Knight's Gambit : Poe, Faulkner, and the Tradition of the Detective Story

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LIKE THE MACHINE GUN, the detective story is an American invention. We can assign its origin to a specific author and story. The author is Edgar Allan Poe, and the story the 1841 tale "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The detective genre has, of course, enjoyed worldwide popularity since Poe's day, but perhaps because of its native roots it has always had a special place in American literature, in both popular and serious fiction. Needless to say, Faulkner is a major inheritor of Poe in this genre, and I would even go so far as to maintain that *Absalom, Absalom!*, with its two young narrators puzzling over the facts of a very old murder trying to understand the motive, represents in some sense the culmination of the gothic detective form.

What I would like to discuss is Faulkner's relationship to the genre's origin (Poe's Dupin stories) in his own practice of detective fiction, that is to say, the way in which Faulkner interprets or inflects various conventions and images associated with the genre, devices that were for the most part invented by Poe. And I would like to center my discussion on Faulkner's 1949 collection *Knight's Gambit*.

Let me begin with a fairly clear cut example of Faulkner's work in the genre, the story called "An Error in Chemistry," first published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in 1946 and awarded a second prize in the magazine's annual contest for the best stories to appear in its pages during the year.[1] (The first prize that year, by the way, went to a writer named Manly Wade Wellman for a story with an American Indian

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setting called "A Star for a Warrior.") What I would like to discuss is the story's relationship to the first and third of Poe's Dupin tales—"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter." As you recall, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a "locked-room" mystery. A mother and daughter have been brutally murdered in their apartment, and when the police arrive at the scene they find that all the apartment's windows and doors are locked from the inside and that the killer has escaped without leaving any trace of his "means of egress,"[2] a puzzle that Dupin must solve on his way to unraveling the still deeper puzzle of the killer's bizarre identity. In "The Purloined Letter," on the other hand, we are confronted with a "hidden-object" mystery. A compromising letter has been stolen from the Queen by the Minister D——, and the police have rigorously searched the Minister's home and person without turning up the missing object. Dupin is certain that if the letter is to be of any use to the Minister in blackmailing the queen, it must be ready to hand, which is to say that if must be hidden somewhere in the Minister's residence. And the mystery then turns upon the fact that the missing object is undoubtedly present within a finite physical enclosure (the Minister's house) without, as it were, making a physical appearance during the minute searches conducted by the police. Dupin solves the mystery by realizing that the Minister has hidden the letter under the very noses of the authorities by not seeming to hide it at all, by simply turning the letter inside out, readdressing it to himself in a feminine hand, and then leaving it in plain sight in a card rack hanging from the mantelpiece.

As you might conclude from this brief description of the two stories, "locked-room" and "hidden-object" mysteries are structurally related. In the former, a physical body (that of the murderer) is absent from an internally sealed space without there being any apparent means of egress; while in the latter a physical object is present within what we might call an externally sealed space (externally sealed because all the possible hiding places for the object outside the space have been logically eliminated) without the object's making a physical appearance. In the former instance (the locked room) we are certain that what we seek *is not inside a given space*, in the latter (the hidden object) that what we seek *cannot possibly be outside it*. Indeed, part of the peculiar force of the hidden-object and locked-room types of detective stories is that they seem to present us with a physical embodiment, a concrete

spatialization, of the very mechanism of logical inclusion/exclusion on which rational analysis is based—present us with this as an apparent confounding of rational analysis.

Now it seems clear that Faulkner had registered the structural resemblance of these two types of mysteries, for in "An Error in Chemistry" he creates his own combination of a locked-room and a hidden-object problem. The tale begins with Joel Flint telephoning the sheriff to say that he has killed his wife at the home of his father-in-law Wesley Pritchel. When the sheriff arrives, he finds the killer Flint and the body of the victim. But Wesley Pritchel has locked himself in his room and won't come out. The sheriff sees Pritchel looking out the window, and the assumption is that Pritchel had witnessed the crime. In the sheriff's account to Gavin Stevens, Faulkner goes out of his way to emphasize the locked-room aspect of the scene by having Stevens ask whether Pritchel's room was locked from the inside or the outside. "On the inside," the sheriff replies.[3] And to compound matters, it seems to the sheriff that Joel Flint, who phones the authorities, waits for them to arrive, and then freely confesses to his wife's murder, is in search of his own locked room. As the sheriff says, "It's like he *wanted* to be locked up in jail. Not like he was submitting to arrest because he had killed his wife, but like he had killed her so he would be locked up" (112). So the sheriff locks Flint up, and the next morning Flint's cell is empty. As the narrator, Chick Mallison, describes it, "He had not broken out. He had walked out, out of the cell, out of the jail, out of town and apparently out of the country—no trace, no sign, no man who had seen him or seen anyone who might have been him" (116). And as he says later, "It was as if Flint had never been here at all—no mark, no scar to show that he had ever been in the jail cell" (120). Concerned about the witness's safety with Joel Flint on the loose, the sheriff sends his deputy out to Wesley Pritchel's place with instructions "not to let that locked door—or old Pritchel himself, if he comes out of it—out of his sight" (117). The deputy reports that Pritchel is still in his locked room and that he doesn't leave it even for his daughter's funeral.

