Dana Mihăilescu[*]

MEMORY CUES IMBRICATED IN NINETEENTH CENTURY FAMILY PHOTOS FROM THE AMERICAN SOUTH: ON WILLIAM FAULKNER'S ABSALOM! ABSALOM![1]

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Abstract: *My paper attempts to trace the relationship between prose pictures and their context in William Faulkner's* Absalom! Absalom! *by considering the five photos referred to in the novel. I mean to analyze in what way pictures record mediations of race, (family/collective) traumatic memory and history and to what extent they point to memory as an act of dislocation in a person's grasp of life.*

Throughout my analysis of the above images, I argue that these photos stand for the discrepancy between the myth of the family and hidden past memories; they deploy power relations as engrained in the content of memories one tries to transmit to another. In the end, the photo as the mnemonic locus of the middle-class white "family myth" regains its authority. The movement is from the picture as an index of family dysfunctions that might still find resolution if one chooses to understand the interdependence of the white and black communities to the general use of family pictures in the nineteenth century as a case of a white-run binding authority over what Southern memory stands for, a binary-type value system.

In Laura Wexler's *Tender Violence. Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism*, a seminal book dedicated to the study of photography, gender and race, the scholar posits that there have been "deviously subtle ways in which, historically, photography has intertwined gender, race, and class to create false images" that particularly served the interests of the nineteenth century middle-class white patriarchal American society (4). This is an issue I also mean to explore in the present paper in the attempt to trace the relationship between pictures and their context in William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936). I mean to analyze in what way pictures record mediations of race, (family/collective) memory and history and to what extent they point to memory as an act of dislocation in a person's grasp of life. Starting from that, my main interest is in how traumatic memories are born and might or might not find resolution both in the case of the white and black communities from the nineteenth century American South.

[*] University of Bucharest; Romania

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Absalom! Absalom! opens a relevant dialogue about the intersections between race-related discourse and memory via pictures for several reasons. Firstly, the novel's present is set around 1910 and it focuses on the situation of Southern life by including ample flashbacks to the time of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction. As relevantly signaled by Peter Ramos in his article, "Beyond Silence and Realism: Trauma and the Function of Ghosts in *Absalom! Absalom!* and *Beloved*," Faulkner's novel is constructed around the figure of the ghost which Ramos interprets as Faulkner's attempt to suggest the limitations of historical realism during slavery and post-slavery times and to look, instead, for alternative ways to deal with them. Secondly, the novel primarily focuses on the Southern white experience and voice and foregrounds the effects of these perspectives on the black community, thereby allowing readers to get a clear sense of the intertwined history of the black and the white. Thirdly, the pictures in Faulkner's text point to how family and race represented a dominant discourse for the second half of the nineteenth century with important implications on one's sense of memory and history. Finally and equally relevant, it is essential to note that the novel does not provide visual images per se, but what we get are "prose pictures," to use the term memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch ascribed in relation to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, one by which she understood a purely word description of and reaction to a photo-in-absentia.[2] In similar fashion, Faulkner provides mediated pictures that are known only through the others' relations to them and, thus, they become a powerful mode of analyzing agency and its relations to memory and history.

In Faulkner's novel, there are five pictures to consider. Of these, only one represents the depiction of an entire family, the Sutpens (Thomas Sutpen, his wife Ellen, and their two children Judith and Henry), located in the Coldfield house (that of Ellen's father). A second Sutpen family photo only captures the mother and her children (Ellen, Judith and Henry) and decorates Thomas Sutpen's library. There is yet another picture of mother and child, representing the family of Charles Bon, a young man brought by Henry to the Sutpen house on Christmas Eve in 1861, one who proves to be connected to the family by blood line but also to be partly mulatto: he thereby complicates the family's entire future prospects, as I will show later on. This photo of Charles Bon's other family introduces the notion of race into discussion, given the visibility of skin color. In addition, there are two individual photos, one of Judith in Charles Bon's possession and one of Charles Bon in Judith's possession, expressing an initial stage of a family-in-the-making by the need to possess the lover's image at all times.

