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Faulkner's Cryptic Closet: Forbidden Desire, Disavowal, and the "Dark House" at the Heart of *Absalom, Absalom!*

IN THE CLIMACTIC SCENE OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*, AS QUENTIN COMPSON and Rosa Coldfield approach the near-ruins of Sutpen's Hundred, Quentin anxiously denies that the secret within carries any significance: "What is it she's got hidden there? What could it be? And what difference does it make? Let's go back to town, Miss Rosa" (291). The bravado with which he follows these entreaties undermines his prior attempts to neutralize the threat, however: "I am not afraid. I just dont want to be here. I just dont want to know about whatever it is she keeps hidden in it" (293). Quentin's obvious terror emerges in his fretful repetitions (the interrogative "what" and later the recurrence of "I just dont want") as well as in the revealing disjunction between his emphatic desire not to know and his assertion that the knowledge makes no difference anyway—if the knowledge truly carried no consequences, of course, he would not have to avoid it so assiduously. Just as Quentin's denial of fear actually uncovers the fear it purports to hide, the old house has come to embody not only its own hidden secret, but the way in which the act of hiding assumes the shape of hiding itself. In other words, the moment we infer that something is hidden, we have begun to trace the contours of what that something might be or might do, rendering it not so safely contained as its concealment may suggest. As Faulkner demonstrates throughout the novel, going to the trouble of hiding something—whether it be the troubling past of a first wife or a dying brother in the attic—ratifies the terrifying power of the facts that characters attempt to bury neatly: if the fact requires covering up, then it must hold dangerous implications for the world at large.

In his succinct delineation of the ways in which hiding requires being partially known, a phenomenon he refers to as "coming into hiding," Malcolm Bull observes that "just as the covers of a book conceal its contents yet recall its content to someone who has previously read it, so

the silent earth somehow echoes with the voices of the dead. It is as though the dead are revealed not despite but because of their concealment” (11-12). Bull’s use of a cemetery as a figure for revealing concealment seems appropriate for a house which has preemptively entombed Henry Sutpen, and yet Bull’s account does not reach Quentin’s fear. Even if Quentin has inferred that the house’s secret relates to the last living member of the family whose saga Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson have been recounting, why should the idea that Henry lies hidden within be so terrifying?

We must recover the sense of danger mentioned above and the possibility that the house conceals not only a body (as does Bull’s more benign graveyard) but also knowledge that will have catastrophic implications if released. In Shreve’s version of these incidents, Quentin enters the house and fully realizes both the truth and the fanatical injunction against its revelation:

[Quentin] saw that Clytie’s trouble wasn’t anger nor even distrust, it was terror, fear. And she didn’t tell [Quentin] in so many words because she was still keeping that secret for the sake of the man who had been her father too as well as for the sake of the family which no longer existed, whose here-to-fore inviolate and rotten mausoleum she still guarded. . . . it was not rage but terror, and not nigger terror because it was not about herself but was about whatever it was that was up stairs, that she had kept hidden up there for almost four years; and she didn’t tell [Quentin] in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret; nevertheless she told [Quentin], or at least all of a sudden [Quentin] knew. (279-80)

Shreve depicts the house as a tomb even as he deepens the sense that this particular burial ground requires careful protection and containment: Clytie “guards” this “mausoleum,” striving to keep the secret even as the structure that hides it has been breached. The portrayal of this mausoleum as “here-to-fore inviolate” emphasizes the previous purity of the house’s separate space—up until now its fortifications have been sound against those who would penetrate from without and drag its secrets to the exterior. The Sutpen house thereby serves as a cross between tomb and castle keep¹—but why should the return of Henry Sutpen, shriveled and near death, represent such ruinous knowledge?

¹This gothic structure bears a strong resemblance to those in Poe’s fiction, a relationship that Faulkner will later force us to acknowledge in the echo of Quentin’s repetition of “Nevermore” (298-99).

To answer this question, I propose that the space Faulkner has created in this house can productively be understood as the fusion between two spatial models of hidden knowledge—the closet and the crypt. Faulkner anticipates such an analysis in the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* when Mr. Compson explains why Rosa has asked for Quentin's help: "the affair, no matter what happens out there tonight, will still be in the family; the skeleton (if it be a skeleton) still in the closet" (8). In evoking a classic trope of the closet as the space for hiding secrets, Faulkner immediately insinuates that this particular space and its particular skeleton will prove the danger of unearthed bodies that were meant never to be found. As I explore this "cryptic closet," I will draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of the closet in the case of the latter, and on the psychoanalysis of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in the case of the former. Both models suggest a truth, be it homosexual desire or incompletely processed grief, which must be carefully contained if the subject is to survive, but neither fully enables the deciphering of the structure of disavowed knowledge embodied by what remains of Sutpen's Hundred in 1909. The house, from which Faulkner tellingly drew his working title for the novel, "A Dark House"², is closet-like in its anxious insistence on thresholds and in hiding a dangerous truth, while its structural affinity with a psychoanalytical crypt emerges when we realize that the dangerous truth it hides is a dying male body that has itself, I will argue, encrypted the body of Charles Bon.

By looking for closets in *Absalom, Absalom!*, I follow Sedgwick in asserting that the closet, despite its modern explicit connection to hidden homosexual desire, is not a liminal space of denial significant only for a homosexual minority, but a space central to the questions of identification and knowledge that characterize society as a whole. In her *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues:

a lot of the energy of attention and demarcation that has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States, has been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematical for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large, mappings whose enabling but dangerous incoherence has become oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality. "The closet" and "coming out," now verging on all-purpose phrases

²The working title is noted on the manuscript included in the Rowan Oak Papers.

for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation, have been the gravest and most magnetic of those figures. (71)

Sedgwick rightly notes that a figure like the closet necessarily emphasizes thresholds. Even more significant is Sedgwick's contention that the anxiety about homosexuality and the controlling terminology that results crystallize the way that culture grapples with other problematic definitions of gender, sex, economics, and, I must necessarily add, race—definitions that make use of what she refers to as “politically charged lines of representation.”