Joel Flint's plan is remarkably simple: The motive is greed. Three northern businessmen have offered Wesley Pritchel a sizable amount of money for his farm, but Pritchel won't sell. And even if he did, he would never give any of the money to his son-in-law, whom he despises. So Flint decides to kill Pritchel and then use his talents as a make-up

artist (Flint had performed for years in vaudeville billed as "Signor Canova, Master of Illusion, He Disappears While You Watch Him" [129]) to impersonate Pritchel, sell the farm, and pocket the money. The only problem with the plan is that while Flint might be able to fool someone like Gavin Stevens, who has only seen Pritchel twice in his whole life, or Chick Mallison, who has never seen him, Flint would never be able to fool his own wife, who is Pritchel's daughter. Consequently, Flint has to kill his wife, who would be a witness not necessarily to Pritchel's murder but to the fact of Flint's impersonation (and thus implicitly to the fact that something had happened to remove from the scene the man he was impersonating). And the brilliance of Flint's plan is that he decides to reverse the usual sequence in the murders of an intended victim and a witness, which is to say, he decides to kill the witness (his wife) first and then kill the real victim (Pritchel) later. And he is able to accomplish this plan precisely because he has duped the authorities into misinterpreting the roles of Pritchel and of Flint's wife in the affair. He has created the illusion that his wife was the intended victim (when the sheriff asks Flint why he killed her, Flint says, "Why do men ever kill their wives? Call it for the insurance") and that his father-in-law was the witness.

All of which casts a somewhat different light on the locked-room aspect of the case. The standard locked-room problem requires that the murderer and victim be together at the moment of the crime in the same internally sealed space. But in Faulkner's version of the problem, the locked room has, so to speak, been split and doubled. There are two locked rooms, the jail cell containing the killer Joel Flint, locked from the outside, and Wesley Pritchel's bedroom containing the victim, locked from the inside. At some point during the night after he has been jailed for the murder of his wife, Joel Flint escapes from his cell. Faulkner doesn't say how this was accomplished, but in telling us that Flint had worked in vaudeville as an illusionist and escape artist, he has in effect finessed the question. For unlike Poe, Faulkner is not really interested in the mechanics of how the killer got out of the locked room without leaving any physical evidence of his means of escape.

Once Flint is on the loose, he goes to his father-in-law's farm, makes his way into the locked bedroom, and kills Pritchel. Flint then disguises himself to look like Pritchel and in turn tries to make the victim's corpse look like Flint. He obliterates Pritchel's face with a blow from a

shovel and then buries him in a shallow grave with a scrapbook full of Flint's press clippings from vaudeville. Flint then locks himself in the bedroom, and by the next morning when the sheriff discovers Flint's escape and sends the deputy out to Pritchel's farm with instructions "not to let that locked door . . . out of his sight," it is Flint disguised as Pritchel behind that door. And it is Flint who stays there during the funeral of Pritchel's daughter, since he doesn't want to risk having his impersonation discovered by people who might have known Pritchel well. The way Flint has it figured, if he simply stays in the locked room, acting as if he were afraid that the escaped killer might still come back to eliminate the witness to the crime, then the only people that he may ever have to confront in his disguise are the three northern businessmen who want to buy Pritchel's farm, and they have only seen Pritchel once before.

Flint's illusionary feat is ingenious, and so is Faulkner's. For in the very act of creating Flint's plan, Faulkner has, right before our eyes, reversed the standard structure of a locked-room mystery. When the law arrives at Pritchel's farm the first time, there hasn't in fact been a locked-room murder. Pritchel's daughter has been killed outside the house, and the person inside the locked room is the witness to the crime, who fears for his life. But when the law arrives at Pritchel's farm the second time in the person of the deputy who, after Flint's escape has been sent to check on the old man's safety, Pritchel's bedroom has now almost certainly become the scene of a "locked-room" murder. But with this difference: it is now the killer who is present in, and the victim's corpse that is absent from, the internally sealed space. And this reversal in regard to the occupant of the locked room grows out of that earlier reversal in the order of the murders, the killing of the witness prior to the killing of the real victim, a trick that Faulkner, like any master of illusion, can't help calling our attention to when he has the puzzled sheriff remark, "It don't make sense. If he was afraid of a possible witness, he not only destroyed the witness before there was anything to be witnessed but also before there was any witness to be destroyed. He set up a sign saying 'Watch me and mark me'" (115). And that is, of course, just what Flint did, because as an illusionist he knows that the way to pull off a trick is to draw the audience's attention in one direction while doing something in another, that is, to make the audience misinterpret what it is they are seeing.

Flint in effect tricks the sheriff into misreading the roles of the three people at the scene of the crime. When Hub Hampton arrives at Pritchel's farm the first time, he finds a triad of murderer, victim, and witness. He sees, correctly enough, that Flint is the murderer; but he reverses the other two roles in the triad, even though he senses that there is something amiss in his reading of the roles. He says to Gavin Stevens, "The wrong one is dead" (114)—by which he means that if the motive for the murder was greed, as Flint's remark about his wife's insurance suggests, then the amount of money to be gained from the insurance is trifling compared to the amount to be gained from the sale of Pritchel's farm to the three northern businessmen. But for Flint to get his hands on that money, the victim would have to be Pritchel.

