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# A THIN SLICE OF ANXIETY

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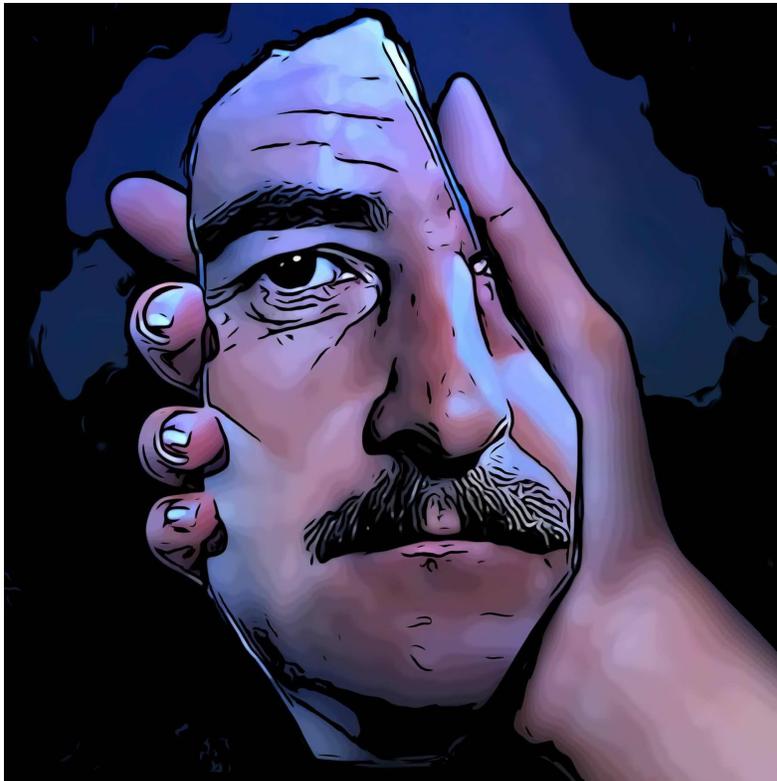
*A Thin Slice of Anxiety* is an independent publication which strives to nurture and promote the best up-and-coming writers of our generation. Writers who are brave enough to guide us into places of amalgamation where the unplumbed depths of the known are made and unmade. Encouraging us to explore the amaranthine abyss and ruthless shadowlands which make up the human condition.

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May 23, 2022

## ESSAY: “WOKE” BEFORE HIS TIME: HOW WILLIAM FAULKNER CAN SAVE AMERICA FROM A SECOND CIVIL WAR

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By **Walter B. Levis**

He's a foundational figure in American Literature, a Nobel Prize winner, an icon of Modernism —yet today William Faulkner's stock teeters on bankruptcy, with many critics and readers, particularly those who strongly identify as “progressive,” viewing the writer's work as essentially racist and misogynistic, and therefore irrelevant. They're wrong. Faulkner can save us from ourselves. He can help to heal the painful gash of our deepening political and cultural divide. All we must do is understand his greatest and most complicated book, *Absalom, Absalom!*

Published in 1936, the novel tells the story of racism in America and points the way to a genuine, lasting, true redemption. America can, indeed, be delivered from its “original sin,” but it takes far more work than proclaiming “Black Lives Matter” or “leaning into difficult conversations” or “overcoming unconscious bias.” The redemption of America requires all of us, Black and White—and full disclosure, I’m White—to learn what *Absalom, Absalom!* teaches: how to live with a profound intellectual humility and moral skepticism, a state of mind in which we understand our history, and understand how we understand it. If we achieve this metacognitive awareness, we can, in turn, achieve a new form of Eros, what Faulkner famously calls “an overpass to love.” This is a phrase the literary scholar Arnold Weinstein has brilliantly illuminated for generations of readers, and it can be understood as a uniquely “Faulknerian” Eros for two reasons: 1) it unites the oppositions and ambiguities inherent in the human experience; and 2) it moves us beyond an ego-centered life, beyond, as Faulkner puts it, “the central I-Am’s private own.” The possibility of achieving this transcendent Eros emerges only at the end of the novel, and only as the result of a journey that is long and arduous—for both the characters and the reader.