In this spirit, I will map the topography of perhaps the most significant closet space in the novel—the Harvard room shared by Shreve and Quentin—not in the hopes of finally and incontrovertibly “outing” this notoriously homoerotic couple (from Spode in *The Sound and the Fury*, who calls Shreve Quentin's husband [78], to the numerous critics who rightfully draw out the sexualized rhythms and exclamations of Shreve and Quentin's storytelling, many voices have noted the erotic overtones of their interactions), but with the desire of creating an analytic framework that I can then apply to the questions of threshold, crypt, and desire at Sutpen's Hundred. My choice to concentrate on the Harvard room as closet in no way implies a dearth of other potential closet spaces in the novel, however: Miss Rosa's “mausoleum”-like, shuttered house (47); Judith's bedroom; the stable as wrestling ring; army field tents; and the cloistered residences of New Orleans (Charles Bon's son is described as growing up in “a padded silken vacuum cell which might have been suspended on a cable a thousand fathoms in the sea” [161]) would all contribute productive insights to this larger inquiry. I focus on the Harvard room because of its primacy in the narrative: because Shreve and Quentin narrate most of the novel's events from this location, and because, in their telling, the Harvard room eventually merges with the historic settings, that room serves as the frame for those events. Although much of my exploration of this specific closet will be drawing out the homoerotic tensions between Shreve and Quentin, these tensions will eventually bring us (as they do for Shreve and Quentin) to the questions of forbidden desire (whether homoerotic or interracial) that plague Henry and Bon.

As Sedgwick notes, one reason the closet provides such a potent image for the critical intersections of knowledge and power is its suggestively binary structure and privileging of thresholds. Just as the

concept of disavowal contains both knowledge and the active denial of that knowledge, the closet at once embodies the possibility of concealment and the threat of disclosure. Even before the link between homosexual desire and the closet became explicit, however, the image of a small space hidden from the outside world captures the predicament of a desire rejected by the larger hegemonic system. Such desires can be disavowed, but not destroyed; in a situation reminiscent of the Hegelian Master/Slave Dialectic and the Foucauldian model of power, the hegemonic system is defined by its relation to the very practices it labels as “aberrant.”³ The spatial model of the closet thus suggests at once concealment and the fact that its defining binary oppositions are utterly dependent on one another: there can be no “outside” without a contrasting enclosed space; there can be no “inside” without an oppositional “outside.” The tension and interdependence, in turn, reiterate the importance of the threshold—the point of separation and also the focus of anxiety, because, as I have already demonstrated, it is in crossing the threshold that a system of desires must acknowledge its alterities.

The sitting room in the suite at Harvard which Quentin and Shreve share provides an ideal setting for considering binary systems: it is inside, but has a window to the outside; it (in the beginning, at least) is warm, while a blizzard emphasizes the cold outside; the room is light in contrast to the night; one of its inhabitants is American and from the South, and the other is a Canadian and thus both foreign and associated with the North. Faulkner’s depiction of the sitting room emphasizes the oppositional elements at the same time it displays their connections and interrelationships. While the room initially seems a warm shelter against the weather outside, the consistently decreasing temperature suggests a constant encroachment of the outside elements upon the small sheltering space. The room’s sole sources of light are electric lamps which could be switched off to create darkness instantly.

One of Faulkner’s first descriptions of the Harvard sitting room reveals a number of the parameters with which we can understand this particular closet. Quentin has begun telling the story of Miss Rosa and the Sutpen family, and Shreve has been listening attentively and is already starting to participate:

³In fact, scholars such as Sedgwick and Chauncey have noted that the term “homosexuality” was coined before “heterosexuality.”

There was no snow on Shreve's arm now, no sleeve on his arm at all now: only the smooth cupid-fleshed forearm and hand coming back into the lamp and taking a pipe from the empty coffee can where he kept them, filling it and lighting it. So it is zero outside, Quentin thought; soon he will raise the window and do deep-breathing in it, clench-fisted and naked to the waist, in the warm and rosy orifice above the iron quad. But he had not done so yet, and now the moment, the thought, was an hour past and the pipe lay smoked out and overturned and cold, with a light sprinkling of ashes about it, on the table before Shreve's crossed pink bright-haired arms while he watched Quentin from behind the two opaque and lamp-glared moons of his spectacles. (176)

Faulkner sets up many of the binary contrasts you would expect from a room in winter—inside/outside, warm/cold, light/dark—but he describes them in a way that problematizes the implicit separations of a binary system: these binaries constantly threaten inversion. Although it is currently warm enough in the room for Shreve to go shirtless and for the window to be described as “warm and rosy,” the “zero outside” seems poised to invade. Even without the possibility that Shreve will throw the window open to the cold, his pipe provides a reminder that what is momentarily inflamed can easily become “overturned and cold.” In the description of the pipe, there are even slight echoes of death that anticipate the moment when this closet will become a crypt. It is not only cold, it is surrounded with “a light sprinkling of ashes”—in Christian belief, the ultimate fate of the human body. The light in the room similarly carries the threat of darkness. Beyond the possibility of an immediate switch that any lamp implies, the language suggests that this lamp does not illuminate the entire room: Shreve's hand is “coming back into the lamp,” a movement indicating that his hand had been in shadow before. While the obvious light/dark contrast may be between the lamplit room and the night outside, between the window that could be described as “warm and rosy” (implying both higher temperature and light color) and the “iron quad” (where “iron” suggests both the cold touch of metal and a dark color), Faulkner complicates that simple binary by reminding us of the light/dark contrasts within the room itself.

It is no coincidence that the light/dark and warm/cold antitheses mentioned above seem to pivot on the window. Not only does the window provide the immediate threshold of the sitting room—an important point in any system focused on delineating inside from outside—it contributes a bodily dimension to the question of

inside/outside and the possibility of homosexual desire between Shreve and Quentin. The window is the location where Shreve habitually stands shirtless and breathes in the icy air: "soon he will raise the window and do deep-breathing in it, clench-fisted and naked to the waist. . . ." At the border that separates interior and exterior, Shreve self-consciously brings the outside air into his body. He seeks to absorb the exterior substance completely—the breathing is "deep"—even if it is difficult. Shreve has no qualms about confronting and confounding the threshold directly—he refuses to be limited by the safe space of their sitting room.

