

Rereading Faulkner Through Parody

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The narrator of Jorge Luis Borges' story "The Immortal," who has finally come upon the City of the Immortals, is the Roman Flaminius Rufus; he is also, if not at the same time, the antique dealer Joseph Cartaphilus of Smyrna, and the poet Homer. The City of the Immortals, erected on a stone plateau, can only be ascended through a region of dark, interwoven labyrinths. It is uninhabited and conveys the impression of enormous antiquity, along with "that of the interminable, that of the atrocious, that of the complexly senseless."¹ It fills Flaminius Rufus with fright and repugnance. Only later, after he has left the City again, does he come to the understanding that he has not seen the *original* city:

As for the city whose renown had spread as far as the Ganges, it was some nine centuries since the Immortals had razed it. With the relics of its ruins they erected, in the same place, the mad city I had traversed: a kind of *parody or inversion* and also temple of the irrational gods who govern the world and of whom we know nothing, save that they do not resemble man.²

The City of the Immortals can be regarded as a symbol of what Aby Warburg has called Cultural Memory. Immortality for Borges can be found nowhere but in culture, especially in literature. Such a culture never disappears. However, with time it changes its face: it becomes a parody or inversion of itself, an assembly of artifacts that partake of immortality yet are devoid of all life. It is a "temple of the irrational gods," but loathsome even to those humans who, like Flaminius Rufus, have become immortal.

Borges thus points out the dangers of parody; yet he also states its historical necessity. And implicitly he seems to make a third point: that the parodist—Flaminius Rufus, Joseph Cartaphilus, Jorge Luis Borges—longs to parody a model which, like Homer's *Iliad*, could instill some of its life even into the parodic imitation. Thus, the poet and the parodist have to be distinguished. The narrator of Borges' story first meets Homer in the land, but not in the City, of the Immortals, who, though given to nothing but thought, are at least still alive. In other words, as long as the

bard can be distinguished from, and lives outside, his song, the *Iliad* cannot be parodied to the point where it becomes nothing but an artifact, one of those dead-end corridors or high unattainable windows in which the City of the Immortals abounds. Later in the story, the lives of Homer and Flaminus Rufus become indistinguishable. Yet even the *persona*, the changing mask or voice, of the bard would guarantee that the parodies of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* remain *songs*. Taking Borges' idea one step further by taking his own oeuvre into account, we might conclude that, although history as well as literary history may well repeat themselves mainly in the form of farce, once in a while a bard must appear who, by dint of a certain kind of innocence, seems to start the whole process all over again. This writer will give the impression of an authentic vision of things; and although in due time his work will again call for an ironic reversal, he will still save the later work from petrification as long as what his parodist writes remains a description of how he revisited the bard. In such transitional phases, Cultural Memory can come to stand for culture as such, immortality can be founded on mortality, the life of the library can depend on that of the librarian. Parody should therefore be seen in this context of innocence and memory, two modes of consciousness which William Faulkner, whom we shall consider as the bard, both thematized and—even more importantly—demanded of his reader. My thesis is that because of his concern for innocence and memory Faulkner's texts resist parody or, better, that he saves his parodist's fictions from becoming mere excrescences in the petrified City of the Immortals as long as the parodist pays homage to this Faulknerian concern. I shall try to illustrate this thesis mainly by comparing Thomas Sutpen to Uncle Jake, the protagonist of John Hawkes' 1985 novel, *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade*.

Both the protagonists of *Absalom, Absalom!* and of *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* are innocent, and both are ruthless. Because of their innocence, they are able to attempt the completion of a design, while remaining oblivious to the harm this may cause to others. For Thomas Sutpen, innocence is opposed to social experience, to the status of a man among men. In the other novels of that period when Faulkner deals with the theme of innocence, for example in *The Sound and the Fury* or *Sanctuary*, he deals with female innocence, and female innocence also appears important within a social context. In this respect

The Sound and the Fury and *Sanctuary* can be seen as companion pieces to *Absalom, Absalom!*. But although Temple Drake uses her innocence in order to victimize others, and although Caddy Compson, though victimized herself, still dominates others through her absence, their female – or biological – innocence ultimately cannot be compared to the male innocence ascribed to Sutpen. For Temple and Caddy cannot help but lose a given innocence, whereas the young Thomas Sutpen will have to discover it and its never-ceasing impact upon his life. Until his death, he never loses it; indeed, his very death is caused by his male innocence, the inability to relinquish his design and accept a girl as his heir. As we will see, the kind of memory that modifies Sutpen's innocence is of the same consciously restricted but potent quality as the author's own, and the comparison with Hawkes will help to illuminate this fact in retrospect – just as Borges' original City of the Immortals can only be divined through its parody.