The first photo we encounter in Faulkner's text is that of the entire Sutpen family which young Harvard student Quentin sees in September 1909 when he visits Ellen's sister, Miss Rosa, in the Coldfield abode:

[2] As Hirsch notes, the picture at the center of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is "his mother's picture [which] exists only in the words he uses to describe it and his reaction to it" (Hirsch 3), and this is what a prose picture stands for.

> Quentin seemed to see them, the four of them arranged into the conventional family group of the period, with formal and lifeless decorum, and seen now as the fading and ancient photograph itself would have been seen enlarged and hung upon the wall behind and above the voice and of whose presence there the voice's owner was not even aware, as if she (Miss Coldfield) had never seen this room before – a picture, a group, which even to Quentin had a quality strange, contradictory and bizarre; not quite comprehensible, not (even to twenty) quite right – a group the last member of which had been dead twenty-five years and the first, fifty, evoked now out of the airless gloom of a dead house between an old woman's grim and implacable unforgiving and the passive chafing of a youth of twenty telling himself amid the voice *Maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them but when you have hated somebody for forty-three years you will know them awful well so maybe it's better then maybe it's fine then because after forty-three years they can't any longer surprise you or make you either very contented or very mad.* (Faulkner 9)

Of immediate relevance in the above quote are the indication that such a photo represented "the conventional family group of the period" (Faulkner 9) as well as its location, the Coldfield dining-room, just as the photo of Ellen and her children will adorn her husband's library at Sutpen's Hundred. This was indeed a practice of middle-class white America at the time following Laura Wexler, who explains that, in its early stage, ranging from mid-nineteenth century to the turn of the century,

> photography was laminated to sentimental functions along with domestic novels, domestic advice manuals, educational reform propaganda, and abolitionist agitation. While the middle-class home became the port of entry for sentimental fictions of all sorts, the hall table and the parlor were accumulating photographs at an impressive rate. Like domestic novels, the resulting accumulation of images helped to make, not merely to mirror, the home. Photography was another mode of domestic self-representation. It worked by staging affect, or imaging relation–literally *seeing sentiment* as a way of organizing family life. (Wexler 65)

Put differently, especially starting with the second half of the nineteenth century, family photographs had agency. They participated in determining power relations and systems of value by representing a mode of domestic self-representation which was structured around the happy middle-class white family as well as the dignified middle-class white woman. Meanwhile, those outside the circle of this white-run model of domesticity were excluded from such family photographs, namely slaves, Native Americans, Eastern European immigrants, Mexicans, Cubans, Filipinos, Chinese, etc. (Wexler 67). At best, such outsiders would be either absent from the photos or made "clearly visible" by "standing in the background" (Wexler 68). Especially in the case of slaves, Wexler explains how "it was not always necessary to worry about drawing the line in a group portrait, since the line would be normally drawn by color" (Wexler 69). Thus, such photos at once indicated an existent social hierarchy decreeing the inferiority of people of color but also, and of high importance in Faulkner's novel, they indicated how the white mind was being bred to embrace the normative institutional gaze of the middle-class white dignified and happy family. Given that, as Marianne Hirsch explains in *Family Frames*, her seminal book about the meaning of family photos, there arises a subverting aspect which the picture can tell, the "contradiction between **the myth of the ideal family** and **the lived reality of family life,**" so that "photographs can more easily

show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore, what, most frequently, it is not" (Hirsch 8, my emphases). Indeed, in its location and persistence, the Sutpens' photo above indicates the importance of family values, but this is set at the level of formality or convention. On an apparent level, this family picture is meant to emphasize the protective role of the family. On a deeper level, following Rosa's words and Quentin's feelings, it emphasizes loss. Especially for Quentin, the photo seems to engage the active conflict between reality and family ideology, since he perceives it as "strange, contradictory, bizarre" (Faulkner 9), sensing some dysfunctionality in the Sutpen family. This idea has already been sustained in the novel by Rosa's story about the Sutpens in which Thomas appears as an "ogre" whose children and wife are permanent victims (Faulkner 8). So hierarchy does not only function in the relation between whites and blacks but also within the white family, with Thomas Sutpen holding the reins of power. The sense of loss predominates most clearly since three of the four depicted members are dead at the time (Ellen died in 1863, Thomas died in 1865, Judith died in 1884), and these "dead" of the photo are placed into the "dead" present of Rosa in 1909.