Shreve's clenched fists suggest more than just violence, however: the image of sudden bodily contraction in the face of an act with the potential to be both painful (inhaling icy air) and pleasurable or at least healthy (there is presumably a reason Shreve does this often) also suggests sexual sensation, a sense amplified by the adjectives "deep" and "naked." The homoerotic dimension of this particular sensation arrives with Faulkner's figurative introduction of the anus: as "the warm and rosy orifice," the window becomes not only the threshold between outside and inside, but the bodily entry point of the sexual act most associated with homosexual relationships between men, or at least the act most strenuously forbidden by the larger culture—a sort of ultimate threshold between "normal" heterosexual and "aberrant" homosexual behavior. In this light, earlier descriptions of Shreve acquire a different tone: he is "cupid-fleshed," where Cupid is the god of erotic love and, in appearance, typically a beautiful, smooth, somewhat-feminized young boy. The repeated references to Shreve's flesh seem both sexual and often overtly anal: his skin or flesh is mentioned in nearly every description, where it is constantly portrayed as pink, thereby echoing the "rosy orifice." Suddenly, an earlier passage takes on an overtly homoerotic quality: Quentin is "glancing . . . for a moment at Shreve leaning forward into the lamp, his naked torso pink-gleaming and baby-smooth, cherubic, almost hairless, the twin moons of his spectacles glinting against his moonlike rubicund face" (147). Faulkner's repetition of "moon" in these two passages, particularly "twin moons," insists upon the buttocks; "cherubic" anticipates the later "cupid" and thus injects the sense of *eros*.⁴ The combination of an erotic gaze and the buttocks

⁴"Moon" was used to refer to the buttocks as early as 1756; the *Oxford English Dictionary* also lists two literary usages concurrent with the time that Faulkner was writing—one from Joyce in 1922 and Beckett in 1938 ("Moon," def. 14).

suggests an anal-privileging that is echoed by “pink-gleaming,” “baby-smooth,” “almost hairless”—phrases that make an implicit (and unfavorable) comparison to pudenda.

If Shreve’s physicality thus embodies the allure of the anus, Faulkner also emphasizes that it is Quentin’s gaze that renders him thus. The immediately preceding description follows Quentin’s “glancing” at Shreve, while in the later description Quentin thinks about Shreve’s habit of deep-breathing: “So it is zero outside, Quentin thought; soon he will raise the window” (176). In Quentin’s eyes, Shreve is able to embrace the threshold, to take the outside into his body both through the window and, considering the erotic valence of that window, through his anus. The possibility embodied by Shreve’s deep-breathing—overcoming the outside elements by choosing to proactively absorb them into his body through a figuratively anal (and thus socially forbidden) act—is one that intrigues Quentin (he has apparently observed Shreve deep-breathe often enough to expect it on certain nights) at the same time that he does not take part. In fact, if Shreve gives an impression of robust good health, of the type who can successfully challenge the outside elements, then Quentin is portrayed as frail (later he cannot even warm himself, only “trying to hug himself warm between his arms, looking somehow fragile and even wan in the lamplight” [236]). Quentin’s doubtful ability to overcome the physical elements suggests a psychological inability to conceive of electively crossing a figurative threshold, particularly when endowed with the valence of tantalizing yet forbidden⁵ homoerotic union. The closet partially defends him from the cold outside by building a protective enclosure, but we are to imagine that he would not survive the removal of that barrier, of absorbing part of the outside through the very act that the outside tries to forbid.

If the window that is increasingly and irrevocably closed represents the forsaken possibility of exiting the closet, then Quentin, in barricading that exit, succeeds in turning the barriers of his closet into

⁵By the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Lord Alfred Douglas’s “love that dare not speak its name” was already a common topos (and, as Sedgwick points out, had its roots in Saint Paul’s condemnation of sodomy and in other Christian writings [*Epistemology* 73-74; 202-03]); the trials of Oscar Wilde had occurred nearly half a century earlier; and in the preceding decade Freud had published “Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality,” linking overly strong homosexual impulses with a kind of paranoia which patients then reroute through a more appropriately gendered object.

the walls of his own crypt. Fittingly, subsequent descriptions of the room underline its growing coldness and the progressively corpse-like appearance of Quentin, who starts to speak in a “flat, curiously dead voice” (208). Faulkner begins a later chapter with the phrase “There would be no deep breathing tonight”—almost as if Quentin needs to repeat to himself that Shreve will not force the opening of the threshold—before continuing to verify that “The window would remain closed above the frozen and empty quad beyond which the windows in the opposite wall were, with two or three exceptions, already dark” (235). By emphasizing the closed window in conjunction with the cold (“the closed, the snow-sealed, window” [243]), Faulkner illustrates the encroachment of outside elements (he notes that the exterior darkness has already vanquished the windows across the quad, for example). Within the logic of the closet, then, Quentin cannot rely on this space for protection: the figurative closing of the anus (in the cold room, “the rosy glow . . . now had nothing of warmth, coziness, in it” [236]) coincides with the closet’s collapse, not in terms of a free expression of previously forbidden desires, but in the destruction of inhabitants who cannot reconcile those desires with the outside culture.

In addition to turning his closet into a crypt, Quentin’s inability to face his homoerotic desire shapes the narrative which he and Shreve subsequently create for Henry and Bon. As Michael Bibler has argued, Shreve and Quentin turn to this earlier pair in part to work through their own anxieties about homoeroticism. Bibler sees their storytelling as creating a sort of safe space in which Shreve and Quentin can enjoy their sameness (or “homo-ness,” to use the phrase he adopts from Bersani) apart from the outside pressures of gender binaries. Faulkner indeed repeatedly states that Shreve and Quentin become indistinguishable (“the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins” [236]), but to take those statements as indications of an equivalence between Shreve and Quentin would ignore the way that Shreve shoulders the bulk of the storytelling while Quentin endures the bulk of the suffering. The most erotically-charged moments of this portion of the narrative become so in Shreve’s descriptions and in his subsequent commentary; these moments leave Quentin unable to participate. In one such instance, Shreve offers a possible explanation for Henry’s eventual acceptance of the incest in terms that pose sexual transcendence through taboo:

And who to say if it wasn't maybe the possibility of incest, because who (without a sister: I dont know about the others) has been in love and not discovered the vain evanescence of the fleshly encounter; who has not had to realise that when the brief all is done you must retreat from both love and pleasure . . . but maybe if there were sin too maybe you would not be permitted to escape, uncouple, return.—Aint that right? (259)

The subsequent description emphasizes Quentin's non-participation to the point that he seems to shrink: "Quentin could have spoken now, but Quentin did not. He just sat as before, his hands in his trousers pockets, his shoulders hugged inward and hunched, his face lowered and he looking somehow curiously smaller than he actually was" (259). When Quentin does speak, he can only offer "I dont know." The obvious explanation for Quentin's reticence would be his own obsessive relationship to incest and sexual purity in *The Sound and the Fury*, but the intervening description raises the additional echo of his struggle to come to terms with his relationship with Shreve. While Quentin is small, shrunken, characterized by "delicacy about the bones" (259), Shreve is more robust (and eros-infused) than ever in his "cherubic burliness" (259). Shreve confronts and even relishes the erotic elements of the story; Quentin shrinks away.