Faulkner's manipulation of the triad of murderer, victim, and witness in the tale has a familiar ring to it. As I argued in *Doubling and Incest*, Faulkner has a predilection for triangular or triadic structures, most obviously for the Oedipal triangle—a structure that he tends to inflect in a variety of ways by substituting different figures in the three roles. Thus, for example, in *Absalom, Absalom!* he substitutes for the standard triad of father, mother, and son the figures of brother avenger (Henry Sutpen), sister (Judith), and brother seducer (Charles Bon), while keeping intact the same structural relationships, the same sexual tensions, associated with the standard triad of the family romance. And as I further argued, the structural principle that governs the dynamics of this triangular relationship is the narcissistic principle of doubling, whereby one figure in the triangle tries to play more than one role within it, as when the son desires to usurp the father's role and thus enjoy a dual relationship to the mother—that of both son and husband.

The ultimate goal of the structural principle of doubling, as it operates within the Oedipal triangle, is the collapsing of all three roles into one. And something very like this is what happens in the triangular structure of murderer, victim, and witness in "An Error in Chemistry." In the sheriff's interpretation of the initial crime scene, Flint's real intended victim Pritchel appears to play the role of the witness, an appearance that deceives the sheriff and that ultimately makes it possible for the murderer also to play the role of the witness when Flint kills Pritchel and assumes his identity. As the narrator says at one point in commenting on the resemblance in physical build of Flint and Pritchel, "he and his father-in-law could easily have cast that same shadow which

later for a short time they did" (110), and we know that for Faulkner the image of the shadow almost always evokes the notion of doubling.

Victim as witness, murderer as witness—it is as if the roles of the two people actively involved in the crime (murderer and victim) had been collapsed into that of the passive observer (and indeed, the dynamic principle at work here is a kind of death drive that seeks a state of quiescence, of absolute passivity, for the self). Moreover, it is not without significance that the persons who fill these three roles are already linked together in a triangular family relationship as father-in-law, son-in-law, and daughter, the male-male-female structure of the Oedipal triangle. (We might note that in Faulkner's fiction a locked room or a closed door often signifies the site not of a murder but of a primal scene, a fantasized scene of parental intercourse in which the child interprets the sounds of lovemaking as the sounds of violence perpetrated by the father against the mother.) At one point in the tale, Gavin Stevens gives his own reading of the triangular structure of the crime as a kind of shadow-play, "That triumvirate of murderer, victim, and bereaved—not three flesh-and-blood people but just an illusion, a shadow-play on a sheet—not only neither men nor women nor young nor old but just three labels which cast two shadows for the simple and only reason that it requires a minimum of two in order to postulate the verities of injustice and grief" (121).

But at this point we should pause and ask ourselves if Faulkner hasn't in fact performed another illusion before our very eyes in regard to the "locked-room" character of the story, another disappearing act as startling as the murderer's switching places with the victim in the role of the witness. We suggested a moment ago that when the deputy arrives at Pritchel's home the morning after Flint's escape and stations himself outside the locked bedroom door, he confronts in effect a locked room mystery, finds an internally sealed space that is the scene of a murder, though in this instance the sealed space contains the living body of the killer rather than the dead body of the victim. Yet isn't it precisely upon that difference in the degree of animation of the room's occupant that the "mystery" in a locked-room problem hinges? Corpses can't lock doors, so to find a corpse alone in a room whose doors and windows have been locked from the inside is mysterious. But where's the mystery in finding the internally sealed space occupied by a living murderer, even if that murderer is disguised as the victim he has done away with

in that locked room? The only thing that might resemble a mystery here is how Flint got out of the locked jail cell and then into Pritchel's locked bedroom to kill him, but as we said, Faulkner finesses that problem by making Flint an escape artist. What Faulkner has done in effect is to switch, under the reader's nose, the type of problem that lies on the other side of the locked door. He has set up a situation that bears the obvious marks of a locked-room puzzle, but when we open that locked door we find that it has changed into a hidden-object problem.

Instead of a purloined letter, the object that everyone is seeking in Faulkner's tale is the missing killer. However, like the purloined letter, whose appearance was altered by turning it inside out, readdressing it to the Minister D—— in a feminine hand, and then leaving it in plain view in the Minister's drawing room, the killer has also altered his appearance and hidden himself in plain sight. And just as part of altering the purloined letter's appearance was the turning of the letter inside out, so part of altering the murderer's "appearance" in Faulkner's tale is the turning of the locked-room mystery's spatial coding of killer and victim inside out. Which is to say that the person who should be outside the internally sealed space (the killer) is inside it, and the person who should be inside that space (the victim) is outside it (buried under the feed room in the stable).

From what we have said so far it should be clear that Faulkner was a profound student of the origin and conventions of detective fiction and that he wrote his own detective stories with an eye to situating them within the tradition of that genre that had been originated by a fellow southerner almost a hundred years before. However, what we must add is that while it may be interesting to discuss a tale like "An Error in Chemistry" in terms of its manipulation of traditional detective story devices and thus Faulkner's inflection of the genre's origin in Poe, that is, interesting to give a reading of it in terms of literary history, it is much less satisfying to read "An Error in Chemistry" simply in terms of the pleasures of a standard detective story. For the tale is marred in two important ways.