Yet there is more to the photo since Henry is still living at this moment. Consequently, despite the loss within the photo, a highly relevant question arises: could one still save Henry, the last surviving member of the group? The photo becomes the locus of postmemory in relation to young Quentin's trying to understand the trajectory of the three dead people with whom he is not related and whom he has never known, but it is also the locus of memory-in-the-making in relation to Henry. Southern memory is therefore posed from the very beginning at the crossroads of lived memory and postmemory, as a legacy that never dies but is passed down to the new generations.

If with the Sutpen family picture we get a glimpse into a possibly dysfunctional white family, the photograph of Charles Bon's other family (wife and child) goes on to suggest how family per se can be a displacing element. This happens because Charles Bon had started to date Judith, the couple already talking about marriage preparations. In this context, the presence of Bon's other family displaces the possibility of his creating a new family. What makes the use of the photograph particularly important is that, rather than eliciting a storming debate about the moral dishonesty of the husband-to-be, as might be expected, the picture results in no mention whatsoever of that issue. Instead, it emphasizes the high stakes of race at the time.

More precisely, within five pages, this picture which Judith finds on Charles Bon's dead body in 1865 is invoked three times but always with a difference: first, there is "the photograph of the other woman and child" (Faulkner 71), then "the photograph which was not her face, not her child" (Faulkner 73) and finally "the picture of the octoroon mistress and the little boy" (Faulkner 75). In my reading, the first choice of description focuses on the displacement of white Judith's authority as wife-to-be given the presence of the other woman with child, while the second choice of a negative definition further subverts her authority in the implication of self-effacement. Of them, the third instance provides the most interesting context: Judith possibly destroyed all the letters that Bon had sent to her (with one exception) "because she found in Bon's coat the

picture of **the octoroon mistress and the little boy**. Because he was her first and last sweetheart" (Faulkner 75, my emphasis). Here, the destruction of Judith's entire love prospects is emphasized in conjunction with race, suggesting how in the Southern white mind, marriage of a white man (as Charles Bon is seen by Judith) to a black woman was considered an unfathomable transgression, an idea which was legally sustained by anti-miscegenation laws that continued in the South until the 1966-1967 case of Love vs. Virginia (Phillips IV 133–142). Also, Judith's three readings of the photo relate Judith's acknowledgement of her displaced authority with the indication of her inbred racial rhetoric since all her identifications of Bon's wife and child refer to notions of inferiority by correlating race ("octoroon") with exclusion ("other"), and negation ("not her face"). Given that, Judith tries to embody the logic of a white supremacist society, in which, as historian Catherine Rottenberg explains in a Foucauldian-Butlerian approach applied to other case studies, "norms work by constructing a binary opposition between white and black (or non-white), in which white is always privileged over black" (Rottenberg 35). Laura Wexler explains how this became possible because white men and women shared "the bond of race and class" versus the visibly different others. Wexler rightly notes in this respect that "[s]pectatorial privilege–that is, permission to discriminate on the basis of visible signs–was established for white women in this country during slavery, in *alliance* with the white male gaze" (90).

