The Rhetoric of Reaction: Crisis and Criticism in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Christopher Geoffrey Worsley
Department of English
McGill University, Montreal
July 20, 1992

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

Shorter Thesis title

The Rhetoric of Reaction: Crisis and Criticism in Absalom, Absalom!

Abstract

Absalom, Absalom! presents the voices of a series of characters who suffer crises when they discover the meaning in other characters' languages or voices to be different from their own. This difference creates an aporia (a radical doubt, a sense of loss of familiar meaning) which disrupts the listening individual's sense of his or her previously 'unified' self. I show that these characters in Faulkner's novel do not have unified voices; their narratives develop as repetitions of the crisis moment when another's voice influenced their way of relating to themselves through language.

I also show that the crisis of meaning that characters in the book experience is enacted on another level. A difficult book to read because of its many textual figures of doubt, *Absalom* may be said to generate a crisis of interpretation in its readers. This thesis offers a way of reading the text which explores the various potential meanings of these aporias in the novel's discursive surface, and so avoids the experience of crisis, of anxiety. This method of reading is based on the mode of reading exemplified by one of the text's own characters: Shreve McCannon, who is not discouraged by the fact that neither the narratives he hears nor the speculative, hypothetical narratives he produces in response make complete and coherent sense of everything

Résumé

Dans *Absalom, Absalom!*, on assiste aux crises que subissent certains personnages lorsqu'ils s'apperçoivent que la signification de leur voix ou de leur langage diffèrent de celle d'autres personnages Cette différence crée donc une aporie (une doute radical, un sentiment de perte de la signification usuelle des choses), ce qui détruit, chez l'interlocuteur, sa perception de sa personalité comme étant coherente et unifiée. Je démontre que ces personnages du roman de Faulkner n'ont pas une voix unifiée; leurs récits consistent de répétitions du moment du crise qui survient lorsque la voix d'un autre influence la perception de leur propre personalité par le biais du langage.

Je démontre également que cette crise que ressentent les personnages du roman se joue à un autre niveau Si *Absalom, Absalom!* est un texte difficile à lire de par ses maintes apories, on peut dire qu'il génère la déroute chez le lecteur. Cette thèse propose une manière de lire le texte de Faulkner qui explore les diverses significations possibles des apories dans la surface discursive du texte, et évite, de cette manière, au lecteur, l'angoisse et la déroute. Cette méthode, pour ainsi dire, de lecture est basée sur une façon de lire qui est mise en example par l'un des personnages du roman. Shreve McCannon, qui n'est pas découragé par le fait que les récits qu'il entend, et ceux qu'il produit n'opèrent pas automatiquement une clarification cohérente des faits.

Contents

Introduction.

Absalom, Absalom! is a novel whose main objective—pursued by several characters, not to mention any number of readers— is, simply, *understanding*... (Mellard, 93).

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is not an easy book to read, as the extensive and varied body of critical writing devoted to it indicates. Figuring out what happens in the text, following its narrative thread, is a difficult task. Such difficulties are due to the fact that the text renders problematic, for its characters as well as the text's readers, the very notion of certain understanding. For many readers, the main problem in reading *Absalom* has been to determine the central subject, as the book seems to engage two subjects: the story of what Thomas Sutpen did, and the story of the four narrators (especially Quentin Compson) who try to account for or explain his actions. Uncertain as to which thread to follow, many readers find *Absalom, Absalom!* an easy text to *misread*. For example, at the end of his study of *Absalom, Absalom!*, one critic admits he had "misread" the work, observing that perhaps his reading "should have focused on Quentin Compson rather than Thomas Sutpen" (Roudiez, 61). It is Roudiez's belief that, in order for the text to admit two subjects, each equally viable, there must be an essential contradiction in the text. I think that this belief, however, results from a further misreading. To read *Absalom* properly one must do away with dichotomies such as that between action (Sutpen) and talk (the four narrators) and see instead how Sutpen's life and the four narrator's representations of this life share a common concern. I will be showing that even in its first three paragraphs the book presents, albeit in as opaque a manner as possible, the theme which binds all characters but one together: the drama of an anxiety of being influenced by another. It is Shreve, as I will be showing in my last chapter, who transcends the anxiety typical of other characters in the text.

J. Hillis Miller has used the word "relation" to refer to the similarity between the two subjects or themes in *Absalom, Absalom!*: relation as the act of "storytelling" and relation as "the network of family and community ties" (Miller 1983, 149). Many critics, in an effort to understand the text, have focused separately on one or the other of these modes of relation. One critical approach to the text has been called, by Hugh Ruppersburg, the "detective" mode (Ruppersburg, 93). Another critic describes this approach as one which

is "concerned with social themes, myth and legend, tragic form, and character." In bypassing the four narrators' involvement in the creation of the stories, criticism of this sort focuses mainly on the characters of the Sutpen legacy (Basset, 125). The other critical approach has been called the "impressionist" mode (Ruppersburg, 93). This mode of reading looks more at the acts of narration than at what is told, and so deals mostly "with narrative techniques, [and] epistemological issues' (Basset, 125).

As Ruppersburg has rightly asserted, "To divorce these aspects of the novel, to overemphasize one at the other's expense, would likely lead to an utter misunderstanding of both" (93). A 'full' reading of the text requires that both modes of relation be given analytic consideration. A number of critics have therefore sought a fuller reading by making the simple assertion that these two subjects or modes have a common grounding, and are thus 'related' to one another. For the sake of brevity I cite only one: "Each narrator tells his or her story for the same reason that Sutpen wants to make his design a real presence in the world. Their narratives articulate a struggle to exist that becomes at times almost as ferocious as Sutpen's own" (Sherry, 40). Sutpen's attempt to create a legacy, a lineage to carry his name into the future, is consubstantial with, say, Rosa's attempt to deal with the past by creating a story that will allow her, so she thinks, to justify herself and so stabilize her identity in and through the verbal medium. Both characters strive to relate to reality by adhering to a story; Sutpen's of how life will be, and Rosa's of how it was. The ferocious struggle to exist is in both cases a ferocious struggle to have a voice, a struggle, that is, to gain possession of one's self through speech or action. I will be considering in this thesis the success of such linguistic (or vocal) self-possession as it is dramatized within the pages of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

To consider the success of such attempts at linguistic self-possession, I propose to read the book in the same way that its characters try to read and understand their experiences and the experiences of others. This is what may be called the scenic method of

reading, where the reader focuses on crucial moments of influence As Michael Millgate notes:

> One way of looking at the book's structure is to think of it as organized about a number of crucial moments of recognition, truth, disillusion: Henry and his father in the library, Henry shooting Bon, Sutpen proposing to Rosa, Wash Jones murdering Sutpen – each moment presented in a kind of tableau arrested at a particular point of time and held in suspension while it is looked at, approached from all sides, inspected as if it were itself an artifact, like that Grecian urn which Faulkner so often invoked elsewhere The main business of the book then becomes the interpretation of these moments, the attempt to explain and make sense of them (Millgate, 164)

What Millgate calls crucial moments, those scenes in which Sutpen proposes to Rosa, and so forth, are moments of influence, scenes in which one person's voice or utterance threatens the listener. Two other critics, Snead and Ross, apply different terms in an effort to describe the same textual phenomenon, their new terms do not recontextualize but simply redefine this textual phenomenon. James Snead refers to the "major incidents" in the text as ones "in which characters encounter 'turns' of phrase and of fate" which usually take the form of an "insult" or "rebuff" spoken by another character Snead notes of the four such scenes which he singles out from the text that each involves four stages, a character's "search to confirm an ideal or dream," the subsequent "rebuff and/or insult to that ideal or dream," the character's reaction which is a "negation of the negative rebuff," and finally a "chiasmus-like return from the place of revelation, portrayed as a reversed repetition of the intial search" (Snead 1989, 22). These scenes therefore are characteristically scenes in which one character's voice vies with another character's voice It is for this reason that Stephen Ross refers to them as "dialogic scenes," or scenes in which the speaker's words seem, from the listener's perspective, to be "symbolic verbal version[s] of other events" and thus say something other than what they seem to say on the surface (Ross 1989, 81). Thus Millgate's "crucial moments of truth, recognition, disillusion" can be seen as scenes which dramatize one voice's encounter with the destructive influence of another voice. In this respect, *Absalom, Absalom!* is about crises of listening (to insults or rebuffs) and the effects of the speaker's utterance upon the listener's ability to possess (have autonomy over) him- or her-self through his or her own language, itself now influenced by the

speaker's language or way of figuring things. Crucial scenes in *Absalom*, then, refer to a narrator's awareness of the fact that the attempt to possess and solidify selfhood through language (the attempt to find one's own voice) is doomed to failure because that language or voice will always be challenged and interrupted by another, alienating voice which forces the individual concerned to "recognize" the actual "truth" of one's "disillusion"—the recognition that a linguistically secured self is an ideal or illusion. This disillusion is something common to Sutpen and Quentin and other figures in the text, for these individuals are repeatedly shown focusing on the 'points' where their own language or narratives break down.

My discussion of crisis as the principle which unifies many scenes in the text is a continuation and thus also an elaboration of approaches undertaken in feminist analyzes of the text. Feminist readings have observed that the "acts of inscription in this novel belong primarily to men, and [that] the place of inscription, more often than not, is the body of woman," so that no female character is able to "fly beyond the boundaries of male inscription" (Gray, 33). According to this view, women "seem to live in the breaks and empty spaces of the narrative" (Susan Donaldson, 21). Such criticism asks: "What if the feminine that the patriarchal voice tells us must be repressed always already resides within the male?" (Duvall, xviii) and notes that that which is repressed "finally returns to defeat" the repressor (106). The nature of the process of subjectification which the text thematizes is, however, non-discriminatory: *all* characters live in the empty spaces of another's rhetoric, all are inscribed within or influenced by the other's self-alienating voice. To take up the language of the text, all characters are converted into "ghosts." Quentin is just as much a ghost as Rosa, and so equally inscribed by the patriarchal rhetoric of the South.

John Matthews notes that "no character" in *Absalom, Absalom!* "lives beyond the moment of his or her voice since all thought and consciousness appear to Faulkner as kinds of talk" (Matthews 1982, 151). Understanding *Absalom*, I would argue, is necessarily grounded through a study of the role of voice in the text, through a study of the ways in

which one character's thought or consciousness influences or, in feminist terms, "inscribes," another character's way of thinking about themselves. But it must be emphasized that vocal self-possession is problematized by the self's subjection to *another*'s voice—it is not sufficient to note that, since all thought in Faulkner's text is dramatically rendered as a kind of talk, no character lives beyond the moment of his or her voice. I find that Leslie Heywood indirectly addresses Matthews' insufficient observation by specifying even further the vocal nature of this subversion of self-understanding, of self-relation:

> In *Absalom, Absalom!*, language is used to incarnate the voices of characters who in turn seek to incarnate the voices of characters long-dead, characters invoked by the narrative voices because it is through these absent presences that the present [narrators/characters] are seeking to constitute themselves as presences. This incarnation of voices and shadow [that of the absent presences] functions to call the idea of absolute presence into question, making the traditional conception of one stable subject highly problematic - as well as this subject's relation to a social structure which masquerades as "true." Faulkner's narrative strategy undermines the "true" through problematizing the idea of stable "presence," for the voices which these "characters" have are "haunted" voices [AA, 8] and not their own (Heywood, 12) [1]

It is simply not enough to approach the text by stating that its concerns with language are expressed in its theme that what "has ceased to exist in history may persist as discourse. [And that] *Absalom, Absalom!* can be regarded as a fictional reflection on this predicament" (Herget, 36) Language is not only presented in *Absalom* as having the positive quality of being able to accord existence to that which is not, for language also involves a strange dynamic of negative import which inscribes or "conceptually entrap[s]" its users (Wittenberg, 104). A complete reading of *Absalom* would reveal that any speaker, any subject believing itself to be stable, loses its stability to these "shadows," be they shadows from the past or of one's contemporaries. And, contrary to feminist tenets, *all* characters here are inscribed or undone by (another's) language This theme of inscription is common to both the characters focused upon by the "detective" critics and those focused upon by the "impressionist" critics.

---

[1] As all references to the text will be from the Modern Library edition, and the abbreviated reference "AA" to designate that the text is being cited. The page numbers will be altered to suit this edition on occasions such as this one where the reference was originally to another edition

David Krause offers yet another similar approach to these problems of linguistic self-possession. The crucial scenes for this critic are exemplified by those scenes of letter-reading and letter-writing in the text. He notes that

> Faulkner uses his letters and their readers to disclose an emptiness, an absence that cannot quite be made a presence. His scenes of letter-reading become meditations on the difficult problems of communication, of intersubjectivity, of selfhood, of authority, of choice, of love—problems which necessarily inhibit, literally dis-compose or de-construct, his writing of a novel and our reading of that novel (Krause 1986, 382).

While Krause focuses his analytic lenses on scenes of letter-writing and letter-reading, I intend to open up various scenes of communication to this thematic approach which are more generally verbal than simply epistolary. I therefore insist that *all* scenes of communication in the text can be read as meditations on the problems of communication and authority. Characters think that by telling a story, listening to a story, reading a letter, or writing a letter, they will find that meaning will present itself and so confirm and consolidate their sense of identity. Yet instead of finding meaning, characters confront its lack, for in each moment the matter at hand, in Kraus's words, "discloses an emptiness." Consequently, scenes of communication in *Absalom, Absalom!* become meditations on the problem of communication, on the loss of authority or of meaning. This is why, as Karen McPherson observes, "the voices in *Absalom, Absalom!* are not only telling the story but also telling the story of storytelling." McPherson notes that, as a result, the text's "metaphors are often figures of the figurative process (fragile thread, monument, scratch, loom, design—all to some degree reflecting on language and narrative). To the extent that the story figures itself, it might be said to suggest its own analysis, but this is analysis as Shoshana Felman describes it, not of the signified but of the signifier" (McPherson, 448). Bernhard Radloff is thus not entirely accurate in noting that the narratives' "rhetoric itself *never becomes a theme for the narrators*" (Radloff, 262). Narrative is not something that the characters, whether those associated with Sutpen or with Quentin, discourse on per se, but it is that which underlies what they say and what they do—for what may be read as action or narrative here becomes, upon closer inspection, a (most frequently frustrated)

meditation or reflection upon the fact that an alien voice always interferes with one's own, a meditation on the fact that what promised meaning actually undermines it. In this sense, as McPherson suggests, the "story figures itself." This concern with the figurative process (as is evident from the use of words like voice, crisis, thread, scratch, loom, design, etc.) therefore develops as a descriptive account of what happens in the plot, of what happens between different characters and their ways of looking at ('figuring') things. I will thus be considering the notions of influence or inscription by paying special attention to those passages in the text where characters reflect upon the problems of communication, the difficulties of 'figuring' things out.

This paper will study the ways in which different voices in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* relate to each other. To do this, I will have recourse to a psychological poetics. Harold Bloom refers to a poet's relationship to another poet's strength as engaging and necessitating what he calls revisionary ratios, strategies to avoid being overcome by the past poet's voice. Bloom believes that the later poet's (the ephebe's) stance or relationship to an earlier (stronger) poet's influential prowess can be usefully defined by reference to a set of tropological reactions. These tropes are the "defense mechanisms" which ward off crippling influence, allowing the ephebe to free up space for his or her own utterance. These six ratios therefore represent stages of the ephebe's veering off from the other's strength to the point at which that strength is no longer considered a threat.[2]

The characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, define a very different set of tropological reactions because they never ascend to such praxis. Their "obsessive" and

---

[2]I mention Bloom's ratios only to set mine against his. Here are Bloom's ratios: clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonisation, askesis, apophrades, their tropic equivalents or representations: irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole or litotes, metaphor, metalepsis, their equivalent psychic defenses: reaction-formation, turning against the self, undoing-isolation-regression, sublimation, introjection/projection (Bloom 1975, 84). But since characters in *Absalom* remain ephebes in relation to the other's speech they continue to perceive the other's strength as a threat. Bloom's ratios therefore describe the ways the threat is overcome. In reference to *Absalom*, however, another set of ratios must be found to describe the ways in which the listener becomes inscribed in the other's speech. Briefly, my own tropic schema for the drama of influence in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the following: metalepsis, demonstratio, catachresis, hyperbole, apostrophe, personification.