Even when Shreve does not explicitly discuss forbidden sex, many of his descriptions nonetheless heighten the elements with homoerotic resonance. In Shreve's telling, Henry's awkward proclamation of loyalty to Bon fuses erotics and patrilineal identity:

[Henry] over the bottle one night said, blurted—no, not blurted: it would be fumbling, groping; and he (the cosmopolite ten years the youth's senior almost, lounging in one of the silk robes the like of which the youth had never seen before and believed that only women wore) watching the youth blush fiery red yet still face him, still look him straight in the eye while he fumbled, groped, blurted with abrupt complete irrelevance: 'If I had a brother, I wouldn't want him to be a younger brother' and he: 'Ah?' and the youth: 'No. I would want him to be older than me' and he: 'No son of a landed father wants an older brother' and the youth: 'Yes. I do', looking straight at the other, the esoteric, the sybarite, standing (the youth) now, erect, thin (because he was young), his face scarlet but his head high and his eyes steady: 'Yes. And I would want him to be just like you' and he: 'Is that so? The whiskey's your side. Drink or pass.' (252-53)

Shreve's depiction of Henry's halting language uses the vocabulary of sexualized touch ("fumbling, groping"), while Henry's reactions imply the rush of blood ("blush fiery red"; "his face scarlet") that suggests a

profession of love as well as mimicking the mechanics of male sexual arousal (an echo deepened by Henry's being "erect"). Even more significantly, Shreve immediately follows this description with the declaration "And now . . . we're going to talk about love" (253). The unspecified narrator explains that Shreve "didn't need to say that either, any more than he had needed to specify which he he meant by he, since neither of them had been thinking about anything else" (253), but it is noteworthy that, though both Quentin and Shreve think about love, Shreve is the one initially able to put that thought into words. Just as Quentin watches Shreve confront the threshold of the window but cannot himself participate, he primarily listens as Shreve assumes responsibility for concluding Henry and Bon's story. Quentin does occasionally interrupt, of course; most notably, now that Shreve has articulated the love that has been on both minds, he twice admonishes Shreve that his narrative improvisations do not fit because "it's not love" (258) or "That's still not love" (263). He does not, however, offer an alternative story that would represent love.

While they may never create a fully-satisfying love story, Shreve and Quentin do eventually infer a narrative element that accounts for Henry's murder of Bon. As Noel Polk has demonstrated, Bon's black ancestry cannot be conclusively verified within *Absalom, Absalom!* The fact that Shreve and Quentin accept it so readily, however, indicates the important function it serves in their own storytelling. Polk argues that they fixate on race as an explanation in order to avoid facing more difficult problems with sexuality and gender (22).⁶ Bibler perceives Bon's blackness as replicating the queer logic of the plantation itself: homo-ness is permissible among men who are the same, but an interracial union between men would threaten carefully maintained power structures (83). I simply wish to add that, if we see the inference of Bon's blackness as a kind of narrative dodge, we must understand that dodge in terms of Quentin's inability to confront his homoerotic desire and its seemingly fatal consequences. As already noted, the Harvard room becomes increasingly tomblike as their storytelling progresses; Shreve takes self-preservative action (we learn he has not only put on his

⁶Although the issues of gender on which Polk primarily focuses here are the figure of the cuckold and male attempts to come to terms with female sexuality, he rightfully notes Quentin's homoerotic desire along with his feelings about incest in discussing *Absalom, Absalom!* (25-26).

overcoat, but turned up the collar), while Quentin hardly moves. Shreve, moreover, seems to recognize Quentin's fragility and even tries to protect him to some extent, twice suggesting that they should leave the cold of the sitting room for the warmth of bed (perhaps another homoerotic echo; 234, 287) and bringing Quentin his overcoat (although Quentin does not touch it). Whether or not Bon actually has black ancestry, his purported blackness derails any focus on the homoerotic bond between Bon and Henry—a bond which Quentin cannot successfully face.

Even with the retroactive understanding that Bon is black, however, the story of Henry and Bon replicates the closet. When read back into the prior narrative, the idea of Bon's blackness, far from successfully deflecting away from the homoeroticism, actually heightens the obsessive focus on thresholds that characterizes the closet. Furthermore, Henry's ultimate fate reveals the full extent of Quentin's peril: disavowed desire results in the erection of a crypt. In psychoanalytic terms, the crypt provides us with a productive figure for disavowal and for the inadvertent revelation inherent to the act of hiding. If the closet delineates a space defined by large societal pressures that dictate those behaviors which can be publicly performed and those which must be kept from view, then the psychological crypt denotes an intimate and literally interior structure erected by an individual.⁷ Abraham and Torok, following the lines of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, characterize the crypt as a psychological coping mechanism developed by someone who has lost a love object but cannot properly mourn the loss. Rather than grieve and move on, the subject indulges the fantasy that she has successfully entombed the love object within her own body and that the object thus remains physically present.

To establish that Henry Sutpen encrypts Charles Bon, I must first illustrate the ways in which Bon serves as a love object for Henry. Conveniently enough, Henry's idolization of Bon forms one of the few points of emphatic agreement between multiple tellers of the Sutpen

⁷I do not wish to offer an overly neat distinction between closet and crypt: both structures address desires which cannot be shown "in the light of day" (Abraham and Torok 141); moreover, the claim that the closet alone deals with societal pressures would ignore the fact that Henry encrypts Bon because he has lost him, and that he has lost him because of a historically and socially ingrained inability to accept the consequences either of his homoerotic desire or Bon's blackness or both.

saga. Mr. Compson asserts many times that “Henry loved Bon” (71, etc); Shreve, speaking with Quentin, imagines Henry “aping [Bon’s] clothing carriage speech and all” (252), and later both imagine that Henry’s desire to imitate Bon would have been strong enough to take on a mixed-race mistress if possible, a fact which even an unspecified outside narrative voice supports: “since both he and Shreve believed—and were probably right in this too—that the octoroon and the child would have been to Henry only something else about Bon to be, not envied but aped if that had been possible” (268-69). Henry yearns to merge his identity with Bon, a desire which opens the narrative to distinctly homoerotic, or at least homosocial, overtones. Mr. Compson conceives of the intense affection between the two men as a seduction (Bon “seems to have seduced the country brother and sister” [74, cf. 73, 75, 76]). We have already seen the way Shreve sexualizes Henry’s halting declaration of loyalty to Bon. Perhaps even more significant than Shreve’s erotic description is the fact that Henry wants Bon to assume his place as rightful Sutpen heir, thereby personally displacing his (Henry’s) patrilineal identity. Whether sexually or in the lines of inheritance, Henry desires Bon’s body to merge with (or even dominate) his own.