The first step of the journey requires—in modern parlance—a version of being “woke,” as Faulkner’s own language suggests when he describes Quentin Compson, the novel’s protagonist. Quentin is a college-age Southerner about to leave home and attend Harvard University. But before going north, he must learn more about his past, and, in particular, understand that his identity—like every American’s today—is deeply intertwined with the fate of the defeated South and the horrors of the Civil War. At the start of the novel, the year is 1908, forty-three years after the war’s end, and Quentin suffers an ambiguous mixture of physical and spiritual sickness and health:

*... his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence.*

The key themes are presented here, the map of what’s ahead for Quentin: first, to wake from the fever and understand its relationship to the disease; then to see that freedom from the disease is, paradoxically, not health and strength, but impotence. The metaphor, carried forward to our current moment of “racial reckoning,” is that the feverish battle against racism—from the Thirteenth Amendment to the Civil Rights Act to the Great Society—“cured the disease” (gave us the election of Barack Obama, for example) but left us impotent. Now, we are “...filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering...looking backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret.”

In today’s terms, the “stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering” are the myriad ways racism persists, including, for example, the legacy revealed by a simple stark statistic such as median net worth: \$188,888 for Whites; \$24,100 for Blacks. But we must process this information with a

Faulknerian consciousness, which is one that circles its subject, Picasso-like, presenting multiple points of view simultaneously, leaving us disturbed, confused, asking questions. What version of reality is this? From whose point of view are we seeing it? Whom do we hold responsible?

To ask such questions is to look “beyond the fever and into the disease.” The form of the novel—a series of conversations—shows us how to do this. The first conversation is between Quentin and a family friend of his grandfather’s, Rosa Coldfield, an old woman who is “one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times.” The “ghost-times,” of course, are the pre-Civil War days of slavery. Before Quentin goes to Harvard, he will hear about these days over and over again from a variety of points of view, each of which offers a partial understanding. We should note here how the novel’s form embodies one of Modernism’s most crucial insights: History is constructed. There are no fixed, permanent, unambiguous answers to the question: What happened? Faulkner’s narrator describes what it’s like for Quentin to listen to Rosa Coldfield’s version of history: “...listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound.” When hearing and listening fail to produce understanding, who’s to blame? As the scholars Joseph Urgo and Noel Polk have pointed out, it’s not entirely Rosa’s fault. There is something “self-confounding” in the way Quentin listens. Eventually, he will learn to listen differently. At the end of his journey, the aural merges with the visual, hearing with seeing, thinking with feeling. When this happens, when the essence of human imaginative power is activated, then Quentin—and the reader—are on the “verge of creative insight.” The possibility of redemption is nearing.

But the obstacles for Quentin—and the reader—are formidable. *Absalom, Absalom!* contains dizzying multiple perspectives with the same material revealed in shards and fragments. The reader—like Quentin himself—must work to construct an understanding from these partial narratives. The sources and their versions overlap, create conflict, and sometimes flat-out contradict. The confusion is enormous. But to go forward—to leave the South and take up his new life at Harvard, where his Canadian roommate, Shreve, will press him to explain the “exotic” South—Quentin must face the confusion and try to answer the questions: How did this horrible history occur? And what does it mean to live with the legacy of racism and its evils?

We face the same questions today, with the same dizzying confusion of partial narratives that conflict and sometimes flat-out contradict. For example, trying to address the issue of fighting racism, author Ibram Kendi concludes in his recent best-selling book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, that “capitalism is essentially racist; racism is essentially capitalist.” If true, then to be antiracist requires one to be anti-capitalist. And what does this mean? Should a new method of distribution—one without markets—be constructed to allocate resources, determine prices, compensate innovation, etc., etc.? But, on the other hand, the last twenty-plus years of global capitalism—since the collapse of the Soviet Union and fall of the Berlin Wall, which resulted in hugely *expanded* markets—show “remarkable progress toward ending global poverty.” This version of reality, with data from the World Bank, asserts that “the number of people living below the IPL (International Poverty Line) decreased from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 689 million in 2017.” That means 1.2 billion people across the globe have had their lives improved by capitalism. Closer to home, a U.S. census data report from September 2020 says:

In 2019, the poverty rate for the United States was 10.5%, the lowest since estimates were first released for 1959. Poverty rates declined between 2018 and 2019 for all major race and

Hispanic origin groups. Two of these groups, Blacks and Hispanics, reached historic lows in their poverty rates in 2019. The poverty rate for Blacks was 18.8%; for Hispanics, 15.7%.