"compulsive" natures make these characters even more dependent on the precursor's voice.[3] The ratios of their reaction therefore require an alternative tropic account from Bloom's. While Bloom extrapolates upon irony as the poet's first rhetorical strategem, as a "reaction-formation" against the uncanny self-same voice of the other, characters in *Absalom,* when they see themselves in the other's utterance, buckle, and thus don't benefit from the distanciating powers of 'the ironic reaction ' The trope, I argue, which characterizes the character's perspective upon language at this point, a result of this obsessive nature, is the metalepsis. This is the trope of reversal in which first is substituted for last, and last for first. The typical incident in *Absalom* which forms the substructure of the text, as I demonstrate in chapter two, presents a character who is compromized by the other's often spoken perception of that first character s self. (It must be noted, however, that 'the other's spoken perception' is not necessarily a direct comment on the listener's self. For often that se'f takes the other's comments to be about his or her self, but is really reading those comments according to Ross' description, where those comments are seen as saying something other than what they seem to say on the surface, and thus are "symbolic verbal version[s] of other events." Therefore, when I use my rhetorical figures or tropes, it is not to describe the rhetorical form of a speaker's words; I use these terms instead to describe the effects these words have on the listener My tropological group, in this respect, refers neither to figures of speech, nor to figures of thought, but to figures of interaction, of (inter)*relation.*) The typical ephebe, in succumbing to the other's discourse, gives the other's figure metaleptic priority over his or her own. Thus, metalepsis, as descriptively applied to ephebes who never develop into strong and assured speakers or individuals, differs in this case from Bloom's use of it, where it occurs as the last in his

---

[3]I owe this dense but apt terminology to John Irwin who critically notes the infectious quality of *Absalom*'s vocal meditations. Faulkner's own text, as I would insist, has a similar capacity to influence its readers' modes of expression, just as the characters in the text are influenced by the voices of other characters: "And if at certain points in the text I start to sound like one of Faulkner's compulsive-obsessive narrators, it is at least in part to evoke Faulkner's own sense that narration *is* compulsion, narration *is* obsession In fact, I would have liked to have written this book in one long unpunctuated sentence..." (John Irwin 1975, 9)

series of ratios, and in his tropology describes that motion whereby a poet overturns the balance of power in his or her favour. Attendant upon this first of rhetorical reactions here is the demonstratio. While the metalepsis accounts for the ephebe's scar by describing an obsessive valuation of the other's presence, the demonstratio describes the actual listening effects of this valuation: in giving the speaker's words such priority or strength, the listener sees the speaker's subject, this alternate and other reality, as greater than his or her own sense of things prior to the disruption.

Absalom, Absalom! also presents, in dramatic form, its rendering of another tropic duo. This tropic duo describes the reaction of subjects who feebly attempt to recoup their self-image, and give an outcry at the speaker's misrepresentation of their selves. In these moments, the self feels misnamed and distorted by, in Snead's words, the other's "rebuff" or "insult"; because the self feels, in these moments, that it is being poorly or inadequately represented, I will be using the rhetorical terms hyperbole and catachresis to name the listening character's sense of anxiety at being misrepresented. Nonetheless their obsessive natures then incorporate this disruption of the self into their sense of who they are, by means of the apostrophe and the personification, two tropes which enable the disrupted subject to speak of their own disruption, to speak of their own 'death.' This return, or "chiasmus-like return," is not, as Snead also argues, a return to the place of the original "search to confirm an ideal," but to the place of the insult, that moment of self-disruption. By reinvoking and personifying the insult, characters prove their weakness in relation to the other's utterances.

Faulkner, however, does engage his readers with a character whose approach recognizes from the start the contingency of selfhood. Shreve never experiences a crisis through an insult or rebuff; he is the only character/figure who ascends to verbal strength or praxis. I will be using the trope irony to describe Shreve's reaction to the tales he hears. With Shreve, Faulkner shows his reader how he wants his own text read. It is this method of reading which I engage in this paper.

In chapter one, I offer a close reading of the gaps or aporias in the first three paragraphs of *Absalom, Absalom!* to show how Faulkner's text ought to be read in an ironic and semiological way, a way in which the gaps or silences in the text are taken to be meaningful in themselves and thus seen as saying something important about the troubles of telling stories. To understand a character's psyche one must look at the gaps in their discourse, those openings which expose that voice's inflection toward another voice. In other words, one must not react, due to an absence of ironic detachment, with the feeling of anxiety over the presence of such aporias or confusion-generating gaps. I demonstrate that themes which occur in the rest of the text are embodied in a preliminary form in these opening paragraphs—these are the themes which substantiate my argument that detective and impressionist modes of criticism miss the mark since Sutpen and Quentin (along with Rosa and the disembodied narrator) are thematically presented as individuals inscribed within other people's voices.

In chapter two, I proceed to the key scenes or tableaux in the text which depict characters agonizing over their crises of having been influenced by another's mode of figuration. Specifically, these are the scenes in which characters are shown meditating upon the figure of figuration, that is, the story of what happens when narratives clash. This is the chapter in which I flesh out the crisis/criticism theory which is the core theme and plot-seed for Faulkner's entire text. I thus show the "critical" similarities between the stories of six characters in the book, directing my focus largely at Judith's lamentation over the loss of meaning in her life, a loss which occurs when other narratives disrupt her own. Characters agonize or experience crises because their mode of reading got them off to a bad start—had characters accepted loss as part and parcel of the reading process, and so read in an ironic and semiological way, they would have developed a healthier, or at least less neurotic and less weak or dependant, attitude toward life.

In chapter three, I continue my argument that once an utterance is inscribed within a network of other utterances, the line of that one voice cannot be read on its own because it

exists within a field of interaction with other voices. I look at Quentin's paralysis in respect to his Southern heritage, a paralysis articulated in his claim that he doesn't hate the South. I note in his critical reaction to Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South?" a severe absence of ironic detachment, which I trace to the influence on Quentin's psyche of Mr Compson's underhanded inscription—his tale of Charles Bon's attempt to convince Henry Sutpen of the validity of New Orleans morality. Compson's tale is strategically designed to manouevre Quentin into rejecting Bon's ironic voice through his (Quentin's) identification with Henry, the Henry created by Mr Compson for Quentin. Compson forces Quentin to align his voice with Henry's, and so prevents him from ascending to Bon's more ironic vantage point.

In chapter four, I show how Shreve's ironic perspective saves him from the crises of meaning that all other characters undergo, crises of meaning which had *forced* other characters to replace semantic coherence with semiological contingency. Shreve's abrupt revision of the Southern legacy symbolically dismantles the significant world of semantics and authority that Sutpen and the Compson family stood for by reading Jim Bond, the last personage in the Sutpen lineage, as the embodiment of an absence of meaning in the Sutpen legacy. For Shreve, the idiot Bond's meaningless babble is the emblem of the non-meaningful or non-authoritative voice that had long been repressed by the Sutpen and Compson mode of reading. I define Shreve's type of reading as ironic and semiological because I consider both modes of reading to lead to a type of playful speculation which is the antithesis of what one critic has called, following Roland Barthes, the mode of "readerly reading" typical to the Compsons and the Sutpens—a type of reading which interests itself in "the (chimerical) security of coherence, stasis, mimesis, representation of what is signified" (Krause 1984, 239).

An ironic mode of reading is one which is detached from its subject, and so does not allow the subject to influence or "insult" the reader's sense of his or her identity. Ironic readings, in my definition, read at the level of the signifier and not of the signified, as

Karen McPherson would say. For example, Shreve's ironic consciousness believes that the meaning which seems to be 'present' in the narrative of the South is a false one. Shreve reverses Jim Bond's position in relation to the Southern heritage (by claiming Bond's ultimate superiority over his oppressors' designs to stifle his voice) in an effort to reassert that which had been "missing" or repressed within that (falsifying and oppressive) heritage. It is Shreve's ironic vantage, I argue, which allows him to engage in a deconstructive substitution of signifiers, giving no signifying system hegemony or hierarchical value over another, but nonetheless willing to turn the Southern picture on its head to show that Sutpen's old structure of meaning deflates its own claims to total coherence or unity.

By using the word semiology, I do not refer to the general understanding of this term as defining the study of a system of signs which indicate a socially shared set of meanings. For Shreve's semiology, in being the opposite of a readerly reading, is the study or consideration of the aporias in discourse. Shreve's reading, as Krause would say, reflects the process of "semiosis"—it concerns itself with "monumental sign and silence" (Krause 1984, 230). Semiological readings, in my sense, focus on the meaning behind silence, focus less on what is said than on what isn't said. Shreve analyzes the aporias in the Sutpen dream of a narrative of total coherence and shows that the gaps in that narrative, the things it is silent about (like the existence of Charles Bon), say quite clearly that Sutpen's attempts to achieve self-possession through language or voice fail in their endeavours.

In my conclusion, I look at Faulkner's own descriptions of the reading process to note that Faulkner, like his character Shreve, considers texts or utterances as a system of signs whose meaning is dependent upon the reader's (or listener's) speculative (ironic and semiological) ability to get the aporias or holes in discourse to speak.

Chapter One.

The Voice Over: The Texture of Telling.

If we use a comparison of a musical order, the unconscious is not the counterpoint of a fugue or the harmonies of a melodic line: it is the jazz one hears despite oneself behind the Haydn quartet when the radio is badly tuned or not sufficiently selective. The unconscious is not the message, not even the strange or coded message one strives the read on an old parchment: *it is another text written underneath and which must be read by illuminating it from behind or with the help of a developer* (Leclaire quoted in Lemaire, 138)

...we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting.. They are there yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest... you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens (Mr Compson speaking to Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*, 100-1)

Faulkner has created in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a text which resists its reader's incursions, and so conceals as much as it reveals. Any serious reading of Faulkner must take into account the stylistic peculiarities and the thematic results of the author's decision not "to work," as John Matthews says, "like his great forebears in the realistic tradition," knowing that this decision would make his work less "directly accessible to [its] reader" (Matthews 1991, 33). Olga Vickery's observation that Faulkner resists "any temptation to circumscribe, define, or interpret his characters from a position of authority" (Vickery, 298-9) raises an important question for any reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*: Without authoritative help, how is the reader to gain access to the text? I argue that it is essential that the notion of textual inaccessibility be kept in mind when reading Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Absalom dramatizes its own inaccessibility both by what it says and how it says it. This inaccessibility, I will be showing, is reflected in the text's theme of an identity's rupture by its own self-structuring voice. In other words, the text shows us that a narrator can be disrupted or subverted by his or her own narrative act, and that a narrative can be disrupted or subverted by its own subject. In this chapter, I will be looking at the disruptive gaps in the novel's opening three paragraphs. I will be arguing that these absences disclose the hidden message of the text, the idea that all characters struggle to assert self-hood through voice, but (with the exception of Shreve) fail because of another voice's influence.

Like Mr Compson's admission in the quote above that the fabric of his narrative is punctured or disrupted by the inability of his recollective act to grasp something which would make all else come clear, the text as a whole glosses the way in which direct access to its subject is blocked when "something is missing." While such absences frustrate Mr Compson and other characters in the text, Shreve seems to take them for granted as an inevitable facet of any narrative. To place greater emphasis on this concept of absence I will frequently use the more academic term "aporia." Aporia is a rhetorical term meaning

figure of doubt. It refers to a threshold moment in which a writer or a speaker wavers undecidedly between choosing one word (phrase, thought, etc) over another. I use the word generally, along with other words such as 'fault,' 'gap' and 'disruption,' to refer to those holes in a speaker's discourse where something that should have been said has not been said. This paper will attempt to explain the function of these aporias or 'missing things' in Faulkner's text and in the various utterances of its characters. As has been noted, the main thing missing in *Absalom* is an authoritative voice, one which the reader would face as a full presence. Not only is Faulkner not there to defend and clarify his book in person, but his scriptive representative, the disembodied or omniscient narrator, generates obscurity through a strategic absence of authority. I wish to study the purpose of such adumbrating strategies (strategies which simultaneously reveal and conceal) and their relation to the all-important theme of voice in the text, even as it is figured in its opening paragraph:

> From a little after two oclock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that - a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. There was a wistaria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away; and opposite Quentin, Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust (7-8).

The 'style' in this passage is of course the product of its author, William Faulkner, but it is important not to assume that the 'voice' in this passage represents its author's. Instead, the 'voice' which describes this particular scene belongs to what is often called the 'omniscient' or 'disembodied' narrator of *Absalom, Absalom!* But do these terms, 'disembodied' and 'omniscient,' accurately describe the qualities of this vocal presence? This voice may be considered disembodied for the reason that it transcends all locale (it is in

Quentin's presence wherever he goes within the confines of the text, and has insight into other minds too), and does not appear to perform a role in the action described. It is omniscient inasmuch as it has the capacity to know what characters think internally, *i.e.*: to know both what Rosa Coldfield "believed" and also what Quentin "thought." But there are at least two ways of reading this omniscience The first is to see it as the mark or attribute of that voice's will to power, of its superior ability to know. Possessing more information than any single character or than any reader, this voice clearly puts the reader in a passive, subordinate position. The second way to read this "omniscient" stance is to see it as a sign that the voice has misunderstood its reader, speaking to us as though we were initiates already familar with the necessary details or information in the scenes it describes, so that it leaves such information unvoiced, unaware that its scope is unsuited to our own. Yet the reader must ask: What are the effects of this omniscience upon the reader? The *nature* of this voice, using its disembodied omniscience to full advantage, draws the reader into its web, forcing the reader to flesh out undeveloped details, to rewrite obscurities, and thus to renarrate what has been obscurely narrated. Whatever this voice's 'intentions' are, its aporias and obscurities serve as an invitation for the reader to enter into the story and tie up the loose ends of a narrative fabric that is already slightly unwoven from the text's inception.

Yet this omniscient voice which glosses over key details does more than force the reader into the scene, in this case the scene of Rosa's office where Quentin and Rosa are seated. It also forces the reader into a more general scene of reading that is structurally identical to what might be termed the 'ur-scene' in the text, the door-opening, threshold scene described in chapter VII, where Sutpen almost enters Pettibone's plantation, almost learns what is inside. For, at the 'opening' of Faulkner's text, the 'omniscient' or 'disembodied' voice opens the door, as it were, onto the scene in Rosa's "office," but does not open that door all the way; it does not, so to speak, let the reader see everything inside, or go inside As one critic puts it: "The main thing we know reading Faulkner is that we

don't know the main thing" (Parker 1985, 3) That which ought to be presenced is instead kept concealed. Nevertheless, this half-opened door, which perhaps conceals more than it reveals, is not an open contradiction of my assertion above that the omniscient voice forces the reader into the scenes described For just as the youthful Sutpen had expected to be admitted to Pettibone's plantation before the butler half-opened the door, denying Sutpen's access, but later builds his entire "design" on the life he imagined Pettibone to lead, so the reader, blocked by the significant absence of authoritative guidance in the novel's opening, must imaginatively cope with this barrier by ascertaining its function. Reading *Absalom*, the reader knows that "something is missing," but what does this absence *say*?

The main thing or principle 'subject' that is hidden behind the door at the text's threshold is the "long-dead object" of Rosa's "impotent yet indomitable frustration" which "appear[s]" or is "evoked" out of the all pervasive dust of the "office." That the "object" is "quiet inattentive and harmless" suggests either that it is a misnamed human 'subject' or an inanimate thing which has been personified through what would appear to be the disembodied narrator's descriptive acts. Consequently, this "long-dead object" becomes for the reader an initial figure of doubt, of undecidability, an aporia or ghostly evocation which remains beyond the borders of the reader's knowing, until this 'figure,' the actual object or subject, is presented more clearly, but far from adequately, two pages later. It must be noted, however, that this long-dead object remains, until its naming two pages later,[1] a figure of doubt or even of the unknowable only to the reader, as the 'all-knowing' narrator 'knows' but just doesn't 'say.' The details known by that transcendent mind do

---

[1]In the first paragraph of the text all that is known of the long-dead object is that it is generated from the "victorious dust" and is "quiet inattentive and harmless." In the second paragraph the "ghost" is described as heading some form of Satanic rite, what the reader learns is the creation of "the Sutpen's Hundred" (9): "faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard behind him his band of wild niggers and manacled among them the French architect" (8). It isn't until the last half of the second paragraph that Quentin's fragmented internal dialogue recuperates signification that is otherwise lost on the reader "*It seems that this demon... (Colonel Sutpen) came out of nowhere and without warning built a plantation*" (9) Thus the central figure or character in everyone's narrative efforts is submitted to a variety of name-callings ("the long-dead object," "the ghost," "he," "man-horse-demon," "the horseman," the 'creator of the Sutpen's Hundred') until the *proper* name is secured

not find an outlet in voice. The knowledge is there but hidden—it does not appear—just as the subjectivity of the figure spoken about is left unvoiced in the word "object." That Faulkner had intented obscurity in the disembodied narrator's voice is evident in his decision to disembody this 'figure' as much as he could For in the manuscript version the author had originally written "the dead man himself" (Langford, 43), but in the final version such clarity, or reference to a human subject, is left unarticulated.