First, Faulkner's decision to make the killer a former vaudeville illusionist and escape artist inevitably strikes the reader as being itself a kind of vaudeville trick, an illusion that lets Faulkner escape from the traditional challenge of coming up with a solution to the locked-room problem different from the one which Poe originated. As any student

of the genre knows, this is a challenge to which detective story writers have consistently addressed themselves over the years. (Indeed, one might note in passing that if the author of a detective story is going to allow himself the liberty of making the killer an illusionist and escape artist, then he might as well go all the way and make his killer the invisible man or superman. A large part of our interest in murder mysteries depends upon the killer's being someone with ordinary human powers like you and me—not a ghost or a creature from outer space.) Second, the way in which Flint's imposture is revealed and his capture effected is not the result of Gavin Stevens's analytic investigations but of an accident: Flint disguised as Pritchel makes the mistake of mixing a cold toddy in Stevens's and the sheriff's presence by trying to dissolve the sugar in raw whiskey, the kind of mistake that a southerner like Pritchel would never make, but that the northerner Flint would. Seeing this, Stevens and the sheriff leap upon Flint, wrestling him to the floor and wrestling him out of some of his make-up—a climax that leaves the reader with the feeling that he has witnessed, if not a *deus ex machina*, at least an instance of *justitia ex ampulla*, justice poured out of a bottle.

All of which leads me to suggest that as a writer of detective fiction Faulkner is most successful when he takes the conventions of the genre and shapes them to his own materials, his own obsessive concerns, rather than when he competes with the genre's originator on terms that are almost wholly Poe's. The reason for this is fairly straightforward. Faulkner's strengths as a fiction writer tend to be in the direction of character and setting and in the poetry of the language, while the detective story is a form that essentially favors plot and has a low tolerance for highly developed characterization or highly evocative language. Indeed, in the history of the genre one finds not great characters but rather great caricatures. From Dupin to Holmes to Poirot, we are confronted not with fully-rendered personalities but with monsters of idiosyncrasy, figures conveyed through one or two odd traits as trademarks. Yet to say that the detective story is a form which essentially favors plot is not to imply that Faulkner has a weakness when it comes to plotting; it is simply to say that the specialized kind of plot which forms the core of the genre demands a type of ingenuity that was the great strength of the genre's inventor, but not of Faulkner, as "An Error in Chemistry" and several of the other tales in *Knight's Gambit* make

clear. It is only when Faulkner pushes the detective story to the limits of the short story form that he is able to bend it to his own artistic will, as he did with the tale that gives the collection its title. And it is on the story called "Knight's Gambit" that I would like to focus the rest of my discussion.

Faulkner originally wrote "Knight's Gambit" as a short story, completing it by January 1942. He described it as "a love story, in which Stevens prevents a crime (murder) not for justice but to gain (he is now fifty plus) the childhood sweetheart he lost 20 years ago" (Blotner, 2: 1097). Some four years later in early 1946, Faulkner began revising and expanding the tale, stretching it from short story to almost novella length before it was completed in November 1948. What I would like to concentrate on is the way that Faulkner took two devices that originated with Poe—the imagery of a chess game used to evoke the battle of wits between detective and criminal, and the notion of the detective's having a personal motive for becoming involved in the solution or prevention of the crime—and, by annexing these devices to standard Faulknerian material, made them his own.

The action of "Knight's Gambit" begins on the evening of December 4, 1941, three days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Gavin Stevens and his nephew Chick Mallison are playing chess at home when a young man named Max Harriss and his sister burst into the room. The brother and sister are the spoiled children of Melisandre Backus Harriss, a childhood friend of Chick's mother. Max Harriss has come to demand that Stevens, as the county attorney, take action to get Captain Sebastian Gualdres out of their house, to have him deported if need be. Young Harriss says that Gualdres, an Argentine fortune hunter whom the Harriss family had met during their foreign travels, was at first engaged to his sister but has since jilted her and intends to marry his mother. Harriss wants Gavin Stevens to intervene, challenging the older man by asking, "You're the Law here, aren't you?"[4] And Harriss implies that if Stevens doesn't act, then he (Harriss) will take matters into his own hands and kill Gualdres.

The situation is a familiar one in Faulkner's fiction. A young man confronts his father or a father-surrogate (an older man who represents authority, who embodies a patriarchal Law) and demands to know what the older man is going to do about the womenfolk, whether he intends to protect the young man's sister or mother from an interloper, which

is to say, to protect the womenfolk from themselves. One thinks of Quentin Compson and his father in *The Sound and the Fury* and of Henry and Thomas Sutpen in the story that Quentin helps narrate, *Absalom, Absalom!*. And indeed the father-son analogy certainly applies to the confrontation between Gavin Stevens and Max Harriss. For as we learn in the course of the story, Stevens had been briefly and secretly engaged to Harriss's mother when she was a girl of sixteen, and the implication is that, had they married, Stevens would have been the father of her son, much as he is to become her present son's stepfather by the story's end. Moreover, young Harriss's real father, a New Orleans bootlegger, was murdered, and just as the role of Max's father has been violently vacated once before, so now Max is threatening to make it violently vacant once again by killing the man who plans to marry his mother—a state of affairs that, given Stevens's feelings about Max's mother, is not lost on the county attorney. Which is simply to say that when young Harriss presents himself to Stevens in a situation that we recognize from other Faulkner fiction as being that of a son confronting a father to demand that the father exercise paternal authority, he is, from Stevens's point of view, in effect challenging Gavin to exhibit his *own* qualifications to fill the role of stepfather, challenging him to exhibit an authority that is not only able to protect the womenfolk by repulsing the intruder but also able to make the son obey the paternal will by not breaking the Law, by not killing the prospective stepfather—a matter of no small importance if Stevens himself ultimately intends to fill that role.

