own work and career. As I mentioned at the start of this entry, the circumstances prior to Faulkner writing the novel were challenging. Faulkner had to relinquish any sense of pretence and all ambition of literary celebrity with his first three novels and "just write."[4] His tenacity, thankfully, paid off. More than sixty years after his death in 1962, *The Sound and the Fury*, along with his broader body of work, has proven to be "the props, the pillars [that] help him endure and prevail," to echo Faulkner's own Nobel Prize acceptance speech.[5] How does Faulkner's capacity for endurance connect to my own experiences as an early-career academic? Above all, his reflections on his own writing have taught me to never give up. In the aftermath of COVID-19, the political and social instabilities throughout the world, and the unrelentingly bleak atmosphere of the last few years more generally, the prospect of entering any profession, let alone academia, seems nightmarish and unsustainable. However, early-career researchers in particular have so much to contribute that academia in general, and the field of American studies in particular, would be infinitely poorer without them. In closing, my advice to anyone in that position reading these words is to keep going, hang in there, and try your best. Absorb Faulkner's wisdom, and endure, then prevail.

Royal Holloway, University of London AHMED HONEINI

Journal of American Studies, **57** (2023), 4. doi:10.1017/S0021875823000403

BECOMING MY OWN AUTHORITY

In the fall of 1966, during my sophomore year at Michigan State University, I enrolled in two courses in the philosophy of history and southern literature. Reading R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* marked out a lifelong interest in the uses to which we put the past. Their work led to my dissertation and first book, "Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner," supervised by Michael Millgate, and eventually to my two-volume biography, *The Life of William Faulkner*, with a dedication to M. Thomas Inge who introduced me to the work of William Faulkner in that southern literature class.

I read Cleanth Brooks and Hyatt Waggoner, authors of two major studies of Faulkner's work, along with other critics searching for what they said about Faulkner's understanding of history. Both Waggoner and Brooks acknowledged the historiographical dimension of *Absalom, Absalom!* but not what historians and philosophers had to say about the interpretation of the past that could be compared to Faulkner's methods. Collingwood is the key figure to consult in a reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*. He argues that historians reenact in their own minds the thoughts of those who acted in the past. He emphasizes thought patterns, not documents or other kinds of evidence, but rather the historian's own capacity to imagine the past.

Of course, Collingwood, like other historians, relies on documents. But to his mind, too much emphasis can be placed on the material reality of data. A letter – some kind of record – remains essential to the historian's enterprise, to be sure, but too much of written history turns out to be what he calls a "scissors-and-paste" job, as though the

[4] Meriwether, 293.

[5] Ibid., 120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875823000403 Published online by Cambridge University Press

historian is assembling a collage. Such scissors-and-paste historians attribute undue importance to their "authorities" – what we would call sources. Sources should not command the historian's approach to the past but rather should be subordinated to a holistic grasp of what figures of the past thought they were doing. Collingwood has a marvelous phrase that sums up his position on historical knowledge. Ultimately, he concludes, the historian is "his own authority."

Is there any better way to understand what is happening in *Absalom, Absalom!*? Quentin Compson and Shreve McCanon, two Harvard undergraduates, must piece together the narratives of Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson, as well as letters and the testimony of Thomas Sutpen, whose son Henry kills his best friend and college classmate Charles Bon. What went wrong with Sutpen's plan to establish a dynasty? As Quentin and Shreve sort through the testimony of others, they become their own authorities, emerging from the scissors-and-paste process of assembling their sources only to go beyond those sources by forming their own interpretation of history, explaining to their satisfaction many of the events that Rosa and Mr. Compson could not understand.