A further figure of doubt is presented in a brief detail which leaves it ambiguous as to whether the omniscient narrator has the answer to the question: Why does Rosa wear "eternal black"? Needless to say, this issue raises doubts involving the narrative voice's omniscience It is stated that "none knew" whether Rosa wore the eternal black for her (dead) "sister, father, or nothusband " That the word 'dead' is unsaid or only implied in this matter is significant, or rather, in-significant (in the sense of 'an absence of signification which draws attention to itself') [2] Instead, the word 'dead' only appears in the first sentence, in reference to the present scene in the office. The effect is the juxtaposition of a dead present with a resuscitated past Furthermore, due to this 'in-signification,' due to this absence of the word 'death' in reference to the sister, father or nothusband, the notion of death itself is articulated or "appears," stylistically, as an absolute absence that cannot even be booked in the present, in the words facing the reader. The reader is not given direct access to information regarding these deaths, deaths that one would assume to be very significant for Rosa. The "long still hot weary" "September afternoon" is referred to as "dead," but the death of the people who had been close to Rosa is left unvoiced, and so this theme of absence in the opening two paragraphs is not embodied in terms of something that is said outright, but in terms of what the 'difficult' style refuses to present fully. One implication of this juxtaposition is that time has more of

---

[2]The 'sub-citation' or underwriting of the word only becomes an issue in relation to the word "nothusband," for while it seems probable to the reader that Rosa's sister and father may no longer be present to her, the utter lack of reference for the neologism "nothusband" throws any certainty, in the reader's mind, as to Rosa's relation with these individuals, out of balance

a presence for these characters than individuals do. This would explain in part the obsessive nature of the characters involved in the evocation of the past; Rosa's narrative of "impotent and static rage" is an outrage against the passage of time since she can no longer confront in full presence, and rectify, situations that are now buried in the past. But this figure of doubt also has something to say about the omniscient narrator's omniscience. For the implications of the phrase "none knew" is that (assuming that the narrator is implicated within the referential scope of the pronoun), even though the narrator may magically have access to some of Rosa's beliefs, there is a 'door' or threshold to Rosa's psyche beyond which even this narrator is denied access.

The opening paragraph, which gives such a sense of Rosa's repression, intimates that since the precise reference underlying signification, the specific cause behind Rosa's wearing the 'color black,' cannot be put into words or the frame of another's knowing, there is a realm of Rosa's signifying powers which is beyond embodiment. It can therefore be stated, as Hunt notes, that the omniscient narrator "is usually less than omniscient" and so must, along with the four narrators, indulge "in guesswork" and so use "words such as 'maybe,' 'probably,' and 'perhaps' to weaken further the insecurity of the reader's knowledge" (Hunt, 103). When the omniscient voice doesn't know, the narrative fabric has holes in it. The text tells us that it can't all be laid on the line, that the texture of telling in this case is not a coherent surface, that knowledge and narrative (from the Latin, meaning Knowledge) are unstable. In the absence of an authoritative voice, the text prepares us both for an excess of knowledge and a lack of knowledge, a rent in the narrative fabric which will prevent everything from being wrapped up, totalized, booked in the present.

If the narrative voice in *Absalom, Absalom!* is less than omniscient, it is also less than disembodied, since this voice does not utterly transcend the scene it describes nor the voices therein. This is not to say that it is then a necessarily embodied voice, one that might have breathed the same air Rosa and Quentin are described as having breathed, but simply that this narrator is more subjective than objective or transcendent and, like the ghost on

page eight, is more a subject than the con-text admits Narrator and ghost are equally embodied and disembodied. The narrator is not completely transcendent for the reason that he or she partakes in the limitations of insight and identity that characterize all other figures in the text. Given the inadequacies of the terms omniscient and disembodied in reference to the narrator who introduces all other characters, I will be referring to this narrator instead as the 'voice over,' for it is this voice which, in this novel's drama of influence, has the last say, puts in the last word. An understanding of *Absalom* and its tales of anxiety and influence must begin with a consideration of the textured quality of this voice over, its near 'self-effacing' superimposition *over* the scene it describes. Or, to put this in the form of a question: How is the story of storytelling and thus of influence suggested by the voice over's (concealing acts of) narration?

Absalom's first sentence prepares the reader for the theme which the rest of the text develops. The voice over's language is a subtle comment on the way language is used and seen by all other characters in the text. Rosa's act of naming the room "the office" is, we are told, a reiteration of the parental logos, and is thus indicative of her inability to escape that past. Rosa's epistemology, or way of *knowing* the room she is in, is inscribed by her father's narrative, his story of how the room is to function. The opening sentence thus subtly articulates what the rest of the text *more* openly expresses: the legacy of naming by which characters are implicated in another's mode of knowing, in another's narrative. *Absalom*'s reader discovers soon enough (p.9) that the material legacy Sutpen had intended failed, only to be succeeded by a verbal legacy. It is the effect of this sort of verbal legacy which is first dramatized within the opening sentence, not only through the tale of influence conveyed through Rosa's use of her father's word "office," but also through the stories of "light and moving air" and of the "dark" which motivate Rosa to keep the blinds "closed and fastened." Rosa keeps the blinds closed and fastened because "when she was a girl someone had believed. .". More is at work in this opening than a mere description of

place, for the language here subtly evokes and introduces the rhetoric (or tropics) of relation.[3]

The legacy or lineage in this first particular example, grounded in the mere use of the word "office," extends from Mr Coldfield to Rosa to Quentin (presumably) and finally to the voice over, the last in the series prior to the reader of Faulkner's text, who would then him- or her-self refer, in citing the text, to the room in which the first scene takes place as 'the office.' Yet while this somewhat concealed linguistic tale articulates the theme of influence to which the more embodied tales of Quentin's received legacy and Sutpen's projected legacy are unabashedly devoted, the theme of influence is granted a fuller expression in the way in which the figure of Thomas Sutpen remains disembodied until he is sketched in in a much fuller way, as we shall be seeing, by Quentin's interior dialogue on page nine—a dialogue which itself shows the influence of Rosa's voice upon Quentin's thoughts.

The voice over's tableau or scene of Rosa and Quentin in the office contains within it another scene: a ghost "evoked" "out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust" of the "dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed " Unnamed, this figure thus becomes even more ghostly and disembodied, hovering or lurking *inapprehensibly* on the fringe or margin of Rosa's "talking." Sutpen appears here as a "ghost" in what could be called a ghost story both because Sutpen is dead and because the discourse reveals him only indirectly. For the reader then, even though Sutpen is the subject of Rosa's discourse, he also represents its aporia, a vague figure which the speaker cannot even name, and about which the speaker remains in great doubt That the hidden narrative in this opening is about

---

[3]This opening thus also raises two important concepts *topos* and *trope* For Rosa, in securing her topos or tableau, the general scene about her, as a place in which to do business, necessarily also places her self there through tropic means. She exerts control over her environment by defining it linguistically while at the same time that environment is controlled for her by her father's act of naming In the words of Brian McHale: "I assume that all definitions in the field of literary history [and by extension, all acts of naming in Faulkner's text itself], all acts of categorization or boundary-drawing, are *strategic* That is, they are all made in view of some purpose on the definer's part; they are all *apropos of* something else" (53). I will be describing, in this thesis, this predicament as the root of all psychological unease, of all anxiety in *Absalom*: a character's topos or identity (the place of the self) is disrupted by an other's speech.

a narrative's capacity to occlude its subject is indicated by the fact that Sutpen is filtered not through one but through *two* proximate sources before his whole life story is revealed in Quentin's interior dialogue: Sutpen is a "ghostly" figure both in the tableau created by the voice over and in the tableau created by Rosa's "talking." Since Rosa's "talking" is not cited directly in this initiating paragraph, Sutpen becomes even more disembodied or ghostly for the reader who must attempt to glimpse this vague Sutpen figure through the holes in the voice over's version of Rosa's narrative.[4] The effect of such a narrative technique is to seduce the reader into trying to open the door even further; it also forces the reader to assess the function of such barriers to knowledge, such aporias. It then becomes the reader's responsibility to try to distinguish the different narrative and scenic threads, and moreover to recognize the power of influence that one voice has to submerge another. Such ferreting out of hidden signifying structures (working to uncover the text's unspoken themes), defines what I consider to be the most appropriate way of reading this particular text, the most appropriate way of coping with its aporetic difficulties.

Not only does the superimpository nature of the voice over's narration distance the reader from Rosa's subject ("object") of frustration, it also obscures the subject(ivity) of the person who stops listening.[5] In the pertinent passage, Rosa is described as "talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear." The reader here might well ask: Whose listening fails, gives up the ghost?

While Rosa is described in physical terms to a certain degree, much else in the passage is passed over as quickly as possible, and thus left hazy for the first-time reader of

---

[4]The reader's desire to see this ghostly figure, and crisis in not being allowed to see it clearly, is significantly reflected by Quentin's position as listener to the tale. Stephen Ross has noted that Quentin wants to escape the voice of the Southern past: "To truly *see* Sutpen, Quentin must try to escape 'behind and above the voice.' But the overvoice never disappears, even when Quentin is not listening" (Ross 1985, 80). As Quentin tries to escape his father's telling, the reader may desperately seek to escape the voice over's delimiting because somewhat blinding descriptions.

[5]At this point in my analysis I will be using the word subject to mean not only a character who is formed or inscribed by another's discourse but also 'grammatical subject,' since the text doesn't use a pronoun, in the following passage, to clarify the 'subject' who performs the action described.

the text. A number of tales are evoked without being told. The narrator's telling here thus erects a screen between his or her knowledge of the events and Rosa's status as teller of the same tale. It is this screen or dark glass which makes the reader experience the tale in a way that is similar to Quentin's experience in Rosa's "office," as Quentin too must deal in listening to her tale with names of people who, while he may have more familiarity with them than the reader of the text, nonetheless appear to him as vague shadows from another field of reference, shadows projected from someone who has more knowledge than he, and so can better narrate the events. It is through this technique that the reader is able to identify even at this early stage with Quentin's crisis, the crisis of listening to another's influential narrative act. The repressed atmosphere of this scene is compounded by the fact that a 'subject' other than the figure of Sutpen is occulted here: the 'individual person' whose listening, in the text's terms, "reneges."

What does the text say through this conspicuous absence of pronouns? Why does the text not read 'until at last *his* [Quentin's] listening would renege and *his* hearing-sense self-confound' or 'until at last *her* [Rosa's] listening would renege and *her* hearing-sense self-confound'?[6] Why is the subject performing this action excluded from or at least allowed to disappear behind the act performed? Simply, Why is there an action but no subject in the clause? and what does this absence, gap, or missing 'subject' mean? I am arguing that the ambiguity produced for the reader by the missing pronoun also produces or generates an indirect commentary upon the way in which such figures of doubt are an integral part of what is being said. It may be grammatically inferred that since Rosa had earlier been described as the one talking in the scene and Quentin as the one listening, it must be primarily Quentin's listening or consciousness which abandons the milieu of Rosa's talking

---

[6]This ambiguity is of course resolved on page nine of Faulkner's text, but that Faulkner intended an ambiguity of reference, and was not simply writing sloppily, omitting pronouns here and there, I would suggest is indicated by a description of the "intervals" (8) of Rosa's talking to be found in the manuscript version, where Rosa's talking was described as vanishing into and then out of her silent "intervals of *self-confounding* unsurprise like a stream" (Langford, 43, italics mine). In the early version, at least, the self-confounding was also attributed to Rosa's character, to add to the confusion of reference in the present text when set up against the manuscript version

to visualize the evoked subject, Sutpen's ghost. But I suggest that, in a larger sense, it is not only Quentin but Rosa, Sutpen, the voice over and *Absalom*'s reader who can be said to individually renege in the listening.

Rosa's telling deifically creates or "evoke[s]" (the ghost of) Thomas Sutpen out of nothing but the dust in her office. Once it "appear[s]," is visible to the eyes, this ghost seems unaware of its having been summoned. Though it reneges its position as the 'subject' of Rosa's discourse, unwittingly inserted into the scene of her talking and thus disinterested in Rosa's objectifying "outrage," thus becoming "quiet inattentive and harmless." At any rate, the subject who performs the act of not-listening could very well be Sutpen himself, as he is the first to be described as carrying out this action or inattention. The reader has only to ask: Are the two acts, of not-listening and of inattention, merely coincidental? This figure of doubt, of course, prevents any hard and fast decisions one way or the other. The strong coincidence may only be defined as a likelihood. Significantly, the opening paragraph, like the opening of a door which is then left only ajar, does not reveal with certitude whether Sutpen was actually the subject/object performing the act of not-listening. This gap, opening, or aporia thus involves the reader's subject-hood (with)in the space of the absent or missing grammatical subject in the paragraph, converting the reader into the non-listener. Technically speaking, the occlusion of the (non)listening subject forces the reader of the text to turn a deaf ear (stop listening) to the way the tale is told (by overlooking the blind spots or aporias in the text) and to attempt to *perceive* what is truly not there, by supplying what is missing: the phrase 'and then Quentin's listening reneged,' for example. Nonetheless, while this is a necessary step to make, any reading of the text must take into account the important textual elements which, like grammatical elements, are left out *for a purpose*. The reader, in other words, should not fill in the gaps, but see what these gaps have to say in and of themselves. In this case the gap seems to indicate to the reader at an early point in the text that the dynamics of talking and listening are more important than the more properly 'mythic' elements of the tale, and are also more

important than the characters telling it. Pronouns are not supplied because subjects are less important here than the act; the narrators or listeners we meet are spoken or inscribed by the narrative, unable to escape its influential sphere, even when "not listening." This theme of inscription and influence is therefore indicated by the absence of pronouns which would otherwise indicate or specify the actual subject performing the act. The narrative of Sutpen's great mythic design to have a lineage to extend into the future once he built a plantation, and all the details of family relations that followed from that, cannot be contained or embodied by any of its potential 'subjects' (Rosa and Quentin), and so it tends to disembody its would-be tellers. Furthermore, this style or technique also indicates that there is a strange relationship between what is seen and what is said—the language does not communicate through its positive content but by what it omits. The absence of a grammatical subject, in other words, tellingly anticipates what the end of the paragraph speaks more explicitly: "appearance" is predicated upon absence. As Quentin and Rosa's conversation is informed by the presence of Sutpen's ghost, and so predicated upon something not really there, so the reader becomes aware of the constitutive nature of this narrative's *aporia*, its mode of telling by not telling.

This pronominal equi-vocation, in multiplying the number of 'subjects' that may fill the position of reneging, articulates, without words or speech, the story of the voice over's influence over his or her subject: his or her power to convert the subject into a ghost. The subject's occultation may also be called a "fading".[7] Of all possible 'subjects,' it is most likely that it is Quentin who reneges on his listening to Rosa's tale. Rosa too, however,

---

[7]I use this useful word in reference to Roland Barthes' use of it. Ned Lukacher, commenting on Barthes' word, notes that "As used in French, '*fading*' describes the erasure or effacement of the voice, as in those telephone connections where the other's voice is borne away by waves of static interference" (Lukacher, 71). In *S/Z* Barthes uses the word in reference to the difficulty a text's reader may have in assigning or attributing the "origin" or "parentage" of one of its utterances. I find the word fading useful because it is a handy word for one voice's containment by another. And since *Absalom* is about the interpenetration of voices, or of the influence that one voice may have over another, Lukacher's telephone connection analogy helps us to understand the doubled linguistic superimposition at work in the initial paragraph. the over voice makes ghosts of Quentin and Rosa who in their telling make a ghost of Sutpen, their subject. For in these cases, the speaker's subject remains a ghost or evanescent figure, a subtext while in a narrative inspired more by the realist tradition, it would commonly be the main text.

could be said to perform this reneging—for the text seems to say that Sutpen's appearance results from an act of not-listening, as though visual and aural faculties could not function in one person together.[8] This understood, the voice over has equal claim to the act of reneging; as long as the voice over sees the ghost appear, he or she too must typically renege his or her listening faculties.