Part of the tale's artistry is that, by having Harriss and his sister interrupt Gavin's and Chick's chess game in order to tell their story, Faulkner is able to assimilate the details of their story to the imagery of chess and thus able to evoke young Harriss's challenge to Stevens in chivalric terms, to present it as a contest, a joust, between a younger and an older knight. As I mentioned earlier, chess is associated with the detective genre from the very beginning. In the first Dupin story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the narrator cites the game as an example, along with draughts and whist, to illustrate the workings of that analytic power which he considers the essence of detection, and in the third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," Poe presents us with a scenario that is strongly reminiscent of a chess game—there is a king and queen, and there is a battle of wits between two knights (Dupin is

a *Chevalier*, and we must assume that his double, the Minister D——, is at least of equal rank), a battle for possession of a letter that concerns the queen's honor and that could, in the Minister's hands, reduce the queen to being a pawn. Given the game's presence at the genre's origin, it is not surprising that the image of a chess game is one of the most frequently used figures for the battle of wits between detective and criminal in the form's history, a figure of the detective's attempt to double the thought processes of his opponent so as to end up one move ahead of him. This doubling of an opponent's thoughts, in which one mentally plays out possible moves, countermoves, and responses against an antithetical mirror-image of one's own mind, at once reflects the kind of thinking that goes on in a chess game and is reflected in turn by the physical structure of the game itself in which the opposing pieces at the start face each other in a mirror-image relationship.

Faulkner would have been exposed to an especially interesting example of the association of chess with both the detective genre and the image of chivalry in the project that he worked on in late 1944—the screenplay of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, on which he collaborated with Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman. Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe always keeps a chessboard in his apartment with a problem laid out on it. At one point in the novel, Marlowe returns home to find that there is another kind of problem laid out in his apartment—his client's daughter, the nymphomaniacal Carmen Sternwood, naked in his Murphy bed with monkey business in mind. Predictably enough, Marlowe's chivalrous spirit immediately turns to thoughts of chess: "I went . . . across the room . . . to the chessboard on a card table under the lamp. There was a problem laid out on the board, a six-mover. I couldn't solve it, like a lot of my problems. I reached down and moved a knight."[5] Several moments later, he adds, "The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights" (146). Yet for all his tough talk Marlowe doesn't take advantage of his client's mentally unstable daughter.

Indeed, Chandler had always thought of Marlowe as a kind of modern knight-errant: the detective in search of the solution like a knight in quest of the Grail. Chandler had named an earlier version of his detective Mallory, alluding to the author of the *Morte D'Arthur*; and references to Arthurian romance fill the novels. In *The High Window*,

for example, Marlowe is described as a "shop-soiled Galahad";[6] while in *Farewell, My Lovely* Velma Valento, the woman that Marlowe has been in quest of throughout the novel, hides her identity behind the name Helen Grayle. And of course one of the Marlowe novels is even named *The Lady in the Lake*. The tone of Marlowe's slightly ironic, somewhat battered chivalry is set at the very beginning of *The Big Sleep*, when he comes to the home of his client General Sternwood and notices above the front door a "stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on . . . he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him" (1).

It is a short step from Chandler's Marlowe (read Malory), a chess-playing detective and modern knight-errant who uses his wits to uphold his personal code of chivalry, to Faulkner's Gavin Stevens, another chessplaying detective whose own chivalrous nature (as evidenced in his encounters with Eula Varner Snopes and her daughter Linda) is evoked by his Christian name's suggestion of King Arthur's nephew and most famous knight, Gawain. (Recall in this regard that the failed knight in Faulkner's 1926 gift-book for Helen Baird, *Mayday*, is named Galwyn.) But the difference is that where Chandler and Faulkner both use the game of chess, with its kings and queens and knights, to evoke the chivalrous character of their detectives, Faulkner, with an eye to the game's presence at the origin of the genre in Poe's Dupin stories, also uses the game to evoke that basic structure of the analytic act which both chess and detection share—that alogical attempt to project an image of the opponent's mind as an antithetical mirror-image of one's own mind so that one can anticipate the opponent's next move and end up one jump ahead of him, a form of mirror doubling that, as we said, is reflected in the physical structure of the game itself. Indeed, at one point Faulkner alludes to this mirror-image aspect of chess when he has Gavin reply to Chick's apparent dismissal of chess as "a game" by remarking, "Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game" (192).

Faulkner evokes the structure of mirror doubling shared by chess and analytic detection at the very start of "Knight's Gambit." When Max Harriss and his sister burst into Gavin's study, interrupting the chess

game, Chick remarks almost in passing that the brother and sister look so much alike that "at first glance they might have been twins" (135). Now there is an obvious appropriateness in having a brother and sister who look like twins interrupt a game whose physical structure involves a mirror-image symmetry in the opening alignment of the pieces, an alignment that evokes the opposing black and white chessmen as antithetical twin images of each other. And this appropriateness was to become even greater some eight years after the appearance of "Knight's Gambit" when, with the publication of *The Town* in 1957, we learn that one of the chessplayers in this scene, Gavin Stevens, is himself a twin.[7] Gavin's twin sister Margaret is Chick Mallison's mother, and as Chick implies on several occasions in *The Town* the twinship of his mother and uncle seems almost to involve their knowing each other's thoughts—apropos the kind of mental doubling associated with analysis in chess. Thus, when the Harrisses burst in on the chess game between Gavin and Chick, a brother and sister who look like twins confront a man who is playing a game of mirror-image symmetries against the son of his twin sister. And what all this twinning and mirroring is ultimately meant to make the reader notice is that the relationship between Captain Gualdres and Max Harriss is the mirror image, the antithetical double, of the relationship between Gavin Stevens and Chick Mallison.