After the humiliating experience at the front door of the big plantation house, a negative experience that will become crucial for the rest of his life, the young Sutpen retreats to the woods in order to try to understand what has happened to him. But instead of coming to such an understanding, instead of accepting the experience as his own, he finally rejects it; indeed, he discounts it even as experience and would rather subject his whole life to the necessity of sustaining an innocence that will preserve his status as it was before this fall. He must then consciously restrict his power of analysis,

because he knew that something would have to be done about it, he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life and he could not decide what it was because of that innocence which he had just discovered he had, which (the innocence, not the man, the tradition) he would have to compete with. (AA 234)

The design which Sutpen finally develops in order to deal with the "man" and the "tradition," that is, the acquisition of land, slaves, a family, and a fine house to combat them with – this design as well as the reasons for its failure are well known. But, as Sutpen realizes even as a boy, the design itself is of secondary importance. What he will actually have to compete with for the rest of his life is the urge to give in and accept experience as experience, man's desire for knowledge. Not to reflect

upon his innocence, therefore, becomes the driving force of his life, and the same, I would contend, is true for the author of *Absalom, Absalom!*. The driving force of Faulkner's life, and the reason why *Absalom, Absalom!* remains his pivotal novel, is his anxiety that, like Quentin Compson, his other alter ego in the novel, he will become one of the ghosts of the past. Like Sutpen, Faulkner is filled with a kind of baffled outrage that he was born in the South, that he is forced to hate what he loves, and his own innocence consists of the attempt to resist that truth by rewriting the history of that very South. Faulkner's creation of more and more facets of the life of Yoknapatawpha resembles Thomas Sutpen's unflagging attempt at creating another heir. Both Sutpen's and Faulkner's lives consist of the constant endeavor to defy the tradition of the South by creating their own tradition, since to accept that prior tradition would be deadly.

When a highly sensitive writer like Hawkes undertakes to parody Faulkner, this implies, not only that he admires his literary father, but also that he has to somehow attempt to overcome the deadly quality contained in any overwhelming literary tradition. Paradoxically, this can be achieved only by remembering how Faulkner managed to remain innocent. Yet to imitate Faulkner at this point by creating another version of his innocent hero would leave Hawkes as the weaker heir. Therefore, Hawkes has to reflect upon the meaning of male innocence, and he takes that reflection to a metafictional level. Uncle Jake in *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* is a pioneer in Alaska, just as Sutpen was in Mississippi. The fact that the narrator, his daughter Sunny, may not call him "Father" or "Dad," but only "Uncle Jake," points to a lack of paternal acknowledgment that resembles Charles Bon's predicament in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In both cases the refusal to accept the role of father has nothing to do with a lack of love. There are many other parallels and inversions between the two novels. Sutpen's treatment of his black slaves resembles Uncle Jake's treatment of the Indians, and Sitka Charley, an adopted Indian, grows up to be Sunny's lover—comparable to Charles Bon who intends to sleep with Judith. Ellen, Sutpen's wife, and Sissy, the spouse of Uncle Jake, are both quiet and respectable, but the former is described as a tearless Niobe, while the latter is timid and cries herself to sleep every night. Uncle Jake's trusting yet overbearing attitude towards Frank Morley resembles that of Sutpen towards General Compson. And

so on. Furthermore, there are many recollections of "The Bear" in *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade*. In fact, the novel could also be read as a parody of "The Bear." But the aspect of parody I am interested in concerns Faulkner's and Hawkes' different treatment of the relationship between narration and storytelling and how this difference illuminates how male innocence can be related to memory and hence to culture.

Uncle Jake creates an Alaska of his own by seeking out adventures which he can then turn into stories for his family, particularly for Sunny. For instead of his biological, he wants her to be his narrative heir. And although Sunny seems to reject this heritage until the very end of the novel, she has already unconsciously accepted it by becoming the proprietor of Gamelands, the best little whorehouse in Alaska, instead of choosing to become a mother and to accept her biological role. While she tells her story, Sunny is haunted by dreams of her father who years ago disappeared from her life without a trace. Through her narration, Uncle Jake becomes a legend and, like Sutpen, he remains a legend for the reader even after the riddle of his death has been solved. Thus, as another storyteller, Sunny cannot help but accept her heritage, and she stays in Alaska instead of leaving for France—just as Quentin accepts the tradition of the South, whether he hates it or not, at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*. As female narrator, Sunny becomes the metafictional inversion of Hawkes, the male author, who has also come to accept his Alaskan heritage over his love for France; metafictional, because Hawkes takes parody to the second degree. Quentin only needed to be Faulkner's male alter ego in the text.