At the same time that Bon’s deflection of Henry’s overtures (“The whiskey’s on your side. Drink or pass” [253]) allows him to avoid disclosure either of his actual identity as Henry’s older brother or of the reason why he has been removed from the family inheritance, its subsemantic echoes carry it perilously close to a full revelation. “Passing” is, of course, precisely what Bon has been doing (especially if we accept Shreve and Quentin’s conclusion that he has inferred his true relation to the Sutpen family by this point): he hides the fact of his familial relation, passing as a mere fellow student and friend, and reading backward from Shreve and Quentin, he hides the fact of his mixed race. Just as the hiding structure threatens to reveal that which is hidden, Bon’s hidden identity strains at the seams of language, constantly threatening to emerge. Bon’s inducement to “Drink or pass” echoes yet another notable sense of passing—to move beyond a barrier, either mental or physical. While Henry eventually convinces himself to accept an incestuous relationship between Bon and his sister, he cannot accept Bon’s transgression of the socially-accepted racial threshold and, specifically, the threshold of his sister’s body. Henry in turn dramatically performs the compulsive protection of his sister’s body through the topography of

Sutpen's Hundred itself: although Henry and Bon presumably ride together to the gates of the house, Henry waits until the threshold of the property—just outside the gate—to kill Bon. Mr. Compson's account and Quentin's reaction privilege both the gate and the idea of "passing":

“. . . the ultimatum discharged before the gate to which the two of them must have ridden side by side almost . . .” (It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them, facing one another at the gate. Inside the gate what was once a park now spread, unkempt, in shaggy desolation . . . the house partaking too of that air of scaling desolation, not having suffered from invasion but a shell marooned and forgotten in a backwater of catastrophe—a skeleton giving of itself in slow dribbles of furniture and carpet, linen and silver, to help to die torn and anguished men. . . . They faced one another on the two gaunt horses . . . the two faces calm, the voices not even raised: *Dont you pass the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles; and I am going to pass it, Henry*). . . . (105-06)

Beyond the repeatedly-mentioned gate lies a park and a house which Henry acts to keep inviolate; the plantation has avoided the “invasion” of the Union Army and Henry resorts to violence to prevent its sexual invasion by a (partially) black man. Henry's anxious attempt to erect an insuperable barrier reveals the arbitrariness of such a boundary—his line is a shadow upon the ground, the moving darkened image cast by light, that, rather than being reassuringly fixed, is entirely relative to its surrounding conditions. Hence the danger that underlies the menace of “passing”—Bon's ability to pass as a white man or to pass into a white woman's body—is the revelation that the social and racial distinctions forbidding such actions are not solid boundaries, but mere shadows.

Henry kills Bon in an attempt to reify the thresholds on which he has based his identity (his sister's purity and the inferior position of the black body), only to be entombed by the barriers he would maintain. The description of Sutpen's Hundred in the passage above prefigures the fact that Henry, in protecting the entry to the property, will actually create a crypt: the house is “a skeleton” that emits, moreover, a contagious atmosphere of death (the skeletal house and the ideals it represents have “help[ed] to die torn and anguished men”; even the uniforms worn by Henry and Bon are “the color of dead leaves”). Henry's disappearance after the murder supports the sense that he has not survived the loss of his love object; although he, unlike Bon, goes on literally living, he disappears for decades, is presumed dead, and only returns as a kind of living corpse to die (this time physically) in the house. In making Bon's

death the veritable stopping point of Henry's life, Faulkner has allowed Henry to encrypt Bon—to enclose the love object at the very center of his being in order never to have to face the implications of its loss. The fact that Henry makes himself a corpse after Bon's death suggests what Abraham and Torok refer to as “endocryptic identification,” masking one's own identity with that of the encrypted object:

The “shadow of the object” strays endlessly about the crypt until it is finally reincarnated in the person of the subject. Far from displaying itself, this kind of identification is destined to remain concealed. . . . This one is an imaginary and covert identification, a crypto-fantasy that, being untellable, cannot be shown in the light of day. (141)

Henry, in other words, cannot literalize his own death, because to do so would be to reveal that he has merged his identity with that of Bon. Instead he can only figuratively die, by disappearing; later, when physical death has become inescapable, he secretly returns to Sutpen's Hundred to hide the fact of that death. By making Sutpen's Hundred into the structure that conceals his final literal transition into the image of his encrypted love object, Henry turns the house itself into a crypt.

Henry's eventual homecoming triggers Rosa Coldfield's eventual return, with Quentin, to Sutpen's Hundred, which return in turn ignites the multiple narratives that reconstitute the Sutpen family's demise. Once again, an attempt to hide actually spurs revelation. The encrypted object's resistance to conclusive burial (whether it be Henry in his self-constructed crypt at the end or Bon within the psychological crypt Henry has created for him) is a hallmark of encryption. Linking encrypted objects to facts that cannot be articulated, Abraham and Torok note,

The unspeakable words and sentences, linked as they are to memories of great libidinal and narcissistic value, cannot accept their exclusion. From their hideaway in the imaginary crypt—into which fantasy had thrust them to hibernate lifeless, anesthetized, and designifed—the unspeakable words never cease their subversive action. (132)

Just as Malcolm Bull describes the cemetery earth's “echoing with the voices of the dead,” this crypt, far from erasing the body within, becomes the means of that body's disclosure.

Even before he has realized that Henry himself has become encrypted, Quentin intuits the vital importance of thresholds in Henry's murder and subsequent encryption of Bon. Faulkner uses the semantically-laden "pass" as he describes Quentin's reaction to Rosa's version of the story:

But Quentin was not listening, because there was also something which he too could not pass—that door, the running feet on the stairs beyond it almost a continuation of the faint shot, the two women . . . pausing, looking at the door, the yellowed creamy mass of old intricate satin and lace spread carefully on the bed and then caught swiftly up by the white girl and held before her as the door crashed in and the brother stood there . . .

Now you cant marry him.

Why cant I marry him?

Because he's dead.

Dead?

Yes. I killed him.

He (Quentin) couldn't pass that. (139-40)

Henry has killed Bon so that his sister, "the white girl," will never have to sully her ("white") virtue as her makeshift wedding gown has grown discolored ("yellowed" might here also hold the echo of a descriptor often applied to the skin of mixed-race individuals); her hymen, like the threshold of the property and the boundaries of racial propriety, will remain unbreached. The barrier that Henry has erected becomes a blockade to Quentin as well, however. In this scene, which Quentin sets around the central threshold of Judith's bedroom door, Faulkner stages the question that will propel Quentin and Shreve into their expansive storytelling: why would Henry kill the object of his (and his sister's) desire and ruin the legacy of his family? As surely as Henry's actions ensure the conclusive downfall of Thomas Sutpen's design—the collapse of the plantation he pulled from the swamp—his attempt to encrypt the reasons for Bon's death inspire the inquiry that will tear his crypt down.