In each case there is an older man and a younger: in one instance the older man is a father-figure for the younger (Gavin and Chick), while in the other the older man aspires to a role that would involve his becoming a father-figure for the younger (Gualdres and Max). And in both cases the father-figure's task is to bring the young man from adolescence to maturity, to conduct a kind of rite of passage by establishing, through a veiled, and sometimes not so veiled, competition with the young man, the older man's authority to instruct him, a paternal authority able to command the young man's respect and thus allow him to learn from the older man. But while this instructive competition or competitive instruction has been eminently successful in the case of Gavin and Chick (Chick not only respects his uncle, he idolizes him), it has been a disaster in the case of Gualdres and Max.

The competition in the latter case turns upon skills that are quite literally knightly—riding, fencing, and romantic dalliance. As Max Harriss's sister describes it to Stevens, her brother is "the rich young

earl" and Gualdres "the dark romantic foreign knight that beat the young earl riding the young earl's own horses and then took the young earl's sword away from him with a hearth-broom. Until at last all he had to do was ride at night up to the young earl's girl friend's window, and whistle" (183). One senses a sexual overtone to the first two of these knightly skills (riding a horse and using a sword) that is made explicit in the third, and one further senses that this competition between the older and younger man for the affection of the same woman (the young Cayley girl) is a displacement of the Oedipal struggle initiated by Gualdres's aspiring to marry Max's mother. But where the instructive competition between Gualdres and Max involves skills that are literally knightly, the competitive instruction between Gavin and Chick involves a sublimation of knightly combat into the mental combat of chess and into the verbal fencing that accompanies Gavin's and Chick's games. Indeed, to emphasize the parallel between these two types of combat, Faulkner has Chick momentarily best his uncle in a discussion of the relative sensitivity of younger men and older men and has Gavin reply, "All right. . . . *Touché* then. Will that do?" (174). But then Gavin beats Chick again at chess and becomes sarcastic, and Chick says that Gavin would probably have a better game by playing against himself, "at least you'd have the novelty of being surprised at your opponent's blunders" (176). To which Gavin replies, "All right, all right. . . . Didn't I say *touché*?" (176).

The fact that Chick every so often scores a hit in his verbal fencing with Gavin suggests why this competitive instruction of the nephew by the uncle works so well, for though Chick may come to the end of these encounters feeling chagrined, he never feels hopeless or humiliated, never feels that he hasn't had some degree of success in making his uncle treat him like a man. But it is precisely a sense of humiliation that Max Harriss continually feels in his encounters with Gualdres, for in just those areas in which Max most prides himself (riding and fencing), Gualdres beats him as if he were a child. Or as Max's sister says, "It wasn't even because of Mother. It was because Sebastian always beat him. At everything" (181). It is worth noting here, as regards the kinship of Gavin and Chick, that in those cultures with communal rites of passage for young men, the relative usually given the responsibility for the young man's initiation to adulthood is the maternal uncle rather than the father, the communal wisdom apparently being that the Oedi-

pal tensions between father and son are such that a male relative from the mother's side of the family is a more effective initiator of the son, particularly if the initiation ceremony involves, as is usually the case, the son's symbolic death and rebirth.

The artistry involved in Faulkner's assimilation of the knightly combat of Max and Gualdres to the mental jousting of Gavin's and Chick's chess games depends in large part, of course, upon the fact that the game of chess, according to virtually every psychoanalytic reading of its structure and symbolism, is a ritual sublimation of father murder played out as the checkmating of the king. The word "checkmate" is from the Persian "shah mat," the king is dead. As the psychoanalyst and chess master Reuben Fine points out, since "genetically, chess is more often than not taught to the boy by his father, or by a father substitute," it naturally "becomes a means of working out the father-son rivalry."[8] And as another chess critic has noted, "chess is a matter of both father murder and the attempt to prevent it. This mirror function of chess is of extreme importance; obviously the player appears in both a monstrous and a virtuous capacity—planning parricide, at the same time warding it off; recreating Oedipal fantasy, yet trying to disrupt it. Yet the stronger urge is the monstrous one; the player wants to win, to kill the father rather than defend him."[9]

It is because Gavin has done his work so well in sublimating Oedipal tension, in conducting his nephew from adolescence to maturity through a prolonged rite of passage symbolically evoked by their combative encounters across the chessboard, that Gavin is able to outwit Max Harriss, prevent the son from breaking the patriarchal law by killing the prospective stepfather, and establish his own right to fill the role of stepfather by virtue of his having commanded the son's respect and obedience. And the agency by which Gavin establishes his authority over Max Harriss is in some sense his relationship with Chick, establishes this authority not merely in the sense that he has demonstrated his ability to be an enabling father-figure in his shepherding of Chick from boyhood to manhood, but in the sense that he has literally created through his relationship with Chick a bright young adult who is his devoted helper, an assistant bright enough to know when patriarchal commands must be obeyed and when they must be set aside. And this latter knowledge is crucial, for it is Chick, of course, who brings Gavin the piece of information that allows him to foil Max's plan—the infor-

mation that Rafe McCallum had sold his wild stallion to Max that afternoon—brings it to his uncle even though Gavin is shut up in his study working on his translation of the Old Testament, that labor of twenty years which no one is allowed to interrupt once he has closed his study door, as Chick says, "nor man woman nor child, client well-wisher or friend, to touch even the knob until his uncle turned it from inside" (207). But Chick has come to maturity as a young man so confident of his own judgment, or rather, so confident of his uncle's respect for his judgment, that he bursts into the study and disturbs his uncle in order to deliver the piece of information that he senses is somehow critical (though he himself doesn't quite know how), disturbs this imposing, white-haired father-figure in the task of translating the patriarchal law.