If more than 80 percent of Blacks live *above* the poverty line, and the rate is improving, then is capitalism the problem or the solution to the problem? Is it fundamentally evil or essentially good? What is at the moral center of capitalism? Quentin faces a version of this question as he learns about the life of Thomas Sutpen, the character at the center of the novel whose rags to riches tale embodies the mythology of what capitalism makes possible: "...he [Sutpen] 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..." In Quentin's first conversation with Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen is characterized as "a demon," a fraud, a man "who fled here and hid, concealed himself behind respectability." Faulkner's Sutpen echoes Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, which was published nine years earlier in 1925. But Faulkner and Fitzgerald differ profoundly. At the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not the American "dream," but its opposite. The nightmare: racism.

At the level of plot, the role of race is fairly straightforward: Thomas Sutpen's son, Henry, has a friend, Charles, whom he brings home from college and introduces to his sister, Judith. The two fall in love. They want to marry. But it turns out that Charles is Black—not by appearance, but by legal definition. Horrified by this news, determined to prevent the marriage of his sister to a Black man, Henry murders Charles.

A summary like this suggests a clear morality: Henry is racist; Charles is a victim of racism. But the power of *Absalom, Absalom!* involves understanding the plot in a larger context, slowly piecing together the concrete and ambiguous actions of the individual characters within the framework of society as a whole, its laws, rules, culture, all of the forces beyond an individual's control. Put another way, *Absalom, Absalom!* challenges us to see what today we call "systemic racism."

Like the novel, the term "systemic racism" must be untangled and its contradictions and confusion embraced. The novel shows us how to do this: Start with the question of responsibility. What is in our control, and what is not?

Thomas Sutpen's upward mobility hinges on a childhood experience of being viewed as inferior—by a slave. Indeed, at this crucial moment in the novel, it is a Black person who views himself as superior to a White person. Note this important ambiguity. The novel is full of ambiguities, all of which we must struggle to accept as essential to the meaning of the human experience.

Born into a poor "blue mountain range" family, the young Thomas Sutpen is sent by his father on an errand which takes him to the front door of the plantation where he and his family live and work as laborers. He's fourteen years old. He knocks, and then:

*...he stood there before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes...He never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back.*

The slave sees poverty in Sutpen's clothing and understands that he has power over this "white trash." Today, we might call this an example of "classism," a "microaggression." It is the defining moment of Sutpen's life—the end of his innocence. Before this incident:

*He just thought some people were spawned in one place and some in another, some spawned rich (lucky, he may have called it) and some not, and that...the men themselves had little to do with the choosing and less of the regret because it had never once occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others. So he had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it.*

This initiation into the reality of status and power leads to Sutpen's decision to become a powerful man himself. He takes "responsibility," and here the word itself must be examined more closely. Faulkner suggests by the form of almost all of his books that all of life is an interaction, an ever-flowing set of "voices" moving into an unknown future. As the narrator puts it at one point during Quentin's quest: "...all the voices, the murmuring of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beyond the immediate fury..." But embedded within the stimulus-and-response of the endless murmuring of "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" is the ability to respond—literally: response, ability. It's a measure of agency, the capacity to take action.

Sutpen takes action with a fury: At fourteen, he rejects his family, who he now views as "a kind of accelerating and sloven and inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam," and boards a ship going to the West Indies, where he learns enough French to find work on a sugar plantation. When some years later he successfully quells a slave revolt, the French plantation owner offers him his daughter in marriage. What isn't clear at the time: The daughter has "just a little spot of Negro blood."

By the time Sutpen learns the truth about his new wife, his son has already been born. And if the mother has "just a little spot of Negro blood," so, too, does the son, a fact that will eventually explain the homicide at the center of the plot. But that understanding comes later, slowly, as Quentin and his roommate arduously work to construct a coherent understanding of "the South." At this point in the story, what we can call the power of "systemic racism" is the focus. From Sutpen's point of view, he's helpless. In one of the novel's many shifts between third- and first-person narration, Sutpen explains his feelings about inadvertently marrying a woman legally defined as Black:

*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.*

Embedded in the idea of "systemic racism" is that no personal agency is required—the responsibility for oppression rests on the system itself. This is a crucial and complicated idea. It's why the current conversation on race is sometimes characterized as "racism without racists." Whether the individual White person is "evil" is not the issue; the system itself is evil. Consider how this applies to Sutpen: He views the situation as one in which he must choose between his "design" of upward mobility, which the system encourages, and his relationship to his wife, which the system forbids. It isn't a question of personal racial bias or prejudice. Sutpen is just accepting the rules, the existing structure of his society. Advancement, Sutpen's "design," is possible, but interracial marriage is forbidden—all this by

law. In fact, as the story unfolds it will become clear that Sutpen feels he has acted with a measure of moral integrity because he “provided for [his wife and son].” To a contemporary thinker like Kendi and his followers, who equate capitalism and racism, Sutpen’s actions might be considered similar to Whites today who insist “I’m not racist!” as they “provide” for their children with inherited wealth. It’s how the “system” works, and therefore they are blameless. Indeed, the role of Sutpen’s financial support becomes an increasingly complicated and ambiguous aspect of the story, but the immediate point is that Sutpen’s individual actions are presented in the context of a larger “system,” the destruction of which is the context for the novel as a whole: the Civil War.

In any country, at any time, civil war marks the ultimate systemic breakdown, and in many ways *Absalom, Absalom!* Remains urgent for exactly this reason: There are frightening parallels between 1861 and today. According to Boston University Professor Nina Silber, co-president of the Society of Civil War Historians, White anger and resentment can be understood as fueling both eras.

At the time of the Civil War, this took the form of Southern White men angry at the idea that the federal government would interfere with their right to own Black slaves. Today, I think this takes the form of White people who believe that Black and Brown people are making gains, or getting special treatment, at their expense.

In addition to Silber, Johns Hopkins University Professor Robert Lieberman, author of the book *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*, believes the 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol is “the closest we’ve come to 1861, the one instance of a real failure of what you would call a smooth, peaceful transfer of power.” The big difference, Silber finds, between then and now is that the 2021 insurrection came “from inside the government,” referring to the members of Congress and President Trump who riled up the insurrectionists. “This is an insurrection incited by the President of the United States,” Lieberman says. “That’s completely without precedent. That’s what’s so jaw-dropping to me.”

The similarities between 1861 and today extend only so far, of course. One important difference: The election of Abraham Lincoln occurred on the heels of the momentous Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the U.S. Supreme Court voided the Missouri Compromise (1820), thus making slavery legal in all U.S. territories. In this context, many historians understand the battle between the North and South as essentially a fight for control over the West. But are they right? Was the war fought over the evil of slavery or only the expansion of slavery? Have we thoroughly examined its evil? For that matter, have we thoroughly examined our nation’s history at all? Indeed, how we relate to the past is precisely the issue in *Absalom, Absalom!* The book raises several crucial questions: Is understanding history a matter of intellectual comprehension of empirical facts? Is it a rational method similar to science? What about our emotions and feelings, our subjectivity? If we acknowledge that all of us are shaped by an essential contradiction—that there are forces beyond our control coupled with our ability to respond to those forces—then how do we relate to the whole? How does the inner connect to the outer, the subjective to the objective? And to what extent is all this a challenge of Eros?

In the second half of the novel, these questions are addressed with the introduction of Faulkner’s famous phrase “an overpass to love.” By midpoint in the story, the reader faces an almost unbearable demand, which, I believe, is part of Faulkner’s aim. The novel’s painfully confusing form and

structure require us to struggle. In precisely the way Quentin and his roommate struggle to relate to the confusion of the past, we as readers must struggle to relate to the confusion of the text. And the key word here is, indeed, “relate.”

The plot twists and turns, particularly as we learn that the action involves not only a homicide but a fratricide too. Yes, Henry murdered Charles to prevent him from marrying his sister because Charles was, in fact, Black; but that’s not the whole story. It turns out that Charles was also Henry’s half-brother because Thomas Sutpen is the father of both men. Charles’ mother was Sutpen’s first wife from the plantation in the West Indies, the woman he “provided for...and put aside.”

All of this information creates enormous confusion for Quentin and Shreve—and for us as readers. The forlorn-suitor tale of Charles wanting to marry a woman who, it turns out, is his half-sister now also involves the father-son story of Charles as an abandoned child. And looming over both dramas is the “systemic racism” which strictly forbids marriage across racial lines. In addition to these conflicts, the story now includes the archetypal prohibition of incest. To understand the whole—which in aesthetic terms means to comprehend *Absalom, Absalom!* as simultaneously a murder mystery, a family drama, and a historical novel about the Civil War—requires Quentin and Shreve (and the reader) to experience a shift in consciousness, a move away from the ordinary ego consciousness into a world of expanded relatedness, a place of greater Eros. Faulkner shows us how to do this.