Absalom's second paragraph draws overt attention to this condition of a subject's fading through the voice over's description of Rosa's voice:

> Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish. There would be the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and over-sweet...and the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity while the wan haggard face watched him above the faint triangle of lace at wrists and throat... and the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house. Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize watercolor, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat .. Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*. Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now.. (8-9)

The description here, while referring overtly to the fading of Rosa's voice, also enacts it grammatically, progressively objectifying Rosa's voice, as the following sequence shows: *her* voice, *it* would vanish, *the* voice. The article "the," instead of the pronoun "she," here again erases the subject who performs the act of voicing, leaving the act performed to stand by itself, disembodied, parentless. The article also subtly enforces a link between the notion of objectification (de-subjectification) and fading ("vanishing"). The reference to Rosa's vanishing and yet unceasing voice reflects not just Quentin's experience of that voice as he alternates between moments of hearing it and imagining its subject, but also the reader's, who must attempt to glimpse Rosa's words through the gaps or aporias in the voice over's talking. The description of Rosa's voice as not ceasing expresses the sense

---

[8] I cite again the original manuscript version which had described Rosa as "self-confound[ed]": in the present edition, Rosa's talking suffers an occlusion, and 'vanish[es]," while in the earlier version Rosa's voice had experienced its own occlusion, since the phrase "intervals like a stream" originally read "intervals of self-confounding unsurprise like a stream" (Langford, 43)

that narratives in the text about the South are perpetual, ongoing, and so never concluded, but merely occluded. The voice over, in order to describe Rosa's act of narration, obscures her narrative. Rosa's narrative voice vanishes but does not cease for the simple reason that it seems to disappear to Quentin when he visually recreates the scene for himself. The text tells a story here, and this story is more intricate than the mere facts or plot-events of the Sutpen myth: just as Rosa's trope "the office" is indebted to her father's act of nomination, so Quentin's reneging on listening and the voice over's suppression of Rosa's words nonetheless continue to intimate her influence upon their thought. In such ways, the text covertly insists upon the dialogical nature of all narrative acts and their capacity to influence future narratives, be it the manner in which a narrative is received or the way in which it is produced.

Rosa's talking is described; it is not directly cited. In not being allowed to speak for herself at this point, Rosa can be said to haunt the voice over. Moreover, the figure of Sutpen, without a house, haunts Rosa's voice. This passage even provides a figure which encapsulates the way in which one voice, in Faulkner's terms, "abrupts" into another: the oxymoron "quiet thunderclap" expresses unexpected change, something which had hitherto been concealed or absent making a sudden appearance. Sutpen abrupts into the scene or insinuates his way into Yoknapatawpha County before any of its inhabitants really *know* or understand what is going on. Sutpen's voice or character thus breaks into what had been the unified or coherent community voice of Yoknapatawpha's inhabitants; Sutpen becomes the unexpected Other to this monological community. Abrupting into a Mississippi scene, Sutpen later abrupts into Quentin's field of imaginative vision, as he hauntingly abrupts into and then out of Rosa's voice, even as Rosa's voice fades in and out of Quentin's hearing of it and the voice over's description of the whole scene. In other words, the story in this passage is multiple: the voice over presents a tableau of Rosa's talking which itself presents to Quentin a tableau of Sutpen's existence; this multiple inscription speaks of the texture of telling, how voices are interwoven and how subjectivity can be lost in such plurality. It is

this texture or network of influence, a texture which makes it difficult for the reader to separate out the voices from one another, which is the story of storytelling in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

The passage from "Her voice would not cease" to "a more fortunate [ghost] would have had a house" is obviously the voice over's, inasmuch as the things described in this passage would not be said by Rosa at this point to Quentin; her discourse to him would not include references to the twice bloomed wistaria, etc. But it remains difficult to know whether the experience of Rosa's vanishing voice belongs to Quentin or the voice over. Whose consciousness experiences that voice as "a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand"; who notices this quality? To ask this question is to ask a question that is necessary to any reading of Faulkner's text, one which the text itself begs its reader to ask: In any given utterance, who is speaking? The project in reading *Absalom, Absalom!*, then, becomes one of separating out the voices, following the thread of one vocal line, or, in the terms of Leclaire's analogy which is cited at the head of this chapter, disassociating the Haydn from the jazz, seeing what influence is latent in any given expression.[9] I use Leclaire's model for the unconscious as my model for the suppression of one voice in the text by another voice in order to reflect upon the constitutive nature of aporias in the many narratives in *Absalom, Absalom!*. It is my argument that all rhetoric in the text, all language use, all narratives, and hence any act of relation, in both of its senses, repeats and represents a pattern: the tale of concealed disclosure.

The repression of one voice by another, the submersion of one narrative in another, finds its clearest example in Rosa's refusal to quote for Quentin Sutpen's insult in chapter V of the text. This insult proves so demeaning that Rosa must, in retelling those events,

---

[9]I reiterate at this point that the psychic motivation for one voice's repression of another voice has to do with the notion of place, topos, or scene. As one critic makes clear, in reference to Lacan's consideration of the locus: "the relationship between ego and alterego" is not a "relationship[] of identity; it is always a question of each trying to take the other's *place*" (Wilden, 168). Place, in my argument, is essential to any consideration of voicing, for it is this notion of place which allows analysis to glimpse the strains of one voice's influence over or by another.

repress Sutpen's voice and merely paraphrase his words to her in her narrative to Quentin.[10] By being only paraphrased but not quoted, Sutpen (and his act of relation) is both present in and absent from Rosa's discourse. Rosa's paraphrasing allows Sutpen a marginalized or non-central position in her discourse, where he is seen hovering within or beyond her speech like a ghost, a fading subject, as at the opening of the text. In Rosa's re-presentation of this insult, Sutpen still speaks, but not fully: his statement is not couched in its deserved quotation marks.

It is not until the third paragraph of the book that Rosa is quoted directly by the voice over. Prior to this, the whole description of Sutpen's (the man-horse-demon's) abruption out of quiet thunderclap belongs either to Rosa or to the voice over's voice, and is hence prototypically dialogical in character.[11] Before Rosa's voice is couched in its deserved quotation marks in the third paragraph, her voice or actual words float disembodiedly within the voice over's predominating discourse, so that one may only infer the presence of her voice as one might detect the jazz music behind the Haydn one tries to focus on. Here then is another aporia or figure of doubt the reader must face: is this description of the demon's abruption out of thunderclap Rosa's or the voice over's? The careful reader will again notice that this narration or narrative act conceals as much as it reveals. Sutpen becomes a dim figure or ghost because he is only vaguely present in Rosa's act of speaking to Quentin, just as Rosa's talking is concealed and revealed in the voice over's opening tableau. The *purpose* of the numerous and strategic figures of doubt ("the object," "the ghost," the "man-horse-demon") in the opening paragraphs is to create Sutpen, the figure of Rosa's talking, out of "quiet thunderclap," out of concealing disclosure. In not being fully described in a traditional realist fashion, but only inscribed by Rosa's tableau, which

---

[10]My next chapter will give a fuller account of this incident

[11]Taking Bakhtin's theory of dialogy into account, Stephen Ross writes that dialogical discourse means "discourse that by its nature takes other speech, other voices into account. The dialogical is discourse that is 'warped' or 'bent' by the presence of another's voice as light is bent by gravity" (1985, 77). Therefore a word like "demon" which the voice over here uses without reference to Rosa's usage of it, not quoting it, is a meeting point or point of convergence, while also a gap or empty space

is itself inscribed by the voice over's, Thomas Sutpen is linguistically generated *ex nihilo*; he is himself dragged "violently out of the soundless Nothing."[12] Sutpen is described by the voice over but not named. Sutpen's presence in the narrative is at best doubtful (ghostly) until he is referred to more directly. The text's second paragraph then, stylistically creates Sutpen *ex nihilo*, reflecting the way Sutpen is created out of the dust of the office for Quentin and Rosa and out of a series of cloudy figures (aporias) for the reader.

Directly after narrating Sutpen's creation of his Hundred acres from the linguistic performance "*Be Sutpen's Hundred,*" the voice over's perspective moves from a concealing representation of Rosa's talking to what is decidedly Quentin's aural activity:

> Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times, and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was—the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage, like this: *It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen Who came out nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a planatation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson*
>
> "Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard they tell me," Miss Coldfield said... "So maybe you will enter the literary profession . and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it." (9-10)

---

[12] As presented here, Sutpen's creation of his Hundred acres through a verbal order deconstructs his grander "design." Sutpen had wanted heirs to carry his glorious name into the future, but instead of being granted a material legacy, since his children rise up against him, he gets only a verbal legacy (people, like Rosa and Quentin, carrying his name into the future by talking about him). This description of the creation of Sutpen's Hundred thus anticipates the theme that Sutpen's "design" never becomes anything more than discourse. Furthermore, Sutpen's 'position' as a ghost in Rosa's talking is an unfortunate one as he would rather "have had a house." But this desire, as the text shows us even in its opening pages, is bound up with voice. The house, we are told, is erected verbally, through Sutpen's articulation: "*Be Sutpen's Hundred.*" Yet, as Nancy Blake observes, contrary to the "opening verses of Genesis" which it echoes, "the origin" here "is not so much without form as it is 'soundless'; by implication then, when there will be something, that something will be a voice" (Blake, 129). The text also tells us that figures of power, characters who use voice authoritatively or monologically, are automatically subverted by later voices, voices which may superimpose their voices upon one's voice, like the voice over. Sutpen's univocal nature is unthreaded by later narratives, and so he becomes "quiet inattentive and harmless."

Quentin, having to listen to Rosa speak and visually to recreate the subject of her discourse, paradigmatically represents for the reader the situation of all listeners in the text when it becomes their turn to speak. The text tells us that one's enunciation is always inhabited by a reference to an earlier utterance. This earlier utterance, moreover, fragments any possibility of coherency in the belated speaker's discourse. Quentin is divided into two Quentins by virtue of his reception of this tale about a ghost from the past. The italicized section is the voice over's version of Quentin's thoughts. That these thoughts take place "in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage" indicates the severity of the ghost's (the Southern legacy's) influence on Quentin's person and on his language. But the word "silence" does more than refer merely to the fact that these thoughts are not voiced aloud by Quentin. It refers more strongly to the "quiet thunderclap" with which one voice "abrupt[s]" into another voice.

Just as Sutpen's sudden appearance in Yoknapatawpha County in 1833 disrupted "a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color," so Quentin's first self, the one which tries to gather the elements of Rosa's story into a coherent whole, is interrupted by his second self, which is significantly represented by a voice which is more Rosa's (the teller's) than it is his own, for this second voice makes repeated references to what "*Miss Rosa Coldfield says.*" Neither the first nor the second Quentin is granted autonomy through quotation marks. Because the text does not read: "...Yes, save by her." "And by Quentin Compson" "Yes. And by Quentin Compson," where the utterance of the one Quentin and the utterance of the other would be signalized as having been projected from the standpoint of an embodied subject, the conspicuous absence of quotation marks serves to indicate the disembodied character of both Quentin figures. Quentin's existence as a speaking subject is syntactically undermined by dashes and parentheses. Thus while these voices are in some ways "separate" or distinct, they nonetheless teeter on the verge of collapsing into one another. The second, parenthetical, voice disrupts the first, but that first then blindly echoes it, in the same way that Rosa, as is shown in the first sentence of the

text, blindly reiterates her father's terms. Finally, Quentin cites *his own* citation of Rosa's words, foregrounding the dialogical nature of his speech by the way in which his thought is structured; without the second Quentin's parenthetical interjections, the first's line of thought would run as follows: 'It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—without gentleness...' Quentin's second voice, bent or warped by Rosa's telling, undermines the coherency of the first—this is what happens when one voice influences another.

This scene of interior dialogue prepares the reader for many other scenes like it, scenes in which a character relates to him or herself in the long silence of notpeople, speaking in notlanguage. The reader observes Quentin "hearing"—his sensibility "Suspended," as Karen McPherson notes, "between having to *listen* and having to *be (telling)*," the language of his self-expression thus "occupied by other discourses" (McPherson, 435). The story of storytelling is seen clearly in reference to Quentin: his interior dialogue, symptomatic of his having been influenced by the Southern tale, is simultaneously a listening and a telling. As a result, "The individual voice," as it is characterized in the text, is no longer indivisible and so becomes, in Michel Gresset's terms, "an asymptote," reflecting its own fragmentariness and "disembodied[ness]" (Gresset, 190). In *Absalom*, any act of listening converts the listener into a ghost. As Alan Friedman observes: "Quentin is not only the recipient and heir of Rosa's and the South's dead past, he is himself, fifty years too late, more her contemporary than his own, both the dead voice that speaks in the dead present and the myriad unalive of whom it speaks" (Friedman, 60). Or, as Ralph Flores writes, "Quentin's mind has been so inscribed by other tellings that it may no longer be his" (Flores, 152). *Absalom*'s opening tells us that unless listening is attended by ironic detachment, a detachment exemplified by Shreve

toward the end of the book, the receiving psyche is liable to fall into the speaker's aporia and lose the train of his or her own discourse.

The italicized section in the second paragraph, it must be noted, gives the reader only a *similitude* or impression of Quentin's internal division. The voice over even makes an overt reference to this fact, admitting that the italicized section is merely a *likeness* of Quentin's notlanguage. I am tracing here the voice over's gradual acknowledgement of voices that had been suppressed within his or her own voice. I am tracing the slow genesis of quotation marks from earlier paraphrasings. At the beginning of the third paragraph, Rosa's words are cited, signed in such a way as to indicate that they belong to her. In the first paragragh and the first half of the second, the voice over represses the voices in the scene he or she 'describes,' while to the careful reader the voice over's fabric of telling betrays loose threads of Rosa's talking. At the end of the second paragraph, the voice over is more quotational and allows Quentin some say, although that is admittedly only in the voice over's *likeness* of Quentin's thought In this way, the opening three paragraphs have a story to tell about the nature of telling that moves beyond the details of the Sutpen myth and the presentation of Rosa and Quentin's scene of talking and listening. It is the story of how voices impose themselves over other voices, since the absence of quotation marks expresses the speaker's monological intention. The repressive aspect of narration in the first two paragraphs of the book epitomizes the book's central theme: the main message in an utterance is communicated not by what is said but in the aporias themselves; what is essential is said in "the long silence of notpeople" (fading subjects) or in "notlanguage" (punctured discourses).

Absalom's opening thus discloses one of its themes of abruption by practically glossing over it. Just as any voice which will try to impose itself upon another does not quote that second voice, so Faulkner's text does not overtly admit its preoccupation with the theme of voice and relation. As in the scene of Sutpen's encounter with Pettibone's butler, the opening into the text's themes is only half-ajar. The text requires its reader to

keep its own blockage in mind, thereby getting its reader to *see* how acts of narration are textured, through their inclusion of (ghostly) figures of undecidability. In *Absalom,* relation is an ad-umbration, a quiet thunderclap, the abruptive shadow within the sketch, Sutpen within Yoknapatawpha, the jazz behind the Haydn. Such is the theme which abrupts into the opening three paragraphs. All narrative acts are attempts to assert an ego in place, but such assertions always involve or include occlusions, aporias where the Other breaks out, abrupts into the surface of discourse. This breaking is not the sudden appearance of a full-bodied, embodied, presence—rather it is a hole, a gap, a hole or gap which 'speaks' to the careful reader. Hence, I have been trying to indicate how the text should be read; closely. These aporias speak better than the subjects, indicating as they do what is truly afoot in narrative efforts. While the voice over's descriptions should be a form of embodiment, of embodying and presenting its subject (two people in an office and *their* subject), these descriptions actually function in *Absalom, Absalom!* as processes of disincorporation, of disembodiment, in which both narrative and narrator fade as subjects, having been converted into ghosts.

In this chapter, I have shown the ways in which one voice contains or is contained by another, and demonstrated how the first three paragraphs of *Absalom* can be seen to serve as an indirect introduction to such texture. This has been a necessary step on the way to my next chapter, where I discuss the self-consciousness of various characters in regards to the texture of their own telling. I will be showing how these characters, in self-consciously reflecting on how their own personal narratives have been punctured by aporias, could be said to dramatize what I, in harmony with Karen McPherson, am calling "the story of storytelling" (McPherson, 448).

Chapter Two.

The Critical Voice: Recouping Absence.