The inability to renegotiate socially-dictated thresholds prompts Henry to kill Bon and erect his own psychological crypt, just as Quentin's inability to transcend the threshold of his closet (as exemplified by the window/anus) threatens to convert the space of the Harvard room from protection to tomb. Despite the homoerotic overtones in the relationship between Bon and Henry, their defining threshold, exemplified by the impassable gate to Sutpen's Hundred, represents not only prohibited homosexual union, but interracial union

(at least as Quentin and Shreve will come to understand it). Quentin's defining threshold, on the other hand, initially carries a stronger residue of desired yet taboo homoerotic union than it does of unsettling race relations. Nonetheless, both thresholds come to represent conceptual sticking points for the characters: Henry freely exhibits his desire to merge his physicality with Bon and even grows to condone incest, but he cannot accept the miscegenation; Quentin, unable to share a common cultural conception of race with his Canadian roommate (who, as Quentin enjoys reiterating, can never understand race in the South), nonetheless does share a common cultural prohibition against homoerotic desire with Shreve.

Thresholds can nevertheless produce contradictory results. In the case of Quentin's window, the threshold doubly articulates both a point of healthy engagement with outside elements and the opening by which those elements can enter and wreak destruction: using the threshold to confront the outside elements (as Shreve does when he deep breathes) is invigorating; allowing the outside to enter through the threshold (as the cold and dark do over the course of the night) is fatal. Either way, the interaction between interior and exterior focuses on this doubly articulating threshold (in the case of male homoerotic desire, the window/anus; in the case of miscegenation, the gate to the family property and the white-clad white bride). Depending on the direction of approach and the method of engagement, these privileged thresholds represent either the means of liberation or the means of destruction.

In describing the Harvard room, Faulkner introduces a phrase similarly tending to double articulation which will not only provide the key to this closet's contradictory threshold, but unlock its cryptic connections to Sutpen's Hundred as well:

It was cold in the room now. The heat was almost gone out of the radiators: the cold iron fluting stern signal and admonition for sleeping, the little death, the renewal . . . [Shreve] was hugging himself into the bathrobe now as he had formerly hugged himself inside his pink naked almost hairless skin. "He chose. He chose lechery. So do I. But go on." (220)

In addition to the return to anal imagery ("pink naked almost hairless") and Shreve's overt embrace of immoral sexual appetite ("lechery"), Faulkner explicitly refers to orgasm by using the phrase "the little death." Purportedly a metaphor for sleep, this phrase actually follows a

long tradition of alluding to sexual release as a kind of death (cf. French, “*la petite mort*”). Suddenly the various axes of closet imagery—hot/cold, erotic engagement/erotic disavowal, life/death—converge: the elements of the outside world drive the closet’s inhabitants toward either a full embrace of their homoerotic desire (bed as a warm sexual site; “little death” as orgasm) or to their tomb (bed as cold death bed; “little death” as actual death). As we have already seen, Quentin, not Shreve, is at the mercy of this doubly-signifying “little death.”

Derrida’s conception of the *pharmakon* might prove useful in unpacking Faulkner’s evocative use of “little death.” Because the Greek *pharmakon* translates as both remedy and poison, the word provides Derrida with an ideal figure for undecidability: *pharmakon* contains a binary opposition while also transcending that opposition. Similarly, “little death” insinuates the sexual release that might allow Quentin, like Shreve, to overcome his disavowal of desire and to free himself by crossing that threshold which threatens to enclose him; “little death,” however, also names the true danger of this closet—that Quentin, like Henry before him, will have to die rather than see that threshold crossed. As glossed by way of *pharmakon*, Faulkner can use “little death” to stand productively on both sides of the threshold, to speak simultaneously of opposing possibilities without deciding between them:

And if one got to thinking that something like the *pharmakon*—or writing—far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be out of something like writing—or the *pharmakon*—that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring; if, consequently, one got to thinking that writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws, leaves only its ghost to a logic that can only seek to govern it insofar as logic arises from it—one would then have to *bend* [*plier*] into strange contortions what could no longer even simply be called logic or discourse. All the more so if what we have just imprudently called a *ghost* can no longer be distinguished, with the same assurance, from truth, reality, living flesh, etc. (103-04)

Derrida’s vocabulary providentially anticipates my own direction: in existing among (but not neatly within) the binary opposites which they describe, these *pharmakon*-like words leave ghosts. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, phrases like “little death” force the experience of undecidability upon the reader: any attempted translation of Faulkner’s meaning would necessarily carry the phantom trace of the other

potential translation. As with the thresholds I have examined, these words, even as they help define the boundaries of structures of knowledge, work to destabilize the solidity of those boundaries. Much like a love object that has been encrypted, these doubly-signifying words emit “ghosts” which “never cease their subversive action” and, like those ghosts, threaten very real consequences even to those beyond their ghostly realm (“can no longer be distinguished . . . from truth, reality, living flesh, etc”).

Faulkner expands the dual possibilities of freedom and death within “little death” by closely aligning the point at which the Harvard room explicitly becomes a tomb with the moment at which Shreve and Quentin achieve a kind of ultimate freedom—their narrative transformation into non-material presences capable (it seems) of transcending time, in order apparently to join the historic moment they recount. Immediately after describing the loss of warmth in the rosy glow—what I have referred to as the figurative closing of the anus—“both their breathing vaporised faintly in the cold room where there was now not two of them but four, the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins. . . . Not two of them in a New England college sitting-room but one in a Mississippi library sixty years ago” (236). The young men are joined for the first time, but their union does not involve the physical link that might lead to orgasm; rather, it provides an imagined displacement to the location and time they describe. Although they have been freed from the bounds of their closet, they have escaped only by becoming ghosts. It is deeply significant that their mental transformation begins at the very moment when the room has grown so cold that their breath becomes visible; Faulkner uses the vapor to underline the finality of the invading cold and to echo the potential for the vaporization of their bodies. Appropriately, his subsequent evocations of the room as a tomb also insist upon their vaporizing breath: “They stared at one another—glared rather—their quiet regular breathing vaporising faintly and steadily in the now tomblike air” (240); “Even while they were not talking their breaths in the tomblike air vaporised gently and quietly” (260); “in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblike room in Massachusetts in 1910” (268); “The room was indeed tomblike: a quality stale and static and moribund beyond any mere vivid and living cold”