Of course Quentin and Shreve's account, revealing Charles Bon as Sutpen's black son come to Mississippi to court Thomas's daughter and Henry's sister, Judith, is open to challenge – not a surprising outcome to a Collingwood-trained historian. Or, as the narrator says in the novel, what these two young historians come up with – that Henry could not abide the miscegenation that would have resulted from his half-brother marrying Henry's sister – is "probably true enough" – a phrase that leaves a lot of leeway, as all accounts of history, no matter how persuasive, must do. Unlike a conventional mystery novel that delivers an indisputable verdict, *Absalom, Absalom!* reverberates with the quest for knowledge that is always amendable over time, as each narrator, and then the reader of the novel, assesses the evidence and the interpretation of successive character–narrators.

After more than fifty years of engaging with the novel, I have to ask myself, why? In retrospect – in fact in the moment of writing this piece – I realize that reading and writing about *Absalom, Absalom!* remains an act of liberation. As a young scholar, confronting the formidable achievements of Cleanth Brooks and Michael Millgate, Faulkner via Collingwood set me free – not to reject my authorities but to use what they had thought to create something new, as Quentin and Shreve do by absorbing the testimony of Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, General Compson, Thomas Sutpen, and Charles Bon (in his letter) to create a history that is more encompassing than the sum of the sources out of which it emerges. I'm reminded of T. S. Eliot:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive at where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Or even better, "Someone said: 'The dead writers of the past are remote from us because we know so much more than they did'. Precisely, and they are that which we know." It is no accident that I call on Eliot, since while writing about *Absalom, Absalom!* in graduate school, I was also reading *Four Quartets* and "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In fact, just now I took off the shelf my graduate school Faber & Faber editions of Eliot's *Selected Essays* and *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* to verify the words that I have never forgotten. Scholars know what a profound impact Eliot had on Faulkner. I don't see how *Absalom, Absalom!* could

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875823000403 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have been written without the historical sense that Eliot touts in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," specifically his notion that the "existing order" of literature

> is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

In a sense, that is what Quentin and Shreve are trying to accomplish in the novel – to "readjust" the version of events given by Compson and Rosa and fit their new authoritative narrative in that historical sequence. We cannot know whether Quentin and Shreve ever read Eliot, but they are nevertheless proof positive of the dynamic between past and present that has to occur if scissors-and-paste history is to be overcome, and we are to emerge with our own forms of knowledge.

I have jettisoned almost all of the books I acquired in graduate school, replacing them with other editions or with books that reflect new interests. But the Faulkner–Eliot nexus abides, and I don't see how I could have gone forward without them.

City University of New York CARL ROLLYSON

Journal of American Studies, **57** (2023), 4. doi:10.1017/S0021875823000415

THE APOTHEOSIS OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

To use one of William Faulkner's favourite words, I think of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) as an *apotheosis*. When I first started reading Faulkner's novels I did so in chronological order, beginning with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). *Absalom* was, therefore, the sixth Faulkner novel I read and, although by that time I was already firmly hooked, I remember the experience as a consolidation. Both in style and in content, Faulkner's fictional universe expanded for me very early on in that reading. From the start, *Absalom*'s interwoven narrative voices wrestle with the story of Thomas Sutpen, Yoknapatawpha's "biggest single landowner and cotton-planter," before his property is almost completely lost due to the events of the Civil War. Sutpen's tenacity, ruthlessness, and cruelty in creating his fortune horrify and fascinate his community for generations, even long after his death. It was through the complexity of Faulkner's style – the nested narratives all trying and failing to encapsulate the import of this life – that I realized that where Faulkner had in earlier novels emphasized profound interiority, the key to this novel would be the irreducible interconnectivity of people, places, and times. The opening pages of *The Sound and the Fury* centre around Benjy Compson's experience of watching golfers "hitting" in the distance, while he compulsively remembers the loss of his beloved sister, Caddy. The outset of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) focusses on the similarly personal perspective of Darl Bundren, who is faced with the equally shattering loss of his mother, Addie.[1] One opening passage concerning the Sutpen story in *Absalom*, however, reads as follows:

[1] William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Vintage, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875823000403 Published online by Cambridge University Press