...a man always falls back upon what he knows best in a crisis (AA, 239)

...he was seeking among what little he had to call experience for something to measure it by, and he couldn't find anything (AA, 233)

A crisis is a crucial point or turning point, going back to the Greek *krisis*, which derived from *krinein*, "to separate" or "to decide," from which came also the Greek *kritos*, "separated" or "chosen," and so *kritikos*, "able to discern," and so to be a critic. The Indo-European root is *skeri*, "to cut, separate, sift," from which stem such allied words as scribble, script, and hypocrisy, as well as crisis and criticism. "Crossing" comes from a different root, a hypothetical one, *ger*, for "curving" or "crooked," but the accidents of linguistic history make it natural for us to associate "crossing" with the group that includes crisis, criticism, and script (Bloom 1977, 400).

As I have shown in my first chapter, part of the difficulty in reading Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* lies in the fact that the text half-conceals its subject. A reader who doesn't know what to make of the aporias in the text will feel that 'something is missing,' that their expectations of what a narrative is supposed to reveal are frustrated. Minrose Gwin has used the Derridean term *différance* to describe the effects the text's language can have on its readers.[1] Derrida's term, writes Gwin, suggests "an appropriate way of describing the unsettling *fluctuations* of language and meaning that keep such works as *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* always so hauntingly beyond our grasp" (Gwin 1989, 238). In this chapter I propose to look at some of *Absalom*'s various stories about characters who find what other characters have to say hauntingly beyond their grasp. These scenes depict various characters in the process of being alienated or unsettled by the other's language, to the extent that a coherent picture of their own 'self' seems to be 'missing' when the other's language disrupts the listening self's sense of itself as a 'subject.'

In my introduction I referred to Michael Millgate's observation that the "main business of [Faulkner's] book" seems to be an interpretation of "crucial moments" (Millgate, 164). This can be taken to mean that Faulkner's novel sets about interpreting elements of its plot, and that the characters, both of Sutpen's time and of Quentin's time, set about analyzing things present and past. I have noted that the text seems to have two subjects if considered from impressionist and detective vantages. Yet the text is not ambiguous in this respect, for I will be defining one dynamic which is shared in all of these key scenes: the relationship between crisis and criticism. Millgate singles out some important scenes in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "Henry and his father in the library, Henry shooting Bon, Sutpen proposing to Rosa, Wash murdering Sutpen." I also intend to select

---

[1]For purposes of brevity, this Derridean term *différance* may be defined simply as "the reserve of the signified, the deffering of [the signified's] presence, the delay between representations" (Bannet, 197).

from the many crucial moments in the text the scenes where Sutpen proposes to Rosa and Sutpen tells Henry that Bon can't marry Judith. These crucial scenes, more specifically, dramatize problems of linguistic interaction, for what is crucial for Rosa in this scene is her discovery that Sutpen's marriage proposal had been a subtle linguistic objectification or a de-*subject*ification of her 'self.' Similarly, in Henry's case, the problem that evolves between Henry and his father is that Sutpen says something that Henry doesn't want to hear, but feels compelled to act against. I have also referred in my introduction to James Snead's characterization of these moments of influence as "major incidents... in which characters encounter 'turns' of phrase and of fate," 'turns' which usually take the form of an "insult" or "rebuff" (Snead 1989, 22). Two other 'scenes of insult' occur when Ellen discovers that she has been deceived by her husband (when she discovers the truth behind the raree show), and when Charles Etienne is confused as to his own racial identity when he is called a "nigger." Of course, in studying such scenes, it would be impossible to overlook the 'ur-scene' in the text: Sutpen's being rebuked at the door to Pettibone's house. However, I will be looking primarily at Judith's effort to come to terms with her own turn of fate: that crucial scene in which she is informed by her brother that he has murdered her fiancé Charles Bon. I will be studying Judith's critical reaction to this 'turn of fate,' by looking at her theoretical recognition that she is now unable to assert a unified self because she knows that other people's narratives will always threaten to interrupt her own narrative(s).

More specifically, these crucial moments involve an individual's recognition that possession of self-hood through language is doomed to failure because that individual's language or voice will always be challenged and interrupted by another voice. Harold Bloom has explained to us what it is to be in conflict with another's vocabulary—those crucial moments when the subject finds that it has, in Faulkner's words in the citation above, nothing to measure the other's vocabulary by. What Bloom describes in literary theory, Faulkner enacts through the drama of his characters' experience of a crisis. In

Bloom's view, a crisis may be called a "loss of love [which] is a loss also to the self that makes figurations, or if you prefer, to the figuration that we call the self" (Bloom 1982a, 226). According to Bloom, when one's text is punctured, when a hole is made in the fabric of one's narrative, the "lies we want to believe because they help us to survive," because they "keep our discourse with ourselves going" (Bloom 1977, 387), are exposed as lies, and so no longer help us to survive or keep our discourse with ourselves going. In this respect, *Absalom* shows us that once the listening individual is interrupted by the other, it then "ceases to know how to talk to itself" (Bloom 1989, 131). Bloom's description of influence shows that when an individual gives meaning to an external speaker's words, it can crush that individual's own sense of meaning, or effectively de-mean that individual's sense of their own self.[2]

Harold Bloom has used rhetorical terms to describe the process involved in a strong poet's overcoming of the crisis of influence, but has not described in either rhetorical terms or otherwise a weak poet's reaction to influence. The tropes and figures Bloom employs (irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor, and metalepsis) only describe the process of a strong poet's movement toward greater independence from another voice's influence. I therefore need to resort to my own tropological schema. I use two terms to describe the moment of influence itself. Referring to a character's weak reaction to a speaker's words, I find that the terms catachresis and hyperbole best describe the loss to the figuration called the self, that moment when an individual can't recognize his or her self in another person's vocabulary and then, subsequently, can't recognize his or her self in his or her own vocabulary. Whereas Bloom uses the term hyperbole to describe that motion whereby a poet seeks to overcome his precursor, I am using it to describe that movement in which a character is overcome by another character's words or acts. Bloom, in his discussion of strong poets, finds the hyperbole a useful trope to describe the process a later

[2]Only Shreve, as I will be showing, is able to engage in conversation because he listens with a sense of ironic detachment which effectively diminishes the power of the other's words.

poet will undergo when he or she begins to 'overthrow' the earlier, more established poet. In discussing weak reactions, I use the term to describe the opposite situation, when an individual is overthrown or squashed by another's greater authoritative voice. For my use of catachresis, I rely on Derrida's description of this trope as an "irruptive" trope. Catachresis usually refers to a word or phrase which is used improperly. I find that this term aptly describes what Faulkner would call those "abruptive" moments where characters find their sense of self disrupted by another's language or narrative act. The catatchresis then describes the ability of the speaker's words to misname or misrepresent the listening self's former perception of itself, and so to alienate the self from itself. I find both tropes relevant because they define usefully what happens when one character encounters another character who can (usually verbally) make the familiar become unfamiliar, and unsettle the self. In brief, the catachresis refers to a character's sense of being misrepresented by the other's language, and the hyperbole refers to that character's attendant sense of having been overthrown or oppressed by the other's voice.

Most characters in *Absalom* fail to overcome their crises because they are weak readers. Because these characters are weak readers they are not able to overcome influence, where influence may be described as the fact that they are inscribed, or verbally modified, by the other's language. Characters admit that the other's voice is more powerful than their own. I will be showing that weak characters show their weakness in their narrative acts, since their narratives take as their respective subject the theme of the self's disruption by another voice. Having experienced a crisis, these characters then thematize or discourse on the speaker's power of influence; continually reflecting upon their turn of fate. The narratives these characters produce after their 'disruption' therefore do not overcome, as Bloom would suggest, or repress, as Freud would suggest, the unpleasant presence of the influencer—instead they talk about how the experience of crisis has destroyed their ability to know how to talk to themselves. These characters discourse on the discontinuity of their discourse. I use the rhetorical terms apostrophe and personification to describe this

reiterative process which invokes and revives the fact of self-loss rather than trying to move to a position of power.

These moments of the self's disruption, a disruption which occurs both in crisis and in the critical reaction to that crisis, are the scenes proper which the text sets out to interpret. As Sherry notes:

> A few significant events become the determining moments of the narration of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*: Sutpen's discovery of his innocence, Henry's break with him, Sutpen's denial of Bon, Henry's shooting of Bon, Sutpen's proposal to Rosa Coldfield and his death at the hands of Wash Jones. These events all have in common two qualities. In each case one person denies the existence of another, while the other struggles to compel the denier to acknowledge that he or she does exist (Sherry, 47).

I will start here by outlining a number of such crises, moments in which a character's existence is denied, challenged or unsettled in the language or expression of another. While it is true, as Sherry notes, that in these moments "one person denies the existence of another," I do not agree that the latter then tries to "compel the denier to acknowledge that he or she does exist." While this may be the initial intention or idea in each reaction, the characters concerned finally allow the speaker's initial denial such power that they find that they do not have a stable self from which to launch such an offensive movement. The act of criticism in *Absalom, Absalom!* is often done primarily for the self; the struggle is to compel the self to face the question (or crisis) of its own existence.[3] Thus the self is first denied, and then that self begins to wonder, self-reflexively, about the way it has faded from a position of subjectivity, thereby continuing to renounce or deny linguistically claims to a stable self-hood.

I cite the following example, Judith's crisis, without its context, in order to get the reader to ponder more fully its interplay of voices:

> the two of them, brother and sister, curiously alike as if the difference in sex had merely sharpened the common blood to a terrific, an almost unbearable, similarity, speaking to one another in short brief staccato

---

[3]I am using the terms crisis and criticism because of their etymological connection (see the quote from Bloom at the head of this chapter). This etymological connection serves to highlight the way in which, in Faulkner's text, the act of criticism is really a repetition or meditation upon the self's crisis. Thus when I refer to a character's critical act I am highlighting the way that that character's narrative still hasn't managed to trascend the initial critical moment of anxiety, of being "insulted" by another. However, when I use the term criticism in reference to one of Shreve's narrative acts, it must be understood that Shreve's ironic perspective marks his mode off from the type of criticism so typical to all other characters in the text.

sentences like slaps, as if they stood breast to breast striking one another in turn neither making any attempt to guard against the blows.

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. He was not even listening to her; he said, "Ma'am? What's that? What did you say?" (172)

This is the voice over's presentation of a scene which captivates Judith and Quentin equally, for neither can pass this threshold; what arrests Quentin's mind is the figure of the brother avenger which he would like to be, and that which captivates Judith is the fact that her plans for the future (her wedding of Bon) have here gone up in (gun-)smoke. The pronominal hinge "He" would have been a potential figure of doubt here, were it not for the clarifying parenthesis, otherwise indicating the degree to which Quentin is involved in the scene, even though he is really (not)listening to Rosa's versions of the events. The scene itself presents the fact that Judith's knowledge of Bon had come mostly through her brother's persuasive, romanticized accounts of him, as her actual meetings with him had been infrequent and brief.

In killing Bon, Henry kills Judith's plans of marriage, and destroys what was for her a stable point of self-reference, her formerly stable idea that she will be given identity as Bon's wife. Henry's act emphasizes to Judith that he had imposed the image of Charles Bon as her lover and fiancé upon her in the first place. This emphasis highlights Henry's power of influence upon her. Judith's image of Bon, in other words, had not been her own; it had developed, instead, out of the words and thought of another. Henry's narration of the events of Bon's death creates a crisis for Judith through the way in which it is half-occluded, not told outright. Even in communicating the message of Bon's death, Henry makes sure that his voice is in a position which allows him to inform and manipulate Judith's relation to reality. Henry's words to Judith occur in the form of compacted statements which Judith wants glossed and specified. For instance, Henry's statement, "Now you can't marry him," *blocks* the passage of information as much as it serves to

convey information. Henry does not say the following all at once: 'you will not be able to marry Bon *because* he is dead by my hand ' Henry's speech of suspended signification makes Judith impotent; it serves as a strong reminder of areas of knowledge which she has no access to without Henry. All crises in *Absalom, Absalom!* involve characters who encounter the fact that other characters seem to know more than they do. Henry's first two statements here develop as aporias, as they create doubt in, or ellicit questions from, Judith.[4] The manner of his speech imitates its content: the gaps in his story slowly reveal that Bon is missing/gone, and this creates a hole or gap in Judith's plans for the future, and so in her self-conception. Judith's plans for existing as she had planned are thus "denied," "insulted" or "rebuffed"—she is forced to face the "truth" that her sense of things had been "disillusioned."

Similarly, in James Snead's words, young Thomas Sutpen's "search to confirm" or bring about "an ideal or dream" is "rebuff[ed] and/or insult[ed]" in another crisis moment in *Absalom* (Snead 1989, 22). The crucial scene I am referring to occurs when the thirteen year-old, sent by his father to deliver a message to the latter's boss, Pettibone, had expected to be "listened to because he had come, been sent, on some business" (233). His desire to see and be accepted into the rich person's home is however denied to him since the black person who answered Sutpen's call at the front door "told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go round to the back" (232). Sutpen is not even listened to; his existence is "denied," as Sherry would say (Sherry, 47), because the butler sent him away "*before* he could state his errand" (AA, 233, italics mine). Sutpen is forced to recognize his lowly caste, and face the holes in his (self)knowledge. Here, as in Judith's case, the individual concerned is forced in an unsettling dialogue to recognize that other people have control over the things he or she

---

[4]It must be remembered that, in using rhetorical terms such as aporia, hyperbole, apostrophe and so forth, I do not mean that the actual things said by characters in the text or by the voice over are figurative in themselves. I use these terms simply to describe the type of relation-ships that develop between characters. Aporia is an apt term here because Henry's manner of leaving the important thing unsaid in his first two utterances creates a severe feeling of doubt, of despair over absence in Judith's mind.

wants to do, control over their life-stories. As one critic puts it, "In that moment at the door, Sutpen... begins to view his world metaphorically... [for it here that] he first became conscious of a possible world of meaning that was beyond him" (Guetti, 89). Sutpen's encounter with Pettibone's butler is, to use the text's language, a "crisis" (239), a moment when a familiar world is suddenly made unfamiliar. It is for this reason that Sutpen is depicted as "seeking among what little he had to call experience for something to measure it [the new experience] by, and he couldn't find anything" (233).

Much the same dynamic is at work in Charles Etienne de Saint Velery Bon's experience when he is brought by his French-speaking mother from New Orleans to Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, to visit the site of Charles Bon's funeral. His crisis, too, concerns words from another which alienate him from himself. In Yoknapatawpha, Bon's octoroon mistress, Etienne's mother, dies When Etienne is adopted by Judith and Clytie, he enters into a state where he "could have *known* nothing certainly except that all he had ever been familiar with was vanishing about him like smoke" (197, italics mine). Like Judith and Sutpen, Etienne's familiar world is abrupted into, destroyed by other people's narratives. Etienne's discourse with his self is disrupted, his identity questioned by an alien, foreign term he doesn't know. Specifically, this disruption occurs, according to Mr Compson's father, when he is called a negro by either Judith or Clytie: Etienne "could neither have heard yet nor recognized the term 'nigger,' who even had no word for it in the tongue he knew who had been born and grown up in a silken vacuum cell" (198-9). The term 'nigger'—suddenly used to give him a new identity—is not only in a language he doesn't know but also refers to racial distinctions of which he is unaware, and thus excludes him from the society of Judith and Clytie's Yoknapatawpha.

Sutpen's marriage proposal to Rosa Coldfield creates a similar crisis of meaning, a crisis which is also a crisis of self-identity. Sutpen's proposal demeans Rosa, for it occludes a proposal of an altogether different order that she may marry him on condition that she first bear him a male child to carry on the Sutpen legacy. Imagining Sutpen

"looking at her daily with that in his mind and she not even knowing it" (171), Rosa is "insult[ed]" at the prospect that she could be read playing a role she did not authorize herself. This unauthorized narrative or figure of her being dismantles, according to Wesley Morris, "Rosa's sense of herself as a 'presence'... She has become for him, she thinks, mere physicality, a reproductive function without identity, an integer, a signifier without a signified, without any indication of the personal" (Morris, 180). Or, as Gwin also sees it: Sutpen's words here tear a hole in her sense of self, rema(r)king her into "a commodity of exchange as surely as her sister had been" (Gwin 1990, 74). Sutpen's words change Rosa's "sense of herself as a 'presence,'" (Morris, 180) create a gap in Rosa's self-representations, effectively killing, as Henry had for Judith, her plans of marriage, and thus tearing up the pattern she had hoped to assert in the fabric of her life.