(275); “the two the four the two facing one another in the tomblike room” (276).⁸

By transforming themselves into ghosts, Quentin and Shreve join Bon and Henry not only in time, but in substance as well: they are “as free now of flesh as the father who decreed and forbade, the son who denied and repudiated, the lover who acquiesced, the beloved who was not bereaved” (237). In other words, Quentin and Shreve have attained the same freedom as those who have died before them. Having traced the logical transformation from closet into tomb in the Harvard room, and having recognized that the categorical thresholds created by the closet drive Quentin into a crypt akin to that built by Henry, I am finally prepared fully to examine Faulkner’s cryptic closet. Breathlessly switching between the scene of Quentin’s discovery of Henry in the old house and Quentin’s reactions to that memory, the novel’s climactic final chapter enacts the jointed assimilation of Henry’s encryption and of Quentin’s refused desire into the cryptic closet space of Sutpen’s Hundred. In the Harvard bedroom, remembering his forcible invasion of the house that hid a dying Henry, Quentin nears death himself.

Critics like Christopher Peterson and Norman Jones consider the final descriptions of Quentin, in which he shudders uncontrollably after going to bed, to be a scene of orgasmic release. Jones in particular presents a compelling reading of the entire storytelling process between Shreve and Quentin as a sexual interaction building to that precise climax. While the sexual rhythms of their storytelling and erotic undertones of Quentin’s shaking are undeniably present, to fix his physical reaction simply as a sexual release is to ignore that, in the doubled logic of the “little death,” the involuntary shudders that rack Quentin evoke death throes as much as orgasm. Faulkner’s description of the Harvard bedroom resurrects the key imagery of the sitting room as closet:

At first, in bed in the dark, it seemed colder than ever, as if there had been some puny quality of faint heat in the single light bulb before Shreve turned it off and that

⁸Even when not repeating his “tomb” refrain, Faulkner connects the vaporizing breath with not only the bodily dissolution of Shreve and Quentin, but the verbal conjuring of the immaterial ghosts of the past: “their voices (. . . the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were . . . shades too) quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath” (243).

now the iron and impregnable dark had become one with the iron and icelike bedclothing lying upon the flesh slacked and thin-clad for sleeping. Then the darkness seemed to breathe, to flow back; the window which Shreve had opened became visible against the faintly unearthly glow of the outer snow as, forced by the weight of the darkness, the blood surged and ran warmer, warmer. (288)

The binary tensions in the first description of the sitting room have finally enacted the inversions they threatened: the inside seems colder than the outside; the breathing that formerly exhaled, pushing vapor into the air, solidifies into a darkness that seems “to flow back” and exert “weight”; the light has switched off into sudden darkness, leaving the threshold of the window to reveal that the interior of the room is now darker than the exterior night (“the faintly unearthly glow of the outer snow”). The window threshold, despite initially offering the tantalizing prospect of physical pleasure and a successful interface between closet and outside world, becomes the embodiment of Quentin’s failure to take advantage of that prospect. For the rest of the scene at Harvard, Quentin’s gaze focuses completely on this window: “He lay watching the rectangle of window, feeling the warming blood driving through his veins, his arms and legs. And now, although he was warm and though while he had sat in the cold room he merely shook faintly and steadily, now he began to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably” (288).

Fittingly, for a character as troubled by permeable thresholds as Henry before him had been, Quentin remembers his entry into Sutpen’s Hundred in terms of its thresholds. Quentin’s first explicit thoughts of returning to town come at the moment he reaches the fateful gate:

He looked at the two huge rotting gate posts in the starlight, between which no gates swung now, wondering from what direction Bon and Henry had ridden up that day, wondering what had cast the shadow which Bon was not to pass alive . . . thinking, wishing that Henry were there now to stop Miss Coldfield and turn them back, telling himself that if Henry were there now, there would be no shot to be heard by anyone. (291)

Quentin intuitively recognizes that passing the gate represents the first encroachment on the protective structure Henry sought to maintain, while his misgivings reveal his sense that they might not survive their attempt to invade. Soon Rosa’s entreaties for Quentin to enter the house force him to confront a threshold with even more psychological import (given the context of the Harvard room): he must enter the Hundred

through a window. Moreover, he cannot cross this threshold by merely passing through it; he must first penetrate and violently destroy the barrier:

The shutters were closed and apparently locked, yet they gave almost at once to the blade of the hatchet, making not very much sound . . . he had already inserted the hatchet blade beneath the sash before he discovered that there was no glass in it, that all he had to do now was to step through the vacant frame. Then he stood there for a moment, telling himself to go on in, telling himself that he was not afraid, he just didn't want to know what might be inside. (294)

He does eventually enter, of course, and he finally reaches the bedroom that literalizes Henry's psychological crypt, where Henry lies, his "wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse" (298).

As Quentin suspected, however, forced entry into the crypt carries consequences beyond uncovering that which wished to remain hidden. Entering the dark house begins to transform Quentin into a corpse uncannily similar to Henry, lying in a state of rigor mortis, enclosed in the space he had hoped would protect him, but which instead admitted the lethal exterior. The atmosphere of the Hundred follows Quentin home that night: as they approach the house that Sutpen made, they move in "the dead furnace-breath of air" (293); later Quentin, fleeing into his own house, is "breathing fast and hard of the dark dead furnace-breath of air" (297). In fact, the atmosphere follows Quentin to Harvard where it, although colder, retains its deathly, "tomb-like" quality. Furthermore, Quentin replicates the same kind of physical reaction in bed at Harvard that he experienced immediately after returning from Sutpen's Hundred. Both physical reactions demonstrate an appropriate undecidability between orgasm and death. Following his discovery of Henry, Quentin hurries to sequester himself in his house:

even inside the dark familiar house, his shoes in his hand, he still ran, up the stairs and into his room and began to undress, fast, sweating, breathing fast. 'I ought to bathe,' he thought: then he was lying on the bed, naked, swabbing his body steadily with the discarded shirt, sweating still, panting . . . (297-98)

While portraying Quentin as trapped somewhere between feverish illness (sweating profusely, panting) and sexual engagement (on the bed,

naked, a steady swabbing of the body), Faulkner emphasizes that these bodily throes correspond to the fact that, mentally, Quentin has not succeeded in leaving Sutpen's Hundred:

so that when, his eye-muscles aching and straining into the darkness . . . he said 'I have been asleep' it was all the same, there was no difference: waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling, toward the faint light which fell outward from the last door and paused there, saying 'No. No' and then 'Only I must. I have to' and went in, entered the bare stale room whose shutters were closed too . . . (298)

Quentin not only becomes a corpse, he becomes a corpse trapped, like Henry, in the cryptic closet of Faulkner's dark house. On entering the final, most enclosed space of Henry's bedroom (again, the crossing of the threshold is a privileged point of anxiety), Quentin actually ensures that he will never escape that fatal chamber.