First, consider the word “relate” and its connection to “Eros” (known as Cupid by the Romans). According to one of the earliest Greek poets Hesiod (700 BCE), Eros was a primeval god, the son of Chaos, the original primeval emptiness of the universe. Later tradition understood Eros as the son of Aphrodite, goddess of sexual love and beauty. Both notions blend in Plato’s conception of Eros as a fundamental creative impulse also having a sensual element. All of these meanings support Faulkner’s effort to push the reader to go beyond the “Chaos” of the text, and into relationship. And note: A relationship fueled by Eros is deeper than can be understood by the intellect; Eros involves the preverbal, the sensual, the physical. It happens to us in a realm beyond the ego. As Faulkner puts it:

*...there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both—touch and touch of that which is the citadel of the central I-Am’s private own...*

A poetic description of the breakdown of an ego-centered life, this is a reality we all know intuitively. To fall in love, to be hit by Cupid’s arrow, is to be struck by a primordial cosmic force greater than our ordinary consciousness. It shatters the intellect’s “decorous ordering” and disrupts the ego’s sense of separateness, our “I-Am’s private own.” And note how this breakdown of the ego blurs boundaries, creating an experience of intense engagement “...which enemies as well as lovers know...”

Sitting in their Harvard dorm room, doing what college students have always done—drinking, staying up late, talking about themselves, discussing who they are and where they come from—Quentin and his Canadian roommate Shreve experience this shattering of their separateness. And although it is, indeed, a transcendence of their egos, it isn’t a mystical experience of magically rising *above* life’s tensions; rather, it’s an imaginative act of *uniting* the opposites inherent in life’s tensions: North and South; past and present; knowledge and ignorance. And the key is love.

It comes unannounced during a lull in their conversation. After telling his friend to either drink from their shared bottle of whiskey or pass it over, Shreve basically says to his roommate—as roommates continue to say to each other today—hey, let’s talk about love.

Although some critics have constructed a homoerotic interpretation of the relationship between Henry and Shreve, what’s at least equally important is to understand that, as the boys continue their intimate conversation, they experience the dawn of their understanding that information—data, facts, the ego level of reality—is inadequate. They’ve been talking for hours, even days; the exact time frame isn’t clear. Quentin has been telling his fragmented story of the South to Shreve, who has been slowly transformed by listening. Shreve’s transformation is profound. He started out full of disdain, mockery. As a Northerner, he felt superior to the South. At one point, he says sarcastically: “Jesus, the South is fine, isn’t it? It’s better than the theater, isn’t it? It’s better than Ben-Hur, isn’t it?”

But the mockery dissipates. In its place comes the capacity to relate, and this marks the introduction of Faulkner’s famous phrase “overpass to love.” Here Faulkner achieves what the critic Arnold Weinstein calls “one of the most beautiful passages in all of fiction.” To be clear about this crucial moment: The two friends are talking about the tangled confusion of Henry’s story, and then there’s a lull, and then an urge to greater intimacy:

*“And now,” Shreve said, “we’re going to talk about love.” But he didn’t need to say that either, any more than he had needed to specify which he meant by he, since neither of them had been thinking about anything else; all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them, as someone always has to rake the leaves up before you can have the bonfire. That was why it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false.*

To explicate this passage, let’s begin with the phrase “...all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them...” The information, the story thus far— “all that had gone before”—must be “overpassed.” The literal definition of this elusive term is to “pass over, to traverse, the way a bridge or road passes over another.” But the narrator is more explicit in two precise ways. First, creating a bridge over the painful story of the past is the singular task of these two college roommates, the Northerner and the Southerner. There is “none else present to overpass it but them...” Their friendship, their relationship (sexual or not), the Eros between them, symbolic of the attraction between the north-south polarity, makes this building of an overpass possible. Secondly, building the overpass is not a job requiring heavy machinery or slabs of concrete, like making a road. Instead, the narrator says it’s like raking leaves before having a bonfire. Consider the

implications of this image: The dead leaves, the past, the disparate, painful parts of the fragmented story of slavery and racism can be pulled together and ignited; a fire of consciousness can be achieved. But it cannot be done alone. It requires—as the narrator puts it, “some happy marriage of speaking and hearing.”