Together with McCallum, Gavin and Chick hurry to the Harriss mansion aiming to thwart Max's plan, and it is part of the wittiness of Faulkner's plot that the method which Harriss has chosen to eliminate his intended victim constitutes a kind of double entendre, evoking that sexual overtone to the chivalric skill of horseback riding that we mentioned earlier. Gualdres owns a blind mare that he keeps in a separate stable at the Harriss place and that he rides every night, but the people of Jefferson have come to feel that the mare is itself a blind to cover Gualdres's nightly romantic adventures, that Gualdres has trained the mare to gallop around the empty paddock at night at varying gaits as if it were being ridden so as to conceal the fact of its rider's absence in search of young women. The humor of Max's plan turns upon his having removed the mare from its stable and substituted McCallum's wild stallion, so that when Gualdres comes for his (k)nightly ride, he'll find an animal that will jump up and down on top of him rather than the reverse—a switch in the gender of the animal to be ridden that smacks faintly of French farce, as if the seducer had gotten by mistake into the husband's bedroom rather than the wife's. No doubt, Max considers this an appropriate demise for the expert rider and swordsman who had galloped his horse up to the Cayley girl's veranda and tried to beat Max's time. (We might note in passing that horseback riding as a sexual metaphor was used more than once by Faulkner during this period. In the film version of *The Big Sleep*, which Faulkner worked on between writing "Knight's Gambit" as a short story and rewriting it as a novella, Philip Marlowe and Vivian Rutledge, played by Humphrey Bogart and

Lauren Bacall, engage at one point in a verbal fencing match in which they appraise each other's romantic possibilities as if they were sizing up the physical abilities of racehorses. Having given her estimate of Marlowe, Vivian Rutledge invites Marlowe to reciprocate, and he says, "Well, I can't tell till I've seen you over a distance of ground. You've got a touch of class, but uh . . . I don't know how . . . how far you can go." To which she replies, "A lot depends on who's in the saddle." One recalls that when Faulkner first met Lauren Bacall during the filming of *To Have and Have Not* he told an acquaintance that "Bogie's . . . new girl friend" was "like a young colt" [Blotner 1156].)

Gavin, of course, saves Gualdres from entering the dark stable and having his brains bucked out, and Faulkner evokes their confrontation as a kind of chivalric combat between the two prospective suitors of the widow Harriss, a duel in which Gualdres's knightly skills are no match for Gavin's prowess in intellectual jousting honed over the chessboard. With a certain *noblesse oblige*, Gavin begins the conversation in the native tongue of his rival, and Faulkner underlines the at once humorous and knightly character of their encounter by having Chick remark that he could understand some of the Spanish because he had read *Don Quixote* and *The Cid*. Gavin structures this verbal exchange as if it were a wager: he bets Gualdres that he doesn't want to enter the darkened stable. And for this life-saving piece of information, Gualdres agrees to marry the young Harriss girl and take her away with him, thus leaving the widow Harriss free for someone else.

And it is with this final ploy of Gavin's that we can see most clearly that other device which Faulkner took from Poe's Dupin stories to use in "Knight's Gambit"—the detective's personal motive for becoming involved in the solution or prevention of the crime. The trajectory of the development of the detective genre within the Dupin stories runs from the pole of physical violence in the first story (the brutal murder of a mother and daughter by a killer ape) to the pole of intellectual violence in the third story (the mental victimization involved in the blackmail of the queen by the Minister D——). And just as the movement from the first to the third Dupin story seems to involve a muting of the form, a sublimation or attenuation of the crime's violence, so this movement also involves a progressive simplification or reduction of what constitutes the mysterious element in the tale. In the first Dupin story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," we are not only confronted

with the problem of "who done it," or more precisely "what done it," but also with the problems of "how he done it" (the locked room mystery) and "why he done it" (the senseless savagery of the crime). But by the time of the third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," we know at the outset who took the letter, how he took it, why he took it, and what use he intends to make of it. The only mystery is how the Minister D—— has concealed the letter in his home so that the police can't find it.

It is as if the inventor of the genre in producing a series of detective stories had to find an ongoing challenge to his ingenuity in order to spur his imagination to new heights, and that that challenge was to see how much he could pare away or reduce the mysterious element in the tale, the element that needed solution, and still have a detective story. But what happens in "The Purloined Letter" is that with the attenuation of the mysterious element in the crime, its reduction to a single, circumscribed problem, a mysterious element from another quarter enters the story toward the end to fill the vacuum—the mystery of the detective's motive for taking the case. For though at first it seems that Dupin becomes involved in the affair of the letter because he is being well-paid or because he is a supporter of the queen's cause (both of which are true), we learn at the end that the real reason for his taking the case is that he has an old score to settle with the Minister D——. The Minister had done Dupin "an evil turn" once in Vienna which Dupin told the Minister "quite good-humoredly" he would remember (3: 993). Consequently, Dupin goes to the trouble of retrieving the letter himself from the Minister's residence, so that he can substitute for it a duplicate letter informing the Minister who it was that made the switch and brought about his downfall.