The four crises outlined so far are all epistemological; they all involve characters who hear something said by someone else, but the things said "reserve the signified" (to use Bannet's definition of differance in the first footnote in this chapter), they all say something that the listener doesn't at first grasp, and, as a result, none of the listeners know how to measure the experience. Ellen experiences her crisis when she sees her husband wrestling with his 'negroes.' Prior to this event she had assumed that Sutpen was simply a spectator of his raree show. *This* strange ritual (of organizing and watching a wrestling match amongst his 'negroes') Ellen had "accepted," thinking, in Rosa's narrative to Quentin, *"thank God, this is all, at least I now know all of it"* (29). Ellen's crisis, however, emerges when she recognizes that she *didn't know* all of it, and saw instead from the stable threshold her husband "reducing himself," as Dale Parker notes, "physically to the barest equal terms with his slaves" (Parker 1985, 142). This crisis moment retrospectively indicates to Ellen the illusory character of the 'representative image' which she had been using to keep herself going, to keep her discourse with herself stable.

Henry's crisis is dramatized in two separate versions, first in Mr Compson's narration to Quentin, and then in a voice which has "no talker" (351) and so seems to

belong equally to Quentin, Shreve and the voice over. When, in the library scene, Sutpen tells Henry that Bon is married and has a son, Henry "turned his back on all he knew" (91) and "repudiated [his] blood birth-right" (89). Henry leaves home as a revolt against these words from his father which indicate to Henry that he knows less than his father. We are told that "It was not the fact of the mistress and child, the possible bigamy, to which Henry gave the lie, but to the fact that it was his father who told him, his father who *anticipated* him" (104, italics mine). Sutpen's words disturb Henry because, as André Bleikasten explains in relation to the drama of a parent's authority over its progeny in Faulkner's texts, "Parental authority... is the more firmly settled as time has erased its contingent and hypothetical origin and hallowed its prerogatives as an indisputable 'natural' right" (Bleikasten 1981, 118). In the second instance, Sutpen's interdiction outdoes the bigamy threat first with the implication of incest, and, when Henry is still resolved to have Bon marry Judith, with the implication of miscegenation--as he tells his son that he had "*found out that his* [Bon's] *mother was part negro*" (355) In both cases, Henry's crises are epistemological: his father's monological assertions, confirmations of what Henry had only half believed prior to them, radically disrupt Henry's desire that Bon be able to marry Judith. As he later destroys Judith's narrative of how she wants things to be, here we see the destruction of Henry's plans.

Crisis occurs when the 'difference' between one narrative (what one expects to hear or see enacted) and another narrative (that which is actually said or enacted) is made clear. In Harold Bloom's tropology, hyperbole is "an overthrowing (or overtaking, or over-reaching) that is closer to simplification through intensity than it is to exaggeration" (Bloom 1989, 117).[5] I wish to use this sense of the hyperbole to name the process of crisis, the overthrowing of an individual's narrative by another's narrative. In this respect, the other's

[5]A similar characterization of the trope is to be found in Paul de Man who defines hyperbole in relation to irony in terms of its disruptive powers: "Often starting as litotes or understatement, [irony] contains within itself the power to become hyperbole. Baudelaire refers to this unsettling power as '*vertige de l'hyperbole*'" or "dizziness to the point of madness" (de Man 1983, 215).

utterance is hyperbolic, since it simplifies or distorts the listener's sense of self-identity, leading the listener to question his or her grounding in the familiar, what has until then seemed 'homely'.[6] Whether simplification or exaggeration, the experience of crisis as hyperbolic is always characterized in the text by an *intensity* that forces the listener to realize he or she has nothing to measure the new experience by.

The familiar is dismantled in these crisis dialogues because words have the capacity to arrange the body, to distort catachretically the way we see our selves. Rosa, to chose an example, is depersonalized and disfigured by Sutpen's utterance because, as Wesley Morris explains, "Words, proper and improper, [have the capacity to] touch, define, arrange, and identify (name) the body" (Morris, 180). Sutpen's words and thoughts, as with all crisis-creating utterances mentioned so far, function here to misname Rosa, and disrupt the narrative she had used to keep herself going. A 13th century rhetorician describes or characterizes catachresis by saying that "There is a common element of adornment and weightiness" in this trope "arising from the fact that an object does not come before us with unveiled face, and accompanied by its natural voice: rather an *alien voice* attends it" (Vinsauf, 54, italics mine). Rosa's self is troubled when Sutpen's alien voice *abusively* misnames her (the Latin word for catachresis is *abusio*): Sutpen's utterance reveals her to herself as 'other,' as a simple medium for the realization of his legacy. Catachresis, in underlining the doubled nature of speech, is thus an "irruptive" trope (Derrida 1982, 256), abrupting into or abusing another's self-image. Catachresis performs, as Derrida continues to note, the "twisting return toward the already-there of a meaning" and is thus "a bringing to light" (257). As a term used to describe the relationship between one language or narrative and another, it indicates or hints at the sub-text, the written version/vision within

---

[6]Judith's plans of marriage, Etienne's alienation in a foreign land, Ellen's alienation in her own household, Rosa's expectation of marriage with Sutpen, Sutpen's departure from his childhood home are all versions of the same drive for the comforts of one's home environment, of a secured topos or stable place. This ideal of comfort or familiarity is clearly denied by utterances which throw these characters out of their homes, so to speak

which the listening individual is inscribed and misnamed. Catachresis is thus helpful in referring to the process whereby the subtext of an utterance is further unveiled.

I wish now to go into the definition of crisis as a loss and of criticism as a reciting of or reflection upon the predicament of that loss, to show, that is, that the things characters say and do after their disruption do not pass beyond the telling and re-telling of their own disruptions. Loss, in other words, is what any narrative act in *Absalom* is about, including Shreve's (although Shreve thinks about loss in a way which is diametrically opposed to the other characters in the text since he sees loss as part of narrative play). Minrose Gwin, in reference to Faulkner's texts in general, writes that loss:

> ...triggers the desire to tell stories about what has been lost, a narrative desire that in turn is both absorbed and regenerated in its own playful explorations of the infinite and mysterious spaces left by the absent one or thing. As we know, these processes, as they signify *both* fragmentation and creativity, disorder and expansiveness—as they become themselves by differing from themselves—produce characters who are other to themselves; they are split, fragmented, disordered. They move between what is present and what is absent, and they tell stories of their own inability to cohere, out of their interior differences (Gwin 1989, 241).

Loss, I would argue, motivates *Absalom*'s characters to tell the story of storytelling. As Gwin writes, loss "triggers"—in characters who are so unsettled by the loss as to become "other to themselves" or "split"—"the desire to tell stories of what has been lost." Given that these characters tell stories from the position of subjects who are fragmented by loss, their discourse on their loss is also a discourse about the impossibility of self-coincidence, "their own inability to cohere," their own inability to be whole individuals Telling then does not rec(o)uperate a unified or total self but *repeats* the abruption or rupture (*coupure*) in the fabric of identity, a rupture caused initially by bereavement or by a puncturing of one's formerly unified narrative. To re-cite Gwin, stories in *Absalom, Absalom!* explore the spaces left by the absent one, an absence which is both of one's formerly coherent discourse and of the real things lost (in Judith's case, Bon). Loss causes a fragmentation which storytelling then recoups[7] in a process that may be called elegiacal, a lyrical turning

---

[7]Reiterates, that is to say, the initial *coupure* (aporia, self-doubt, instability due to another's disruptive narrative).

to what is not present, to a passage in life now past, to a 'passage' (or utterance) whose anxiety is recited, but not overcome.

If we look to examples of this second stage in Faulkner's work, we see that characters in *Absalom*, in encountering the unknown, do not resist or *repress*, as Freud would have it, that which contains within it the potential to negate or misname them, but rather repeat in an act of lyrical meditation that which came close to severing their relations to reality. Rosa's expectation of romance is unwoven when she discovers that Sutpen's language is at base insulting and unromantic. Rosa discovers that her selfhood is not perceived or formulated the same way in another's language as it is in her own. Rosa's subsequent narrative to Quentin recoups the fact that other's peoples languages have the capacity to revise her language or her linguistic presentation of things. The story of her crisis just after Bon's murder, when she discovers an apathetic Judith blocking the threshold to her bedroom so that Rosa is prevented from seeing Bon's body, is prefaced by these words to Quentin: "*So they will have told you doubtless already how I told that Jones to take that mule... That was all I needed to do since they will have told you doubtless that...*" (134). Eventually, having described her trip from her own house to Sutpen's, she reveals to Quentin that there is a part of her narrative that no one else can abrupt into: "*...and this too they cannot tell you How I ran, fled up the stairs and found no grieving widowed bride but Judith standing before that closed door to that chamber...*" (142). Rosa does not simply say to Quentin: "I will tell you now how...", for to say this would be to speak from a position of wholeness. Instead, she expresses her concern for or awareness of the fact that other people may have told Quentin the same story, and thus speaks with an awareness that her linguistic position, her ability to define and describe certain events in language, is not so strong as to be able to ignore other accounts. Her words express that she must force herself to see herself from alien and alienating perspectives. Rosa's crisis, when she discovers that Sutpen's—the other's—words have the capacity to break up her discourse, is repeated in her critical narrative to Quentin, as she finds she must force herself

not only to realize the presence of *other* peoples voices about her, but also to incorporate this indirectly into her own voice (by effectively saying: "You have heard this from me and from them").

As mentioned earlier, Etienne, like Rosa, discovers that self-identity is not grounded or stable. His critical act occurs when he attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to "remember himself" (199) after he is 'distorted' by the term 'negro ' His inability to remake a total self-image is reflected by the "shard of broken mirror" (199) he uses in the hopes of recouping his fractured or dismembered self. The mirror for Etienne is that tool which he hopes will clearly reflect and thus make tangible the indelible mark impressed upon him by either Judith or Clytie's foreign term. But Etienne, like Joe Christmas in another of Faulkner's novels, is, as Snead notes, "an American double-being who breaks all the semiotic codes of society [in not being clearly defined as an individual who is either 'black' or white']" (Snead 1986, 81). He will never know for certain whether he is black or white and so, to all appearances, seems either. No language or mirror will be able to reflect or represent Etienne's inner and inalienable self Criticism, the attempt to deal with the crisis, is the attempt to achieve power through one's "own" words.[8] Violence becomes Etienne's (non-verbal) way of *relating* to the image of blacks around him, as it is the image of the 'black' within him that, according to the Southern code, taints his person, and so brings about his alienation in the Sutpen household. In Mr Compson's words to Quentin:

> It had happened at a negro ball held in a cabin a few miles from Sutpen's Hundred and he there, present and your grandfather never to know how often he had done this before, whether he had gone there to engage in the dancing or for the dice game in the kitchen where the trouble started, trouble which he and not the negroes started according to the witnesses and for no reason, for no accusation of cheating, nothing... the white man the focal point of it and using a knife which he had produced from somewhere, clumsily, with obvious lack of skill and practice, yet with deadly earnestness . a strength composed of sheer desperate will and imperviousness to the punishment, the blows and slashes which he took in return and did not even seem to feel (202).

In the intense predicament of breaking the semiotic codes of society, Etienne becomes indifferent either to life or to death. In either giving or receiving slashes, he apostrophizes

---

[8] I have put the word "own" in quotation marks in order to remark upon, to bring the reader's attention to, the fact that most characters in the text are never able to pass beyond the other's language to their "own," and thus effectively 'repeat' or 'return' to that language

and re-enacts the intense effects upon him of Judith or Clytie's crisis-causing term. He re-embodies the intensity of his self-division between black and white by straddling the bar or fence between life and death. By starting "trouble," Etienne either marks others or receives further marks, these marks or impressions re-presenting the impass of his own crisis of identity.

A further example of the way criticism reiterates crisis in *Absalom, Absalom!* can be drawn from Sutpen's own self-division after he is turned away from the front door to Pettibone's plantation. Sutpen runs away in order "to think" (232), to perform the act of "intellection" which James Mellard considers fundamental to *Absalom* (McHale, 57). Sutpen initially runs away to distance himself from the scene of his crisis in order to criticize it, to try to comprehend it. He turns or runs away from the scene of his insult in an attempt to grasp what went wrong in the delivery of his father's message. The text focuses overtly on Sutpen's fragmentation:

> ...there was only himself, the two of them inside that one body, arguing quiet and calm: ***But I can shoot him...*** he argued with himself and the other *No That wouldn't do no good*; and the first: ***What shall we do then?*** and the other *I dont know*...(234-5),

and returns to Sutpen's division after his return home:

> ...he just lay there while the two of them argued inside of him, speaking in orderly turn, both calm, even leaning backward to be calm and reasonable and unrancorous *But I can kill him. —No That wouldn't do no good —Then what shall we do about it? —I dont know*: and he just listening, not especially interested, he said [in Sutpen's own narrative to Quentin's grandfather many years later], hearing the two of them without listening . He thought. 'If you were fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn't it?' and he said Yes 'But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what the man did. You have got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with You see?' and he said Yes again He left that night... He never saw any of his family again (237-8).

As it appears in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the critical act is dialogic since one voice is fractured by another voice. The butler's words initially disrupt Sutpen's intentions to pass the letter/message on to Pettibone, and, as a result of the butler's remark (a remark which makes a gap in the fabric of Sutpen's selfhood), Sutpen fortifies his self-image by becoming two people/voices (or three people, if the disinterested figure who heard without listening can be considered as having taken part in this critical interplay of voices). Thus,

while this process of division or multiplication is initiated by the butler's remark, the same process continues in and is co-opted by Sutpen for his own purposes. Through such processes, the gap in the ego is not mended but preserved.[9] Sutpen's formula of revenge is to repeat in his own person the model of wealth which insulted him. As one of the voices tells him: "You have got to have land and niggers and a fine house." Sutpen's critical mode of dealing with his crisis, by altering his caste and ostensibly re-originating himself, simply repeats that which caused his crisis. In order to fight Pettibone on his own 'grounds,' Sutpen seeks to define himself through the logic of self-equality (where quality *x* is equal to quality *x*)—a "house" for a "house"—and thus does not extricate himself from the milieu of his crisis, his insult. Yet, as one critic suggests, the Sutpen tragedy could have been avoided, theoretically, had Sutpen followed his initial instinct and "killed the landowner instead of imitating him," for "by killing the rival he would eliminate the other on whose recognition his own self-image depends" (Cobley 1987, 433). The suggestion is clear that if Sutpen had not incorporated the other's voice as part of his self-image, Sutpen would have escaped being influenced by this voice, and so escaped buckling under its greater power.

Ellen's critical reaction to the truth behind Sutpen's raree show, as with the three other examples so far, also involves an ongoing bifurcation of self-identity. Her reaction, uttered aloud to Sutpen, and recreated by Rosa- -"'I will try to understand it; yes, I will make myself try to understand it'" (30)—also implies two selves: an empirical self which will attempt to perform the function of forcing the second self into an act of comprehension.

---

[9]John Irwin sees the trend to repeat the past as explained by a different analogy Freud's formulation of the *fort/da* game, where a "child had created a game by which he had mastered the traumatic event of seeing his mother leave him" by "throw[ing] away a toy and as he did, utter a sound that Freud took to be the German word *fort*—'gone,'" and "then recover[ing] the toy and say[ing] the word *da*—'there'" (Irwin 1975, 115). All acts of narration in *Absalom* are akin in purpose to this game; they repeat and thus preserve a traumatic event in an attempt to come to terms with that event The *fort/da* game "permits the child to transform an unpleasant situation into a pleasant one by actively initiating unpleasure instead of being its passive victim. The compulsion to repeat is an instinctual urge to establish or rather to return to a state of pleasurable inertia" (Cobley 1983, 251). The creation of a narrative, and thus the recreation of the narrator's self or selves, uses repetition as "a means of achieving mastery," of gaining "power" (Irwin 1975, 115) It is thus "in this mechanism of repetition" that "we have the very essence of revenge" (Irwin 1981, 154), as we see that Sutpen's idea of revenge consists repeating his oppressor's life-style

Divided into two selves by her crisis, Ellen will only be able to act towards a solution, but never in effect achieve it—she will make herself try, but it is implied that she expects never to achieve it. Although she is only minimally represented in the text, one is given the impression that Ellen is in fact what Mr Compson calls her: the "butterfly of a forgotten summer two summers defunctive now", the "substanceless shell" (126) (of a catterpillar, one would assume) because she has been so influenced by Sutpen's language use and can't escape it to regain her own voice.

