The Weight of History and Loving One’s Home

A region weighed down by a story from its past – a past that is as transnational as the region’s present, ranging from France and Spain to Africa, Canada, and Haiti. It is a contested story that some attempt to frame in terms of innocence, while others tell it in the damning mode of the Gothic. It is a story of seemingly biblical proportions – about incest, fratricide, and war – with family homes being destroyed and a patriarch’s dynastic designs thwarted. Through all of this, the region’s black inhabitants continue to be denied their fundamental right to represent themselves: as narrators in the novel, but also as voters in Faulkner’s present. It is difficult to think of any other novel in which the tradition of all dead generations weighs so palpably on the brains of the living – like an endless nightmare that we, as readers, are made to share through the technique of uncanny narration.

It is Quentin, in particular, who can barely cope with this nightmare of belonging to a region that is so deeply flawed. And yet, when at the end of Absalom, Absalom! Shreve asks Quentin why he hates the South, the latter denies that this is the case: “I dont hate it,” Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I dont hate it,’ he said. I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I dont! I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (303; original emphasis). Norman W. Jones interprets Quentin’s surprising reaction as an unconscious denial of his homoerotic desire for Shreve (340), while most other critics read it rather straightforwardly as Quentin’s desperate attempt to repress his hatred for the South (e.g. Betina Entzminger 117; Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin 25; Jameson, “Third-World Literature” 86).34

However, while such interpretations are certainly plausible, there is also a more intriguing possibility: that Quentin really does not hate the South. Quentin’s reaction would then constitute, not a case of repression and denial, but rather a moment of horrified recognition of the fact that, despite everything he knows, he nevertheless cannot bring himself to hate the region that remains his only home. What leaves Quentin gasping in “the cold air” of New England, in other words, is his inability to hate a place he knows to be fundamentally corrupt – that in many ways would deserve his hatred. In a final twist to the novel’s

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34 Roger Lundin tries to strengthen the case that Quentin is torn apart by his hatred by pointing out that Quentin commits suicide five months later on (179) – at least according to The Sound and the Fury, a novel which also features a character named Quentin Compson. However, Lundin’s argument is not unproblematic, for as Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin (35) point out, Shreve has a different name in Absalom, Absalom! (genealogy: Shrevlin McCannon) than in The Sound and the Fury (Shreve MacKenzie), which suggests that despite the striking similarities between the characters in the two novels they are not necessarily identical.
emotional drama, it is not Quentin’s unconscious hatred, but his ineradicable love for home that lies at the heart of his nightmare of belonging (that is to say, he would prefer simply to hate it, if only he could).

What is left unstated in *Absalom, Absalom!* but arguably implied by this final twist, is that in order to deal successfully with the weight of history, it is not enough for us merely to keep on retelling it. Admittedly, such a ‘working through’ of one’s story may constitute a necessary first step; after all, Quentin arrives at his recognition that he loves the South despite everything only through the therapeutic act of collaborative narrative reconstruction; in this sense, Shreve’s game of narrative seduction does have a positive effect after all. At the same time, however, the realization that ‘supernatural’ or Gothic hauntings are, in fact, material also means that historical (re-)interpretation must be followed by material changes if the ghosts of the past are ever to be laid to rest. If the home is found undeserving of a love that nevertheless proves ineradicable, then the only remaining course of action is to try and work towards changing that home.

*Absalom, Absalom!* makes clear that this is far from easy, and that it certainly cannot be achieved by indulging in fantasies of Adamic new beginnings. Rather, while some American ideologists (and supposedly many modernists) believed in the possibility of simply ‘making it new,’ Faulkner’s novel focuses on the obstinacy of socio-political reality and on the circumstances under which Americans in the 1930s had to try and make their own history: admirable ideals of freedom and equality, but also a heavy burden of racist oppression and imperialistic interference in other regions of the hemisphere. This long history of injustice cannot, the text suggests, be redressed by the heroic actions of super-human individuals (as witnessed by the utter failure of Thomas Sutpen’s design single-handedly to defeat the plantation system that had destroyed his self-worth as well as his trust in the ideal of equality). We live, as Marx emphasizes, under circumstances not of our own making (see chapter two and above), and so heavy is the burden of our common history that only through a collective effort can we hope to escape the seemingly endless nightmare of belonging. Such unity, of course, never comes easily, especially in a society that is historically as deeply divided as Faulkner’s South – but it is all the more important for precisely that reason. However, to examine in more details the fissures within a particular

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35 As Kurt Heinzelman points out, Ezra Pound is often erroneously credited with having coined the phrase ‘make it new’ in 1914. Though Pound did use the phrase “in canto 53, written probably in the early 1930s,” it was Ford Madox Hueffer (a.k.a. Ford Madox Ford) “who came closest in 1914 to saying the equivalent of ‘make it new,’ at least in the sense that phrase has come to possess” (131).
community, as well as the factors that might help to overcome them, we must now leave the rural South of Faulkner’s novel and turn, instead, to the Northern English industrial town portrayed in Pat Barker’s *Union Street.*