knowing it the central motivation of his entire design, but would have made an ironic conclusion of all that he had suffered.
and endured in the past and all that he could ever accomplish in the future toward that design – which claim he had voluntarily relinquished, taking only twenty niggers out of all he might have claimed and which many another man in his place would have insisted upon keeping and (in which contention) would have been supported by both legal and moral sanction if not the delicate one of conscience [...]. (199)

In passage (a), we are told for the first time that there was something about Charles’s mother that made her unsuitable for Sutpen’s design, though what exactly the problem was remains unstated. In passage (b), we learn more about the situation: that there was “misrepresentation” on the part of the relatives, and that it is a kind of misrepresentation that would have been condemned by the dominant legal and moral order (i.e. Sutpen’s reaction to this mysterious misrepresentation had “both legal and moral sanction if not the delicate one of conscience”). The key truth has not yet been revealed (‘fragmentary exposition’), and this remains the case for some time to come:

(c) [Sutpen] also told Grandfather, dropped this into the telling as you might flick the joker out of a pack of fresh cards without being able to remember later whether you had removed the joker or not, that the old man’s wife had been a Spaniard [...]. (203)

(d) [Sutpen: “The marriage was] an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which I had been working toward, concealed it so well that it was not until after the child was born that I discovered that this factor existed [...].” (220)

(e) [They] sat in that drawing room of baroque andusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough, while the Haiti-born daughter of the French sugar planter and the woman who Sutpen’s first father-in-law had told him was a Spaniard (the slight dowdy woman with untidy gray-streaked raven hair coarse as a horse’s tail, with parchment-colored skin and implacable pouches black eyes which alone showed no age because they showed no forgetting, whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough) told them nothing because she did not need to because she had already told it [...]. (268)

Passage (c) both adds the information that the French planter’s wife “had been a Spaniard” and serves as an implicit comment on Faulkner’s own narrative technique, in which important information is “dropped into the telling as you might flick the joker out of a pack of fresh cards without being able to remember later.” Next, in passage (d), there is a suggestion that the ‘flaw’ in Charles’s mother was of the kind that can be detected after the birth of a child (though
the causal relation is not in fact stated explicitly: “after the child was born [...] I discovered that this factor existed”). Finally, in passage (e), we get a description of Sutpen’s first mother-in-law, who had “raven hair” and “parchment-colored skin,” and who Sutpen had been told was of Spanish descent.

Against the backdrop of slavery, the U.S. South, and the history of Haiti, and taking all of this information together, it would, in theory, be possible to realize that the ‘flaw’ in Charles’s mother must be racial in nature: a ‘taint in her blood’ that makes the marriage unsuitable in the eyes of the dominant white culture, with the claim that her mother is “a Spaniard” constituting the crucial act of misrepresentation on the part of her family. And yet, the fact that the five passages cited above are dispersed over seventy-four pages (‘fragmentary exposition’), combined with the perceptual overload of Faulkner’s style – particularly evident in passages (b) and (e) – renders it difficult for any reader even to process the information, let alone to put the various pieces together. Once the ‘unknown’ truth about Charles’s mother is revealed in a straight-forward manner, however, the material that was subliminally perceived is (re)activated, generating on the part of the reader an uncanny sense of familiarity and belated recognition: it is strange but already long familiar.

Importantly, the technique of uncanny narration is not merely a way of sending shivers down readers’ spines. Rather, it constitutes a stylistic correlative to the novel’s concern with what we might call the nightmare of belonging. Much as is the case in a nightmare scenario, the novel’s interminable sentences propel us inexorably forward, as if we were running from some obscure threat. At the same time, when reading Absalom, Absalom! there is a strong sense of not getting anywhere, in part because of the novel’s frequent repetition of half-told stories. We have seen, for instance, that Rosa tells Quentin about a mysterious “something” hidden in Supten’s Hundred quite early on in the novel (140), and four pages later the text states more precisely that “somebody” – i.e. a human being – is hidden there. And yet, much later in the novel, we still do not know “whatever it was that was up stairs, [...] hidden up there for almost four years” (280). At the same time, given that all the characters from the story that so haunts Quentin are either dead (e.g. Ellen, Judith, Charles Bon) or clearly not hiding at Sutpen’s Hundred (e.g. Rosa), we in a sense already know that it can only be Henry who is hiding in his father’s house, even if we are not consciously aware of this knowledge. When Quentin finally stands face-to-face with
Henry, the nightmare of belonging thus reaches its uncanny climax not only for Quentin, but for the reader, too:

And you are——?
Henry Sutpen.
And you have been here——?
Four years.
And you came home——?
To die. Yes.
To die?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here——?
Four years.
And you are——?
Henry Sutpen. (298; original emphasis)

Though this is the first time in the novel that the truth about Henry’s return home is revealed, for the reader the revelation constitutes a “hollow repetition” of the kind that Eagleton regards as characteristic of Gothic fiction in general (Heathcliff and the Great Hunger 194). Even in terms of style, the dialogue is crammed with repetitions, and Quentin realizes that “waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived” (298). Waking or sleeping, Quentin thus finds that he cannot escape the power of postmemory, which forever binds him to his haunted, conflicted home community. The aesthetic purpose of uncanny narration in Absalom, Absalom! is that it simulates or enacts this condition for the reader, who is similarly weighed down by the sheer mass of the novel’s language, with its ceaseless stream of burdensome sentences and endlessly accumulating repetitions.

33 Note that the quotation from Absalom, Absalom! contains a narrative palindrome – “To die. Yes. To die? Yes. To die.” – embedded in a larger, ‘semi-palindromic’ passage. Christina Ljungberg suggests that such palindromes “focus attention on the very act of signification” (i.e. that they have an implicitly metafictional effect), and that “they bring into play the figure of reversal and thereby challenge the unidirectional linearity of human discourse, spoken or written” (248). Both observations fit Faulkner’s novel perfectly. Moreover, Faulkner’s revisions show that he reworked the manuscript version in a way that heightens the ‘palindromic effect’ of the published passage (Langford 358; I would like to thank Christina Ljungberg for bringing Faulkner’s revisions to my attention).