While Sunny is the narrator of *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade*, Uncle Jake is the original storyteller of the novel. Here Hawkes parodies the complex relationship between narration and storytelling that has become evident in *Absalom, Absalom!*. As regards narration, the derivative yet parodically necessary mode of the two, Hawkes' style betrays only slanted allusions to Faulkner (as when the huge bear which Uncle Jake has killed is called "His Unholiness"), but his reflections about storytelling directly question Faulkner's art—as when, for instance, Sunny (or the author?) describes the effects of Uncle Jake's stories on his listeners:

But Uncle Jake had a flair for silence. He enjoyed his dramatic silences as much as his delaying tactics of his accordion narration, as he called it ... He knew that Sissy and Frank Morley wanted to be left for a while just as they were: stunned by his story. He knew that it would be some minutes yet before they found their voices, as they continued listening to the sound of his in the cold silence, and that they could not move, though they were stiff enough from sitting. He knew that the power of the storyteller is greatest when the story's done, and no one enjoyed his own power more than Uncle Jake, or more enjoyed the pleasure of a speechless audience — even an audience as small as this one.³

As we remember, the point of the story in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that it hasn't really ended. Even after Quentin and Miss Rosa have visited the Sutpen plantation and found Henry dying in the old mansion, and even after that mansion has burned down, the story persists: Quentin still needs to tell it to Shreve, and the howling of Jim Bond, the idiot negro, continues to haunt the reader. In contrast, Uncle Jake always concentrates on the end of his stories — he even ends his own life-story by committing suicide. Like the end of his stories, his real disappearance is planned so well that his daughter needs to imagine his death again and again. That is, if Faulkner's story cannot come to an end, Hawkes counteracts it with a story that constantly thematizes endings. And since Uncle Jake even treats his own life as if it were a story, genealogies are ultimately as irrelevant for Hawkes' novel as they are important for Faulkner's. Uncle Jake may well be the father of Jack Hawkes, even if Hawkes has created him. The fact that the life of Uncle Jake resembles that of Hawkes' real father — the fact that places the author in the position of Sunny — supports this thesis, but it further confuses any possibilities of biological identification. But by Hawkes' stressing the end of each story to the point where the power of the story is greatest when it is no longer there, the irrelevance of genealogy in *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* as such becomes important. Since Uncle Jake's life-story ends repeatedly (and all of his stories are life-stories, the stories of his various adventures), implicitly the ending of his life becomes impossible. Hawkes' parody of Faulkner thus amounts to a reflection on Faulkner's deepest concern, the relationship between life and legend, innocence and memory.

Still, Hawkes — like Uncle Jake — is as innocent as Faulkner — or Thomas Sutpen. Uncle Jake's innocence at first appears to be primarily

physical; in fact, Sunny's conception would probably never have taken place in the vast coldness of Alaska. But Uncle Jake's physical innocence is also parodic: it is Thomas Sutpen's innocence in reverse. If Sutpen needs a design that dominates his life in order to compete with his innocence, then Uncle Jake has taken this concept further—in a postmodernist direction. For although Uncle Jake's designs, like Sutpen's, also result in failure, this failure is premeditated: Uncle Jake *wants* to fail as an adventurer, because he wants to win out as a storyteller. Or to quote Stanley Elkin's God from *The Living End*: "Because it makes a better story is why."⁴ This belief in the power of the story is as innocent as Sutpen's belief in the effectiveness of *his* design, but it also clearly points in the direction of Uncle Jake's author, and marks *his* innocence as post-modernist.

A final parallel between *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* is of decisive importance. The designs of both Thomas Sutpen and Uncle Jake depend on obliviousness in their perpetrators, while demanding a desire for memory from those who experience their effects and in the end narrate them. While those who surround the hero suffer from the consequences of his actions and therefore cannot forget them, the hero himself is ruthless enough to suppress the memory of each failure and unflinchingly start all over again. And each renewed failure deepens the pain of those attached to him. Their memory becomes more and more of a burden and prevents them from acting on their own. They thus have to take to narration, since this is the only way in which memory can be both preserved *and* projected onto others. Rosa Coldfield tells her version of the Sutpen story to Quentin; Quentin then tells his and her version to Shreve. By reenacting part of the story, Quentin and Shreve together ultimately try to move back from memory to innocence. Similarly, Sissy in *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* keeps a diary which her daughter inherits. Sunny then weaves the contents of that diary into her own narration. The unburdening of her memory, *her* movement back from memory to innocence, is brought about through the series of dreams of her father that, like Quentin's and Shreve's endeavors to identify with Henry and Charles Bon, also appear as erotically charged symbolic actions. If they cause her to accept Alaska as her heritage in the end, they also cause Hawkes finally to accept Faulkner's fictions as *his* own heritage.

In *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* Hawkes takes up Faulkner's main concern, the relationship between life and legend, innocence and memory. But what Faulkner represses, Hawkes reflects upon, and thus makes available for evaluation. Hawkes' preoccupation with the relationship between storytelling and narration harks back to Faulkner; it invites an intertextual rereading of his texts. Therefore, Hawkes' novel cannot be seen as one of the dead-end corridors of Borges' mad City of the Immortals; instead, the later author leads us back through the caves of the unconscious on which Borges' city is built, into a land where the return to life is still possible, because the father will still answer to the call – just as Homer finally answered the call of Flaminus Rufus in Borges' story.

NOTES:

- ¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby eds. (New York: New Directions, 1964) 110.
- ² Ibid. 113 (my italics).
- ³ John Hawkes, *Adventures in the Alaskan Skin Trade* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) 89.
- ⁴ Stanley Elkin, *The Living End* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979) 114.