Something very like this scenario of creating a new source of mystery from the detective's motives, as the mysterious element in the crime is being reduced to a bare minimum, occurs in "Knight's Gambit." We know at the start by his own admission who the prospective killer is, we know the intended victim and the reason for the crime, and we know that it will be committed within a few days. The only thing we don't know is how it will be done. But as those standard mysterious aspects of the crime are being pared away in the course of the story to a single problem, another mystery is emerging, the problem of the identity of the man who was secretly engaged to Max's mother when she was a girl of sixteen. The realization that it was Gavin Stevens comes about simul-

taneously with our realizing that Gavin's involvement in preventing the murder has not been simply in an official capacity, but rather has been a personal involvement in order to win the hand of the woman he was once engaged to. For if he allows Max's plan to succeed, then as county attorney he will have to handle the case, and I think that it is still conventional wisdom in the South, as elsewhere, that the best way to advance one's suit with a wealthy widow is not to prosecute her only son for first-degree murder.

But Gavin's problem is more difficult than that, for there are two other obstacles—the lovestruck daughter and the foreign suitor. And the solution that Gavin works out makes us realize how early in the affair he had begun planning to turn matters to his own ends if the situation permitted, how early he had begun to think of the matter not as a chess game but a chess problem, as Faulkner suggests when he has Gavin, at the end of the evening when first Max Harriss and his sister and then Miss Harriss and the Cayley girl interrupt his chess games, sweep the board clean and set up a chess problem "with the horses and rooks and two pawns" (192). Of course, in Gavin's personal chess problem, the object is not to checkmate the king (indeed, it is precisely that Oedipal content he tries to repress), but rather to capture the queen. And the alignment of pieces in his problem is somewhat different from the one he sets up on the board for Chick: there are two dark knights, one older, one younger (Gualdres and Max), one white knight (the white-haired Gavin, read Gawain), a young dark queen (Max's sister), an older white queen (the widow Harriss), and one white rook (the widow's property). The solution goes like this: in exchange for Gavin's saving his life, the older dark knight settles for the young dark queen and half the white rook, or as Gavin puts it, "a princess and half a castle, against some of his bones and maybe his brains too" (218). And in exchange for Gavin's saving Max's life as well, which is to say, for Gavin's preventing him from committing murder and perhaps being executed, the young dark knight acknowledges Gavin's authority and accepts that penalty which small town prosecutors have for years offered to local boys as an alternative to being charged with a first offense—he joins the army. (Indeed, part of Faulkner's wit in setting the story on the eve of America's entrance into the Second World War is the way that this allows him to bundle up all the Oedipal conflict, adolescent mischief-making, and chivalrous yearning for desperate glory and ship

it off to the front in the persons of Max, Gualdres, and Chick.) With all the obstacles removed from his path, the white-haired knight rides up to the empty castle and captures the white queen.

But we should have expected this conclusion in a story named "Knight's Gambit," for while there is no chess opening called "the knight's gambit," Chick does tell us that his uncle's favorite opening move was pawn to queen four, that is, the first move of the queen's gambit. And Gavin had said to his nephew during one of their chess games, when Chick had forked Gavin's queen and rook, that in that situation you should always take the queen and let the castle go because "a knight can move two squares at once and even in two directions at once," but "he cant move twice" (176). Chick later applies this remark about the knight's being able to move in two directions at once to Gualdres's attentions to both the widow Harriss and her daughter, but surely Faulkner means for the reader to apply the remark to another knight who in one move was able to carry out his public duty by preventing a murder and at the same time accomplish the most personal of goals, the winning of a wife.

In his reworking of this device of the detective's personal motive for involving himself in the investigation, as in his annexing of the imagery of chess to the detective story, Faulkner shows his debt to Poe, but he also shows how far he could expand and develop such devices when he joined them to the kind of material that was closest to his imagination, thus revealing himself not only as a worthy successor but a formidable competitor of the genre's originator.[10]

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NOTES

1. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner, A Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974) 2: 1201. All subsequent quotations from Blotner are taken from this edition.

2. Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969–78) 2: 551.

3. William Faulkner, "An Error in Chemistry" in *Knight's Gambit* (New York: Random House, 1978) 113. All subsequent quotations from "An Error in Chemistry" are taken from this edition.

4. William Faulkner, "Knight's Gambit" in *Knight's Gambit* (New York, Random House, 1978) 137. All subsequent quotations from "Knight's Gambit" are taken from this edition.

5. Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Random House, 1976) 144. All subsequent quotations from *The Big Sleep* are taken from this edition.

6. Raymond Chandler, *The High Window* (New York: Random House, 1976) 161.

7. William Faulkner, *The Town* (New York: Random House, 1961) 45, 181, 302, 305.

8. Reuben Fine quoted in Alexander Cockburn, *Idle Passion: Chess and the Dance of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 42.

9. Cockburn 101.

10. This essay was originally delivered as a paper at the seventeenth annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference at the University of Mississippi. The author wishes to thank Professors Evans Harrington, Ann J. Abadie, and Doreen Fowler for inviting him to participate in the conference. A longer version of this essay will appear in the volume of papers from the conference to be published by the University of Mississippi Press.