Henry's reaction to the crisis of Sutpen's anticipatory words is to suspend all action, all further steps towards Bon's marriage, in order to give the latter time to "renounce and dissolve the other marriage, knowing that the four years of hoping and waiting would be in vain" (97). Henry's critical reaction to the fact of his father's greater knowledge is to put himself, Bon, and Judith in a "durance," "interval," or "probation" (91 ff). In the later version, Sutpen's information concerning Bon's parentage takes Henry completely by surprise. His critical reaction is the same in form to that of his first. The passage is as follows: "*Nor did Henry ever say that he did not remember leaving the tent. He remembers all of it. He remembers stooping through the entrance again and passing the sentry again; he remembers walking back down the cut and rutted road...*" (355). In both versions, Henry's action is a refusal to act, because he is blinded by what he has been told by his father. His discourse about what he had wanted to happen (Bon marrying Judith) is in both cases interrupted by his father's discourse. Henry reacts by foregrounding these words in his consciousness, acting in such a way so as to highlight the fact that his discourse has been interrupted, by interrupting his own actions, and basically waiting for another discourse to show the way out (waiting for something else to happen). Anthony Wilden, a theorist who has commented on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic work, notes that: "a certain *méconnaissance*—which we might call sublimation—is essential to health," as a way of dealing with crisis, for "Dostoievskian hyperconsciousness is no solution" (Wilden, 166).

Henry's reaction is typical of an unhealthy reaction, as he incorporates the aporia caused in his initial way of relating to the world into his ongoing 'practical' activities.

Each of these characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* moves from an original crisis to a series of reiterative critical reactions to that crisis. The narratives they present recount and reorganize an earlier event; their speech is always based upon an earlier discourse which influences them (as a result, their various speech acts express that 'influence' has broken their sense of self). An analysis of the speech acts in Faulkner's text then, requires an understanding of the fact that one discourse is both structured by and occludes another discourse which influenced it. It is important to see that most narrative acts in *Absalom* are *critical* reactions. Harold Bloom offers one approach to such a dynamic in his description of the moment of criticism as a primal fantasy which re-inscribes a crisis or, as he calls it, a primal scene[10]:

> ...the "oral" scene is the topos or Primal Scene proper, the negative moment of being influenced, a perpetually lost origin, while the "written" scene is the trope or Primal Fantasy. This means, in my terms, that in a poem a topos or rhetorical commonplace is *where* something can be *known*, but a trope or inventive turning is *when* something is desired or *willed*. Poems, as I have written often, are verbal utterances that cannot be regarded as being simply linguistic entities, because they manifest their will to utter *within* traditions of uttering, and as soon as you will that "within," your mode is discursive and topological as well as linguistic and tropological. As a Primal Scene, the Scene of Instruction is a Scene of Voicing; only when fantasized or troped does it become a Scene of Writing (Bloom 1982b, 61)

But *Absalom* may require a model other than Bloom's, for the fantasy structure that Bloom proposes does not account for the possible incorporation of the dynamics of the crisis monment in later critical reactions. For a description of this more Faulknerian mode of criticism, I turn to Ned Lukacher:

---

[10]In the passage which follows the primal scene or scene of instruction refers to Freud's theory of an infant's crisis in seeing his or her parents in the act of love, an unfamiliar scene which scares the infant and one which exceeds or overspills his or her ability to comprehend it. This is an image which the more fully grown child or even adult is unable to escape, as this image or scene returns through unconscious mechanisms which disguise and disfigure the original scene irrevocably (In *Absalom*, this scene returns through *conscious* mechanisms, as the disrupted self can't stop thinking about its own disruption.) Bloom calls such returns the primal fantasy. However, in *Absalom*, the self-healing function of the primal fantasy is never achieved since the individual concerned is never able to create "strong representations," or a discourse which is free of the precursor's influential voice. Bloom describes the Scene of Instruction, the encounter with the voice of the dead, as the "state of heightened demand that carries a new poet from his [or her] origins into his [or her] first strong representations" (Bloom 1976, 207), to say something which rids the self of its great debt to the precursor.

> With respect to narrative, the task of interpretation has become that of reconstructing the temporal difference between the *fabula* [story] and the *syuzet* [plot], which readers have forgotten but the text remembers. With respect to style, the task is to locate the shift in the voice of the text, to determine the tone changes and the rhythmic alternations that separate the voice from itself. This is the focus of my next chapter, where I use Lacan's notion of the 'fading of the subject' and Paul de Man's rhetorical figure of 'prosopopoeia' to locate the point where temporal difference is registered at the level of style. The task of interpretation is that of constructing primal scenes of other voices and other narratives (63).

Since criticism here involves a discourse which thematizes the rent in the fabric of discourse which is also a rent in the fabric of self-relation, the task of analyzing Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* is to point out how the narrative acts therein do not so much embody knowledge as they reiterate each narrator's unknowing, or instance of non-being. The task of interpreting Faulkner's text is, as Lukacher would say, to recognize the way narratives in that text are in some obscuring/occluding way about primal scenes, and thus incorporate the voice of the other. Plot's (in my terms, criticism's) recapitulation and reorganization of story (in my terms, a crisis moment, the actual encounter or moment of influence) thus "separate[s] the voice from itself"—in recounting the crisis, the character concerned recounts the impossibility of self-coincidence

Apostrophe and personification are rhetorical terms which describe the many critical acts in *Absalom* because they are tropes which invoke the past. The apostrophe is a trope which thematizes its bent toward the other's disruptive discourse. It is a trope in which the speaker "interrupt[s] the current of [his or her] discourse, and turn[s] to another person, or to some other object, different from that to which [his or her] address was first directed" (Gibbons, 213). This trope (or figure) therefore describes the disruption of one discourse by another discourse. It is a rhetorical term which also describes the act of critical reiteration, as it is a "figure spontaneously adopted by passion" which also "signifies, metonymically, the passion that caused it" (Culler 1981, 138). Furthermore, the metonymical impulse behind such an invocation of the past (the impulse to pass from one thing to another which is closely related to it), linked as it is in Harold Bloom's tropology to the notion of "repetition" and thus of return, "hints at the psychology of compulsion and obsession" (Bloom 1979, 11), the obsession with the past which practically every character

in *Absalom* exemplifies. Personification also describes, in another sort of retrospective orientation, this obsessive nature which is so fundamental to the plot in *Absalom*:

> A prosopopoeia is usually at least implicitly an apostrophe, an invocation, an attempt to bring back something that was presumably once present but no longer is present. A prosopopoeia ascribes a face, a voice, or a name to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead by addressing them as if they were persons who could answer back (Miller 1990, 238).

But the attempt to cope with death or loss, as with the attempt to understand a text, to cope with its always illusory and evasive significations, also effaces as much as it gives a face to, closes the door as much as it opens it. It is for this reason that Bloom asks us to "keep remembering that primarily [personification] means not humanization but masking, or as Fletcher has taught us, masking at the threshold, at the crossing..." (1987, 183). Personifications bring alive the painful moment of the insult, that moment when one experiences a turn of phrase and of fate—that moment when the self is punctured by an aporia, no longer knowing how to read itself. These two figures—the apostrophe and the prosopopoeia—can thus serve as general figures for the critical act in Faulkner's text.

Within the text, the major incident of criticism's recouping of crisis occurs when Judith reflects on the subject of her discourse's abruption. Of all characters in the text, Judith Sutpen is the most articulate on this 'topic' of the 'crossing,' for her speech acts not only refer to her displacement from a figure or place or familiarity, but also elaborate this theme into a general theory.[11] I refer to the scene, a week after Bon's burial, in which Judith explains to Mrs Compson (Quentin's grandmother) why she wants to give her a letter Bon had sent her. The text's description of Judith's critical reaction to (Bon's) death occurs in Mr Compson's narrative to his son, Quentin, in which Mr Compson significantly mentions (in passing) the deaths of her mother and her grandfather (Mr Coldfield) as a way of highlighting Judith's sequence of losses, culminating in Bon's. Here is the passage:

---

[11] I use the term "crossing" in a away similar to Bloom's, where he uses it in many works to refer to a poet's movement between "different kinds of figurative thinking" (Bloom 1977, 398). My use of it therefore refers to that crisis-moment in a character's life where that character discovers him- or her-self to be incurably alienated from his or her self, and so always in the process, in any narrative act, of expressing this state of perpetual movement, this state of not having a stable self or "topos" (in the sense of 'place of secure identity') from which to project a self.

...(Judith) never called on anyone now, had no friends now, doubtless knowing no more why she chose your grandmother to give the letter to than your grandmother knew; not thin now but gaunt, the Sutpen skull showing indeed now through the worn, the Coldfield, flesh, the face which had long since forgotten how to be young and yet absolutely impenetrable, absolutely serene: no mourning, not even grief, and your grandmother saying, 'Me? You want me to keep it?'

'Yes,' Judith said. 'Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or dont read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter. And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even to bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be *is* because it never can become *was* because it can never die or perish...' and your grandmother watching her, the impenetrable, the calm, the absolutely serene face, and crying:

'No! No! Not that! Think of your—' and the face watching her, comprehending, still serene, not even bitter:

'Oh. I? No, not that. Because somebody will have to take care of Clytie, and father, too...' (126-8).

In order to understand Faulkner's text here, it is necessary to understand the critical act involved in such a narration. Narratives allow the characters producing them to address the issue of their self-identity or, more specifically, to address the issue of the erasure or fragmentation of their identity. Judith here admits to Mrs Compson that her present narrative articulates the scene of her breaking; she admits that her discourse reflects upon the disruption of her earlier discourse, her failure at the loom.

Given this, what message does Judith's loom analogy convey to Mrs Compson? Not surprisingly, her web imagery is wound up with the correlation of 'life' and a form of 'textuality'.[12] That living life as one would like to becomes a textual activity is evident in Judith's assertion that her discourse is "*like* five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug." But this text, whether patterns on the loom or scratches on a tombstone, ends up being undone or erased because, as ephebes, Judith and Bon fail to wrest places for themselves, fail to weave their

[12]The word 'text' is from the Latin term *textus*, meaning "style, tissue of a literary work, literally that which is woven, web, texture" (O E D)

own pattern into the metaphorical rug. Judith's reflection on the loom is her reflection on language, so it is only appropriate that she effectively disappears behind her text (Judith occludes herself in the pronoun "you" which obviously directs attention away from her "me"). Judith's narrative is about her crisis, the fact that she had been erased, her pattern undone, by her brother's killing of Bon; she critically brings this up in her half-concealed way, in her discourse on self loss to Mrs Compson. The reader becomes caught up in the ongoing rhetorical onslaught or textual weaving together of birth to loom to rug to block of stone to scratches, and so on, and so does not even perceive this occultation, having so much else to follow. As a result, Judith's actual (though obscured) self-references reflect metaphorically, in their occlusion, her failure at the loom; her "I" is not asserted in the fabric of her discourse to Mrs Compson. The fact that she is really talking about herself becomes a thread lost in her discursive shuffling of metaphors.

But why does Judith, as I am arguing, *willingly* lose herself in the discursive shuffle of her own metaphors? It is because Judith has adopted what may be called the ethics of disinterestedness: "so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something... at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another. ." Judith passes the letter disinterestedly because she believes that she might "make a mark on something" that way. She therefore serenely and impenetrably passes a private possession on while explaining her present actions in figurative terms. It must be remembered that the intricacy of Judith's verbal web is fundamentally a representation of her having heard the voice of death: Henry's announcement of his murder signalling Bon's irre-vocable absence As a narrative of her experience of death, her words say: 'there is no *place* for my desire, for my (romantic) designs,' and so the 'I' which tells of my heartbreak must be subsumed by the metaphoric fabric of my explanation. Judith, in other words, is aware of her act, aware that handing the letter over erases her position or place in relation to it, as David Krause observes of this scene: "handing the letter over to a stranger activates new and unstable

contexts, intentions, and audiences, inevitably smudging, erasing, any recoverable original meaning" (Krause 1984, 232).

Having superficially erased herself from her narrative and her act, by giving *her* letter to a "stranger," Judith nonetheless feels that she (and Bon) would by this act be leaving a "mark on something." But what is it that makes *these* marks more vital and permanent than the scratches upon a tombstone, or the pattern one tries to weave into a rug? Strangely, the passage of time (rain and sun modifying the inscription on a tombstone) and the passing away of people (Bon, Ellen and Mr Coldfield)—both of which testify to the ephemeral nature of existence—motivate Judith's idea that a memorable/durable mark can be made by disinterestedly passing a scrap of paper to a disinterested or uninvolved stranger. To answer the above question, I ask a preliminary question—another question which it will take the rest of this chapter to answer. In what way did Bon leave a mark on Judith's psyche? If "you make so little impression," how did Bon achieve one? The mere desire to leave an impression, Judith tells us, is annihilated by other people's efforts, so that no impression is left ("then all of a sudden it's all over"). As in the Tower of Babel, all remarks become lost in the con-text (network of discursive webs) of the general tone, and nothing is relayed or passed. In seeking a way out of this discursive con-text, Judith begins to meditate upon the nature of discourse itself, and so to generate a sort of meta-criticism. In other words, Judith's entire act of passing the letter on to Mrs Compson and her reflection on the necessity of her doing so, develops as the novel's most self-conscious scene of an individual theorizing the fact of their having been influenced.

Judith's ethic of disinterestedness, as a way of leaving a mark, is nonetheless marked by, and thus has a vested interest in, the subject that is her explanation's concealed theme: her frustration at being left with a dead lover. The character of this impression, however, is different from the type of impression that people on the loom struggle to leave. For those people, in their struggle to manifest their desire, seek to leave a mark which will be a sign, or subsitute representative, of their presence. There is nothing significant about the effects

of this desire; it leaves either no mark or a mark that is prone to fade after "it rains on it and the sun shines on it." Judith observes to Mrs Compson that presence cannot be asserted from a vantage of presence: presence can only be attributed to that which is dead ("the block of stone cant be *is* because it can never become *was*"). This too could be taken as the subtext of all narrative acts in *Absalom*. one can only discuss events that have passed. Hence the obsessive tone of most narrative acts in the text. According to this text, only meaningless babble results when one tries to express oneself with one's contemporaries, the people one is born with. One must instead be influenced by the past, by that which is no longer present. It is only once Bon is dead that he truly becomes a presence for Judith, galvanizing her into action, into discoursing upon the nature of life. The Charles Bon text (web) achieves its full significance for Judith once it has been completed, finalized; only then, only in an act of retrospection typical of most characters in *Absalom*, can she begin to *read* him, recognize his impression, his presence Judith comes to believe that language can only leave an impression when it reflects upon the absences or ruptures that are inherent in all linguistic relationships.[13]

Even though she is referring to her own life experiences, Judith uses a vague pronoun to insulate her from the exposure of explicitness (by saying 'I' she would be attempting to assert a pattern in the fabric of life and thus end up being destroyed again). Judith thus indirectly expresses how the figure of her self is caught up in the 'you' of the world, thereby admitting her own fragmentation. A further rhetorical expression of this predicament, and also a reflection upon her rhetorical strategy, is embodied in her use of the

---

[13]It must be remembered that Bon's completed existence is not only a fullness but is also a severe absence for Judith. Jacques Derrida's association of the deferral of presence in the figure of the written (as opposed to the spoken, where "speech is proffered *in the present, in the presence* of" the listener) may help clarify this notion of Judith's being influenced or motivated by a significant death which is both presence and absence. Derrida writes that "only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up. . only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving. If a speech could be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone" (1981, 71). Judith's address to Mrs Compson buries what it praises, personifying Bon while effacing his and her overt presences in her discourse It is thus that her discourse reflects the notion that only the absent, only the hidden or non-present, can be engaging.

conjunction 'and.' It is a conjunction which fails to enforce a juncture; it takes the place of punctuation or, even more likely, takes the place of elaborating interconnecting phrases as in: 'You get born. *After a while* you try this except you dont know why... *Furthermore, since* you are born with a lot of other people...' Judith's "and," as a special kind of 'conjunction,' also serves to give the impression of breathlessness, intimating Judith's groundlessness and feeling of confusion as that person who had struggled to assert her pattern at the loom. That Judith has not transcended this crisis and so still considers herself at the loom is articulated in the following passage:

> ...your grandmother watching her, the impenetrable, the calm, the absolutely serene face, and crying:
> 'No! No! Not that! Think of your—' and the face watching her, comprehending, still serene, not even bitter:
> 'Oh. I? No, not that. Because someone will have to take care of Clytie, and father, too...'