Therefore, with this photo we get insight into an ambiguous double play between authority and subversion which keeps the black and the white inextricably related: there is subversion of the white family-in-the-making by the already existing black family, whose presence makes it powerful, and subversion of the black family by the white's institutional, dominating gaze of power. Yet, what no one of Faulkner's characters seems to understand is that the decision not to acknowledge and recognize the one brings about the destruction of the other, they are interdependent upon one another. In other words, the photo manages to suggest that without recognizing the problematic presence of the other in one's past as well as one's present, one is locked in a dead-end. If one does not seriously consider the "confrontations or interactions between subjects [which] can potentially lay bare the disjunctions and contradictions within the nexus of force relations" (Rottenberg 51), one misses the chance to open up a space of negotiation. Unfortunately, all of Faulkner's characters, black or white, are locked in such a deadlock represented by a Southern value system which is created on an illusionary, binary-type structure of values that believes in the fatalist binding authority of fixtures of thought.

The same photo of Bon's wife is related to the picture of Judith: "And how I saw that what she held in that lax and negligent hand was **the photograph, the picture of herself in the metal case which she had given him**, held casual and forgotten against her flank as any interrupted pastime book" (Faulkner 114, my emphasis). With this photo, some new questions arise: were there two photos that Judith found in Bon's pocket, one of the other woman and child and one of herself? This might be a possibility as, this time, a new element is introduced in relation to the picture Judith has: it is held in a metal case. So there might be two pictures, a frameless picture of the other woman and child (which

Rosa does not refer to here) and the metal case picture of Judith. What is certain is that we have two pictures, one of the woman with child, one of Judith, and one metal case; could it be a case of photo substitution and, if so, what would that point to?

Part of the answer may come from the fact that we can associate the photo of Judith with the icon-like photo of Bon that Judith keeps in her bedroom, the two are likely to form a possible family-in-the-making but one which gets destroyed by the presence of Bon's other family. So, again, photos engage here in a struggle for power via presence as opposed to absence.

Thanks to Shreve's interpretation, we learn that this is indeed a case of photo substitution. This happens since Judith stood tearless behind the closed door,

> holding the metal case she had given him with the picture in it but that didn't have her picture in it now but that of the octoroon and the kid. And your old man wouldn't know about that too: why the black son of a bitch should have taken her picture out and put the octoroon's picture in, so he invented a reason for it. But I know. And you know too. Dont you? Dont you, huh? (...) It was because he said to himself, 'If Henry dont mean what he said, it will be all right; I can take it out and destroy it. But if he does mean what he said, it will be the only way I will have to say to her, I was no good; dont grieve for me.' Aint that right? (Faulkner 286–7)

Shreve recognizes here the agency of the photo (bearer) in determining the other's constructed memory as to reasons for the substitution and he also points to the photo as the embodiment of expectations. In his reading, Bon's aim is to protect Judith by providing her with a version more likely to suit her middle-class white inbred expectations for the future. However, no matter how pure Bon's intentions for the conscious substitution of the photo are, this is in fact his means of escaping confrontation with the painful aspects of his life, in the same way that the other characters avoid confronting their past. So, Henry's is a passive agency which only allows Judith to remain trapped in the myth-like framework of Southern ideology, merely prolonging pain.

In order to come full circle in presenting the burden of the South, there is one more picture in Faulkner's novel we need to consider, that of Ellen and her children located in Thomas Sutpen's library. It forms the background for the Christmas discussion between father and son in 1861, a confrontation which leads to Henry's break with the family and brings out the secret of Charles Bon's being connected by blood with the Sutpens. It reads as follows:

> in a Mississippi library sixty years ago, with holly and mistletoe in vases on the mantel or thrust behind, crowing and garlanding with the season and time the pictures on the walls, and a sprig or so decorating the photograph, the group–mother and two children–on the desk behind which the father sat when the son entered; and they – Quentin and Shreve – thinking how after the father spoke and before what he said stopped being shocked and began to make sense, the son would recall later how he had seen through the window beyond his father's head the sister and the lover in the garden, pacing slowly, the sister's head bent with listening, the lover's head leant above it while they paced slowly on in that rhythm which not the eyes but the heart marks and calls the beat and measure for, to disappear slowly beyond some bush or shrub starred with white bloom. [...] Father: "He is your brother" and "He has known all the time that he is yours and your sister's brother." But Bon didn't. (Faulkner 236–7)

In following the relationship between the photo and its context above one finds the discrepancy between the closely-knit family undertones of the picture and the reality springing from the father's words: he has another son by another woman while he transfers the blame on Bon's shoulders. Bon is responsible because he knew he was their half-brother.