What follows is further elaboration of the meaning of “marriage,” of this universally recognized institution. And let us note that in our contemporary moment, the institution of marriage has been justly transformed to include same-sex couples, but it is no less enduring as the ultimate embodiment of Eros. Here, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the “happy marriage of speaking and hearing” between Henry and Shreve involves a profound absence of struggling over power, over whose voice is heard. The narrator explains “...it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it...” Why doesn’t it matter who does the talking? Because they are united in a consciousness greater than one’s solitary ego, a shared reality larger than both of them. And this shared reality creates “a demand.” The final lines of the passage explain the meaning of this “demand”:

*...wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false.*

What requires special attention in these lines are the verbs: forgive, condone, forget, sift, discard, conserve. And the overall goal of these actions must also be underscored. What’s the purpose of this work? What’s it for? The answer is: “...in order to overpass to love...” But the word love also contains a unique meaning. By this time in the story, after struggling through the confusion of multiple narratives, Henry and Shreve—and the reader—have earned the right not just to ordinary love but to this Faulknerian Eros, which is a love “where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault or false.”

Here, the novel offers a striking contrast to our current state of polarization. Consider, again, the work of Ibram Kendi and his enormously influential book *How to Be an Antiracist*. For Kendi, paradox and inconsistency seem to be banished. He suggests the best way to talk to each other is in clear-cut either/or binomial categories:

There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups. ... there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas.

Perhaps it makes sense for a racial activist to reject complexity out of sheer frustration with the enduring problem of racism, but what are the consequences of such oversimplification? Consider an idea such as the “whiteness of time,” as articulated by Brittney Cooper, Associate Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Africana Studies at Rutgers University. In an interview on National Public Radio, Professor Cooper explains:

White people own time...[because] the way that we position ourselves in relationship to time comes out of histories of European and Western thought.

Linking time to “European and Western thought” might be useful in dividing the world into Black and White, but it also raises questions, among them: What about the rest of the world? Consider China. With a population of 1.4 billion, which is about triple the population of the United States and Europe combined, would the Chinese agree that “White people own time”? And what about the 125 million Japanese, with their own distinct history? Or the additional 1.3 billion people living in the complicated country of India?

On the other hand, Professor Cooper’s challenge to examine our assumptions about the meaning of time contains some genuine insight. Her idea might be linked, for example, to the work done by scholars of Comparative Religion such as the late Huston Smith, of Yale University, who explores the meaning of time, explaining that “the historical religions of the West, which are messianically forward looking” contrast sharply with Asian religions and their emphasis on the world being “cyclical,” without the coming of a messiah. Huston also points out that many religions embrace a concept of “eternal time,” which complicates matters further.

The larger point is this: Faulkner’s “overpass to love,” with its ego-transcending “paradox and inconsistency,” differs sharply from oversimplified ideas on the “progressive left” such as Kendi’s binomial antiracism or Cooper’s “Whiteness of time.” But we must note that the dangers of oversimplification come not only from the “progressive left” but from the “conservative right” too, such as when Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis says that the idea of “systemic racism” is a bunch of “horse manure”; or when Senator John Kennedy from Louisiana says, “Critical Race Theory teaches that America is totally screwed. We need to just tear it down and start over.”

Both the governor and senator are grossly oversimplifying and distorting, and their blind spots overlap. To clarify, Critical Race Theory (CRT) doesn’t teach “America is totally screwed.” The theory—and let’s acknowledge that it is, indeed, a theory, not a doctrine or creed—involves the complicated relationship between a society’s legally binding rules and structures and the effect of those rules and structures—the “system”—on people’s real lives. Critical Race Theory was developed by legal scholars in the late 1960s as it became undeniable that some states wouldn’t apply Fourteenth Amendment protections to all citizens, and that implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, including school desegregation efforts, could be blocked by the legal system itself. One clear example focused on by early “CRTscholars” involved a follow-up Supreme Court decision to *Brown vs. Board of Ed.* The initial case in 1954 established that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. However, in 1955, the Supreme Court heard a second case, *Brown II*. The court’s ruling in this second case included the famous phrase “all deliberate speed,” which legally permitted—i.e., “systemically” allowed—schools to integrate gradually, instructing lower courts to insist only that offending school boards make “a prompt and reasonable start.” The phrase “all deliberate speed” became an example of how the legal system can defend, maintain, and even promote racist practices, and many know the phrase today because it’s the title of a book by the late Derrick Bell, considered one of Critical Race Theory’s founders and greatest thinkers. Building on this insight from *Brown II* into how the legal system can itself maintain racism, Bell and other legal scholars began to see how real

estate practices, housing and zoning laws, hiring rules, banking and loan regulations, probation and sentencing guidelines, police tactics, and a myriad of other legal processes and structures can result in the perpetuation of racism.