The cryptic closet of Sutpen's Hundred thus functions like Pandora's box, in which the dangerous inner contents flood out as soon as their enclosure is breached. My metaphor is not unmotivated: earlier in Shreve and Quentin's storytelling, Faulkner describes the letter from Mr. Compson, recounting Rosa's death and burial, as "the fragile pandora's box of scrawled paper which had filled with violent and unratiocinative djinns and demons this snug monastic coign" (208). Like the closet, the box is threatened by the outside world ("fragile"), and yet it holds a large and potent secret that, if unleashed, will irrevocably alter that outside world.⁹ In this case, the fact of Henry's encrypted death serves as a kind of contagion, infecting Quentin with its atmosphere and effects. Immediately after Quentin mentally returns yet again to his brief conversation with Henry, Faulkner shows him as the mirror image of Henry:

It was quite cold in the room now . . . the chill had a compounded, a gathered quality, as though preparing for the dead moment before dawn. . . . [Quentin] lay still and rigid on his back with the cold New England night on his face and the blood running warm in his rigid body and limbs, breathing hard but slow, his eyes wide

⁹In addition to heightening the closet-like sense of an enclosed space populated by men ("snug monastic"), this description carries the echo of economic forces. Especially in the sense of Henry's crypt, which he constructs from his inability to have Bon's black body in an owning (not owned) status, the claustrophobic cryptic closet ("coign") is concurrent with the economic relationships that helped build it ("coin").

open upon the window, thinking 'Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore.' (298-99)

The adjectives “dead” and “still,” the repetition of “rigid,” and the uncannily “wide open” eyes all contribute to the representation of Quentin as a corpse; the fact that he stares at the window and repeatedly mutters “Nevermore” suggests that the window threshold figures the peace that he might have achieved but which will never exist for him now.

I would like to delve more deeply into the oft-noted allusion within Faulkner’s repetition of “Nevermore” to Poe’s “Raven.” Lest it seem that I am merely following an intriguing tangent, let me declare from the beginning that, in fact, the affinities between Poe’s poem and *Absalom, Absalom!* crystallize my argument about the figure of the cryptic closet. Like Sutpen’s Hundred in 1909, the chamber in the poem contains a man who has encrypted his lost love object. If we follow Richard Godden’s reading of the subsemantic rhythms within Poe’s poem, we can even speculate that the crypt in question may contain a black man in addition to the more obvious love object, Lenore.¹⁰ While the narrator’s psychological crypt (and perhaps even the black body inside) mimics Henry’s encryption of Bon, the narrator’s chamber itself replicates the binary structures and pressured thresholds of the closet. The cold outside threatens to overcome the chamber’s source of heat (“it was in the bleak December; / And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor”). In addition to the encroaching coldness, utter darkness lurks just beyond the entrance to the room (“here I opened wide the door; / Darkness there and nothing more”). As in the Harvard room, with its sole lamp and pools of light and shadow, the poem’s narrator depends on a fading fire and the light of a single lamp—both sources of illumination that prove to be better suited to casting terrifying shadows than

¹⁰To Godden’s argument that the presence of the black body (“le noir”) alongside the beloved white woman (“Lenore”) demonstrates the class politics that need the black Other to sustain the myth of White Womanhood, I would wish to raise merely the possibility that, like Judith who is only the “woman vessel” (86) for Henry and Bon’s desire, Lenore might actually belie the forbidden desire of the white narrator for that black (male) body.

effectively staving off the impinging darkness.¹¹ Finally the “ebony bird,” seeming to be the exterior darkness and interior shadows (and perhaps the encrypted black body?) distilled into ominous animal form, invades the room.

Throughout the poem, the narrator’s anxieties play out upon the thresholds of the chamber. The bird begins by “rapping, rapping at [his] chamber door” (a fact repeated over multiple lines), finally (like Quentin entering the dark house) enters through the window, and eventually perches on the bust which sits, incidentally, above the door. In his last agitated exclamation, the narrator fixates on the door, entreating the raven to leave not the room in general, but to leave that threshold specifically:

“Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
 Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
 And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

The final stanza begins with the horror of the present progressive “still is sitting, still is sitting,” where the second italicized “still” suggests the appalled incredulity of someone frozen in a nightmare with neither the possibility of resolution nor the hope of escape. For the narrator of “The Raven,” the trauma of the breached threshold makes the horror of encryption palpable: in a scene which is always unfolding, never finishing, the narrator remains trapped face to face with the dark bird that has come to represent the horrific reality of his irrevocable loss. In an earlier confrontation with the raven, the narrator laments “this home by Horror haunted”; by the end of the poem, Poe has made that haunting Horror none other than the narrator himself. Beyond the aforementioned nightmarish freezing of action, the narrator’s soul has

¹¹Each “dying ember” wreaks “its ghost upon the floor”; the last stanza closes with the image of “the lamp-light o’er [the bird] streaming throw[ing] his shadow on the floor.”

assumed physical presence in the room and is overshadowed by the bird (“And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor”) in terms which, moreover, echo the earlier (and explicitly ghostly) “[a]nd each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.” The narrator has, as it were, become a skeleton in his own closet.

The powerful resemblances between Poe’s haunted chamber and Faulkner’s dark house provide a fitting coda to an analysis as concerned with doubled structures as mine has been. Whether it be the way the closet space of the Harvard room maps onto Sutpen’s Hundred, or the way that Henry’s psychological crypt for Bon ultimately expands to envelop himself and, decades later and miles away, Quentin Compson as well, the structures of disavowed knowledge within *Absalom, Absalom!* bleed through boundaries of time and distance. To attempt to understand either of these historical situations without the echo of the other would be to overlook their fundamental undecidability: far from being mutually exclusive, these situations are mutually constitutive. Furthermore, if we are to grasp the means of their mutual constitution, we must recognize the threshold at which they pass into one another—in this case, the cryptic closet of Sutpen’s Hundred. By the logic of this space, the act of hiding will always reveal, thresholds will be breached eventually, and the desired body encrypted at the heart of Faulkner’s dark house will never cease its subversive, fatal action.

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