In actual fact, considering the above passage, the photo becomes the locus of subversion since its location in the father's library becomes burdened with his hidden secret of having another wife and son. In the meantime, the real scene between Bon and Judith in the background becomes a projection of the picture and the love atmosphere subsumed in it as opposed to its imminent crumbling given family secrets. Thus, the picture in context becomes the epitome of tensions within the Sutpen family given the hidden secrets of past-related memories and it poses the threat of subverting the father's power and authority.

A few years later, during the Civil War, when Thomas Sutpen goes to see Henry on the front and a second conversation ensues, the location seems once again to revert back to the Christmas-time library meeting between father and son and to the photo of the mother and children:

> in a second tent candle grey and all are gone and it is the holly-decked Christmas library at Sutpen's Hundred four years ago and the table not a camp table suitable for the spreading of maps but the heavy carved rosewood one at home with the group photograph of his mother and sister and himself sitting upon it, his father behind the table and behind his father the window above the garden where Judith and Bon strolled in that slow rhythm where the heart matches the footsteps and the eyes need only look at one another. (Faulkner 283)

Again, the father speaks, and this time race is the reason he invokes in order to determine Henry's opposition to a wedding between Judith and Bon: "his mother's father told me that her mother had been a Spanish mother. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that her mother was part negro" (Faulkner 283). What transpires from here is that, just as in the case of Bon's other family, moral issues are not considered but miscegenation rather than incest becomes highly problematic. If one might have invoked mitigating circumstances in ignoring issues of moral dishonesty in the case of a man previously married to a woman of color and father of a child of color (Thomas Sutpen's case and Charles Bon's apparent situation), we see here that in the relationship between race and Southern society, the scope of morality is never at issue, since committing incest is considered less problematic than being black. Sexual promiscuity with its correspondent effect of destroying one of the main Southern values – that of the pure Southern lady[3] – can be tolerated more easily than racial miscegenation. In this new context, the middle-class white family photo regains its binding authority as long as race is the category of transgression. Despite the different moments in which the pictures

[3] It is in his earlier novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), that Faulkner addressed the high relevance of the Southern lady ideal as one of the most deeply entrenched values making up and possibly destroying the Southern legacy, especially in relation to the character of Caddy.

suggested a potential subversive agency, at the end, the return is to the authority of the sentimental model of the family picture, the familial institutional gaze. Henry, who was still alive as the first family picture was introduced in the novel, is now as dead as the others, becoming part of the same deeply burdened Southern legacy.

Therefore, in Faulkner's case, photos stand for the discrepancy between the myth of the family and hidden past memories; they deploy power relations as engrained in the content of memories one tries to transmit to another. Additionally, even though in the case of traumatic memory, recollection and remains from the past are the means by which one comes to acknowledge the loss, the dislocation of one's life starting with a particular moment, simply remaining at the level of awareness and acknowledgement of pain leads to a deadlock, one is trapped in the past and everything that happens in the present is determined by and subordinated to the authority of that past, which is the problem I see with the memory of Faulkner's characters from *Absalom! Absalom!*.

In the end, in *Absalom! Absalom!*, the photo as the mnemonic locus of the "family myth" regains its authority. The movement is from the picture as an index of family dysfunctions that might still find resolution if one chooses to understand the interdependence of the white and black communities back to the myth of the middle-class white happy and dignified family. All in all, since race proves to be a *fixture of thought* which the characters cannot transgress, the novel moves back towards the general use of family pictures in the nineteenth century as a case of binding authority over what Southern memory stands for, a binary-type value system. Moreover, for the new generation, as represented by Quentin and Shreve, these pictures remain unassimilated and inassimilable memories, vain attempts to reassemble a family fractured and destroyed by such Southern values.

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