But that's the root of Critical Race Theory, the historical context. Today, the challenge is to understand the theory's intent, to overcome the divisive rhetoric and oversimplified distortions the theory has inspired (on both sides of the political divide), and to embrace the ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions that are revealed not only by this particular theory but by our larger, more complicated "conversation on race." All of this is possible. We can untangle the painful confusion; we can hear the truth embedded within. But we must learn to listen differently, which is precisely what happens to Quentin and Shreve.

Near the end of the novel, the roommates share an extraordinary moment: Their conversation about the past becomes an experience in the present. They transcend their ordinary consciousness and become larger than themselves, capable of a radical empathy that results in "...not two of them there and then but four of them riding the two horses through the iron darkness..." They feel the cold weather on the night of the dreadful murder; they hear the clatter of horses riding in the darkness; they know the pain and suffering of a forbidding father and an anguished son. The key passage in its entirety illustrates that not only can the extraordinary transformation of self-transcendence occur, but we can understand precisely what makes it possible:

*It would not matter here in Cambridge that the time had been winter in that garden too, and hence no bloom nor leaf even if there had been someone to walk there and be seen there since, judged by subsequent events, it had been night in the garden also. But that did not matter because it had been so long ago. It did not matter to them (Quentin and Shreve) anyway, who could without moving, as free now of flesh of the father who decreed and forbade, the son who denied and repudiated, the lover who acquiesced, the beloved who was not bereaved, and with no tedious transition from hearth and garden to saddle, who could be already clattering over the frozen ruts of that December night and that Christmas dawn, that day of peace and cheer, of holly and goodwill and logs on the hearth; not two of them there and then either but four of them riding the two horses through the iron darkness, and that not mattering either: what faces and what names they called themselves and were called by so long as the blood coursed—the blood, the immortal brief recent intransient blood which could hold honor above slothy unregret and love above fat and easy shame.*

The final lines reveal what makes transcendence possible: blood. The bond of common humanity—this is what the boys attain. It's their insight into the power of redemption. Blood makes it possible for "not mattering either what faces and what names they called themselves"; blood holds honor above "slothy unregret"; blood raises love above "fat and easy shame." But we must note the paradoxical and inconsistent qualities of this blood. With a classic streak of Faulknerian adjectives (modifiers jammed together without any commas), the narrator describes "immortal brief recent intransient blood..." And the tension in this phrase of adjectives contains what is perhaps the book's greatest wisdom: the need to embrace paradox.

Blood is paradoxical. It is an example of how *that which unites also divides*. Yes, blood can be invoked as a “progressive” symbol of universal humanity, but it can also be seen as a foundational “conservative” metaphor of tribalism. Consider a phrase like “Blue Blood.” And, of course, the suffering and cruelty at the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the ugly phrase: “just a little spot of Negro blood.”

At the close of the book, however, in spite of its deeply contradictory nature, the valence of blood symbolism is unquestionably positive. Exhausted, the two roommates have reached the end of the story. They have explored the past, brought it with them into the present, and now are considering the future. Shreve makes a prediction. He says that, eventually, it will be interracial children like the character Jim Bond, the only survivor of the Sutpen clan, who will dominate our culture, marking the end of racism as a ruling principle. In the book’s final paragraph, Shreve says:

*... I think that 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.*

Shreve’s prediction here points the way forward: interracial marriage, interracial consciousness, humanity united by what we share, a common life-force. But there’s no simple saccharine sweetness at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Yes, we can understand our history and cultivate a deep Eros and transform the divisiveness of blood so that we are redeemed by our common humanity. Yes, we can keep our nation alive. But it will be an emotional struggle. There will be no simplistic flag-waving, no loving all things American. In fact, there will be no escaping our conflicted feelings. Perhaps that’s why Faulkner ends the book with one final dialogue between the roommates. Although they have “a happy marriage of speaking and hearing,” Shreve taunts his “spouse” one final time by asking:

*“Why do you hate the South?”*

*“I don't hate it,” Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; “I don't hate it,” he said. I don't hate it, he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*

Does he hate it? Over the years, critics have considered this ending to indicate “the crisis of being a Southerner.” Today, as our “racial reckoning” continues, it’s the crisis of being an American. The only solution is an “overpass to love.”

-END-

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