Judith's face is impenetrable; it doesn't bear the marks or scratches of her trouble, her losses. Yet while the face may resist critical penetration, the identity that ought to constitute Judith, the identity that ought to be at the core of her being, is not there. It is instead within the linguistic possession of her father and Clytie, and now too of Mrs Compson. Judith's self belongs to those others. Judith and Mrs Compson had been talking about the locus into which the letter was to be placed, and Mrs Compson had begun to advise Judith, one must infer, that she not give it up because some day she may wish she had it as a memento of the past. Mrs Compson almost says "Think of your*self*" but Judith interrupts her, saying "Oh. I?", thereby showing how her self returns to her consciousness only through the motivating words of another and returns even then as though her 'I' were an afterthought to her. By saying "Oh. I?", Judith also admits that her "I" or self is no longer under her authority (for the reason that she will have to devote herself to caring for her father and Clytie), in the same way that all acts of critical expression, in the text, quote the authority of the other and so admit that the self doesn't have autonomy over its utterances, or over its destiny (Mrs Compson reads Judith's act of passing the letter on as a passing of the self, as a prelude to Judith's complete renunciation of self through suicide). Once

again, Judith ventures her 'I' only with the purpose of displacing it, by stating that she will not need Bon's letter because it no longer *refers* to herself. Devoting herself to others, she is no longer a stable topos (or place from which to receive or project other people's utterances or one's own) and thus the letter must be passed on to a group beyond Judith's association. Judith wouldn't know who Mrs Compson might show the letter to, or what she might do with it. Judith breaks into Mrs Compson's discourse then, only to undermine her position in it once again.

Judith passes Bon's letter on and passes herself on too. But, as I have been maintaining, this strategy finally does leave a mark. Judith asserts her self (albeit a divided self) by passing a letter on to Mrs Compson, the closest approximation to a stranger she could find in a small town. Judith's passing, and her theory of it, unearths the gap forced forever between her and her fiancé, and unearths too the fact that the discourse she had used to keep herself going prior to Bon's murder had been broken. Or, to describe her act as a type of personification, we may rely on J. Hillis Miller's description of a form of personification which

> always buries what it evokes in the apostrophic praise, like Antony speaking over the dead body of Caesar. Prosopopoeia effaces what it gives a face to by making it vanish into the earth and become... *soma* without *sema*, or *soma* coming into the open as the material base of *sema*, as no longer overt personification but now effaced catachresis become mere literal name, like a tombstone with the letters worn away or a coin rubbed smooth, 'effaced' (1987, 346).

In its apostrophic recalling or reiteration, Judith's personifying act of criticism "buries" or "effaces," 'wears away the letters' (on a "tombstone"), and so speaks about a body without meaning ("*soma* without *sema*"): a discourse which takes its own inability to cohere into account.

To understand her critical act's reinsciption of her crisis, we must see what it is that Judith passes on. Let us look a large section of this letter's second paragraph:

> *We have waited long enough You will notice how I do not insult you either by saying I have waited long enough. And therefore, since I do not insult you by saying that only I have waited, I do not add, expect me. Because what* WAS *is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861, and therefore what* IS*—(There They have started firing again Which—to mention it—is redundancy too, like the breathing or need of ammunition Because sometimes I think it has never stopped It hasn't stopped of course... So that means that it is dawn again and that I must stop Stop what? you will say Why,*

thinking, remembering—remark that I do not say hoping—, to become once more for a period without boundaries or location in time, mindless and irrational companion and inmate of a body which, even after four years is still immersed and obviously bemused in recollections of old peace and contentment the very names of whose scents and sounds I do not know that I remember . But to finish.) I cannot say when to expect me Because what IS *is something else again because it was not alive then And since because within this sheet of paper you now hold the best of the old South which is dead, and the words you read were written upon it with the best of the new North which has conquered and which therefore, whether it likes it or not, will have to survive, I now believe that you and I are, strangely enough, included among those who are doomed to live* (131-2)

In reading this letter after Judith's departure, Mrs Compson would find that find that Judith in her speech had been quoting or at least referring indirectly to parts of the letter she would be passing on to her. Judith has thus come to incorporate Bon's own interrupted, disrupted words in her discourse—Bon speaks through the holes in her voice, since the same concern with the *was* and the *is* is basic to the texture of Bon's words, too. In his letter, Bon notes that the pattern he was creating on the sheet of paper was interrupted by other people, individuals fighting to assert their desires at the loom of conflict, fighting not on a rug but in the Civil War. In the midst of this strife Bon had wanted to regain his old, unified self, "*without boundaries or location in time*," prior to internal division. But his body (his *soma*), not his mind, will not let him forget the "*old peace and contentment*," and thus maintains the division. Bon's observation here also leads us to observe that Judith's was/is theory ("it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be *is* because it never can become *was* because it can never die or perish...") derives from Bon's letter. In Bon's terms what *was* is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861, and therefore what *is* is something else again because it was not alive then. Bon tells Judith that they are in a new world, that the world of the Old South is dead, and, because the New South is new and unfamiliar as yet, he cannot tell her when to expect his presence.

Yet there are differences between Bon's was/is formulation and Judith's re-presentation of it For Judith what *is* is really *was*; a glimmer of understanding of a subject is possible only once it has been lost. For Bon what *is* is something that is forever new,

and the *was* instead something that no longer has any effect, except upon the body. Now, as Dennis Foster notes, Judith "demands... her letter's repetition through another's memory." She believes, in other words, that in order to "'be is,' she must place another under an obligation. The passage suggests that Being is precisely this exercise of power over another who will interpret the letter as a trace of what *was*" (Foster, 86). Bon, however, seems to believe that his letter is on the vanguard, and will always remain *is* in the permanent order of the New South.[14]

Judith's formulation seems to be closer to Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return. In Irwin's words:

> To will that repetition, to will the eternal, meaningless recurrence of the same is the highest act that Nietzsche knows, for while man cannot change the nature of time, within whose grip he is essentially passive and helpless, he can change his relationship to time by actively willing repetition, by actively willing his own passivity. But to will actively one's own passivity in the grip of time is to will that event to which time leads, it is to will one's death, or at the very least, to concur in one's death (80-2)

In the terms of my argument here, one's critical acts "concur in one's [own] death" by repeating the abruption caused by the Other or, less severely, by (an)other. By passing Bon's letter on to a near-stranger, Judith wills the eternal, meaningless recurrence of difference, where meaning is grounded in the body, the self's image of itself, that entity which is no longer an entity but is now divided. The eternal return, as Marcusse reads Nietzsche, is not "mere repetition" but a "willed and wanted re-creation" of the crisis or primal scene and thus can speak for "the total affirmation of the life instincts, repelling all escape and negation" or repression (Marcuse, 112, 111) Judith's *is* is because it was once *was*. Bon's *is*, however, also affirms life and its ambivalent implication in and with death. Bon says that they are doomed to live, doomed, that is, to leave an impression on the fabric of life. It is this prophecy of being doomed to live that Judith's passing on of the letter

---

[14]But Bon fails in his belief. As Krause notes of Bon's letter "The writer wants his letter read two ways, wants it decoded both as nonverbal sign of more or less objective historical circumstances and as verbal text of more or less subjective existential desire Though it attempts to write its own reading, the letter by self-definition remains in a way incomplete, insufficient to itself, unreadable, except by that 'you' it requires and presupposes and writes—but cannot read" (Krause 1984, 236) In this respect, both theories of reading trope, are about, the circuit of communication Bon's letter, in other words, talks in an obscure way about the fact that individuals do not have authority over their utterances

fulfills. Judith passes the letter on, but marks it while doing so, asserting a discontinuity between her figure and Bon's by using the terms in a slightly altered sense. Let us now consider the nature of this sort of passing on.

It is my belief that Judith's strange acts of passing her fiancé's letter to Mrs Compson, and of giving herself to her father and Clytie, make sense when considered as acts of criticism which consciously quote the primal scene instead of repressing it. By passing the letter to Mrs Compson, Judith is performing an apostrophe, or the sort of apostrophe defined by Culler, which "makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself" (Culler 1981, 135).

All signs, all patterns, Judith suggests to Mrs Compson, are in a state of flux; there are no stable topoi (mental conceptions of the self as a stable place from which to initiate or receive discourse). Bon and Judith become doomed to live, to be remembered by future generations, to leave a mark on the fabric of life because they themselves, through their actions, become 'crossings,' symbols of a self's disruptions. By passing on the letter, Judith asserts a sense of continuous discontinuity in life, sameness through difference. Carolyn Porter observes: "Bon's letter, as well as Judith's act, manifest physically the principle of social continuity at work in all the conversations [or narrative s, o. critical voices] in the novel" (Porter, 266). But a letter is commonly understood as that which is sent from one locus to another. Letters are directed; they begin in one place and end up in another place. Bon's letter, however, appears "without date or salutation or signature" (129), and thus reflects its own nature as an object without stability, an object that is not grounded by a single destination and will thus always be in the process of becoming. The blank or gap where Judith's name ought to have been as addressee gives it its mobility.[15]

---

[15]What was said earlier of Rosa, that Sutpen's words insult her because they convert her into a signifier without a signified (Morris, 180), suggests what most individuals in the text fear—that is, those individuals who don't have an ironic perspective upon what they hear—is a sign without a stable meaning. They fear the catachresis most. It is this *a priori* absence of meaning which the teller of the tale, here Mr Compson, doesn't grasp. Compson expects "something missing" to be found in the letter to Judith, but instead there is a gap or aporia, an absence of names in the letter. As one critic notes, citing Barthes in reference to Mr Compson's inability to make the parts of his story cohere: "A 'readerly' reading, driving toward the

Judith's passing on of the letter thus recognizes and reasserts the letter's implicit mode of being, and re-enters it into the circuit of crossings.

This act of passing re-enacts the letter's symbolic status as non-being, as loss. Judith's words to Mrs Compson tell her indirectly about her (Judith's) loss of Charles Bon, a loss which she revives and apostrophizes by giving the letter away. Jonathan Culler notes that it is the psychological work of the apostrophe to recoup the old familiar "something [that had] once [been] present [but] has [now] been lost or attenuated... by removing the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locating it in a discursive time" (Culler 1981, 150). Evidently, Judith removes the opposition between *was* and *is* by generating here a narrative for Mrs Compson which is about the disruption of her own discourse.

Personification, as we noted in an earlier citation from Miller, always buries what it evokes in the apostrophic praise, and thus effaces what it gives a name to by making it vanish into the earth. Miller refers to this process as articulating a *soma* without a *sema*, or *soma* as the material base of *sema*. For Judith, the meaning Bon's letter is to have in the world of things is articulated fully through its body, its mode of being, its existence as something to be passed on and on. McPherson notes that Judith's dictum that she passes

---

(chimerical) security of coherence, stasis, mimesis, representation of what is signified, will not satisfy the genuinely pensive text Compson works as a readerly reader of a pensive text, hence, his inevitable frustrations He expects Bon's letter to reveal its secrets to him, to tell him (in response to his pressing inquiries) what it thinks But the pensive text does not reply, it remains unperturbed, 'shadowy inscrutable and serene'" (Krause 1984, 239). Mr Compson, even if we believe that his ability to quote Judith's words to his mother is derived from years and years of hearing the story told, and so of its being passed down to him, still has a creative hand in many of the details Thus, even though he makes parts of it up, he still passes this story on to Quentin while admitting that its meaning isn't even clear to himself Yet by being what he might like to think of as a mere medium, Mr Compson still, in wanting a common sense reading, but not being able to find one, nonetheless unconsciously does what the other critics mentioned so far have done consciously. Since criticism is not a contemplation of that which is represented, but a contemplation of *how* the subject is represented and of the way in which that circuit of communication decenters identity and highlights ambivalences, Mr Compson too tells how his narrative contains embedded within it textual threads which unravel his way of figuring things, of seeing things through his (legally-trained) logistic and common-sense eyes With this in mind, Krause is able to insightfully note, in reference to Judith's utterance ("it would be something just because it would have happened") that "What would happen for Compson's Judith, then, would not be the mimesis he wanted for himself but a semiosis, not documented meaning and voice but monumental sign and silence" (Krause 1984, 230) So that Mr Compson's efforts at representing the facts becomes more of a critical act as his discourse generates a primal scene which disrupts his more conscious attempts to secure sense and meaning

the letter on not *mean* but to *matter* draws a distinction between "the significance that is meaning and the significance that is mattering" (McPherson, 445). In Krause's words then, the distinction is also one between "documented meaning" and "semiosis" or "monumental sign and silence" (Krause 1984, 230). Mr Compson, even though he 'invents' the tale and the dialogue, nonetheless himself produces *something that is missing* to him. He therefore generates a narrative about his own loss. Bon's letter itself, grounded in no single, stable self but only in the selves of its successive possessors or readers, thus becomes incorporated into different narratives Judith's crisis, her crossing, is repeated in the passing on of the letter. Judith's scratch comes to have more vital and permanent effects than the efforts made by people on the loom. Because she comes to understand what Shreve, as we shall see, takes for granted—the notion that total meaning, something to explain all acts and narratives, is a vain idealism; the notion that everything can't always be explained, that something will always be missing—Judith talks about aporia through aporia as she passes the letter on, renouncing its claim to her renounced 'self.' Judith uses the letter, itself an anonymous crossing or aporia, to symbolize the mobility of her own self. Judith's act of criticism *makes yet a further tear in the fabric of her life*, discoursing, as it does, upon the abruptions that are part of all narrative acts.

Chapter Three.

Vocal Networks: Quentin's Crisis of Listening.

"...Now I want you to tell me just one thing more Why do you hate the South?"
"I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I dont I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (AA, 378)

Is it an image, or is it a phantasm? (Hartman, 23)

In my first chapter I showed that to understand the language of the first three paragraphs of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* it is important to see what its aporias say in and of themselves. We discovered that the occlusion of grammatical subjects expressed something in itself This occlusion in effect disclosed that it doesn't matter *who* talks about or who listens to the narrative of Sutpen's South because that narrative disembodies or "inscribes" its would be tellers and would be listeners, depriving them of their own identities and making them into repositories for *other* voices. In my second chapter I showed how six individuals in *Absalom, Absalom!* react *critically* to other voices by making the fact of their narratives' disruption the theme of their talk. In this chapter, I noted, quoting another critic, that Mr Compson, reading as a "readerly reader," "expects Bon's letter to reveal its secrets to him" (Krause 1984, 239). Reading in this way, and so expecting the "security of coherence, stasis, [and] mimesis," Compson would have great difficulty with the pronominal equivocations in the first paragraph of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Departing from Compson's mode of readerly reading, I explore in this chapter the meanings of Quentin's critical assertions (quoted on the title page to this chapter) in which he claims that he doesn't hate the South In doing so, I hope to uncover the vocal influences upon Quentin's psyche, noting that Quentin's exclamation repeats his abruptions by other voices, and reveals, as a result, an intricate network of vocal influences (namely of Mr Compson's transfer of his own mode of readerly reading to his son).

Quentin, having gone to the North to study at Harvard, had hoped to distance himself from the stories of Supten and of the South which had haunted him since his childhood. His attempt to achieve this distance obviously fails in light of his critical answer to his roommate's question "Why do you hate the South?" Unable to escape the influence these tales have on him, Quentin's response is the anxious if not psychotic "I dont hate it," spoken aloud twice to Shreve and then a number times, but with just as much emphasis, to himself. In this chapter and the next, I consider Quentin's critical pronouncement as a non-

ironic utterance, appearing in the text as a direct juxtaposition to Shreve's way of reacting to the things he hears about the South. In this chapter, prior to considering the nature and effects of Shreve's ironic sensibility more fully, I try to disentangle the network of vocal influences which prevents Quentin from admitting his hatred of being undermined and inscribed by the inheritance of a tradition of Southern tales, his hatred and fear of being inscribed by voices which, as the text says, convert him into a "commonwealth."[1]

I am arguing that Quentin's crisis of not being able to balance his voice with the more powerful voices of the Southern legacy he had been brought up on can be traced back to the effects on him of Mr Compson's story about the conflict between Henry's language of puritan values and Bon's language of New Orleans hedonism. Superficially, the story seems to be about Bon's attempts to get Henry to accept Bon's hedonistic language so that Henry will drop his objection to the concept and reality of Bon's "mistress," and so let Bon marry Judith. Yet there is a strange relationship between Compson's tale and Quentin's exclamation at the end of the book. For Quentin's vocal pronouncement and Mr Compson's presentation of Henry and Bon conversing form a strange vocal network, so that it is impossible to understand what happens in the one without a consideration of the other. This complexity is the result of the double plot of Compson's narrative. For just as Compson describes how Bon tried to inscribe Henry within the bounds of his less restricted ideology, so Compson's story reflects its own process of exposing Quentin to Compson's own values, as we shall see.

Compson cons Henry into upholding a belief in a language of meaning, a language of presence, as opposed to a more ironic language of freeplay. In other words, Compson forces Quentin into a readerly mode of reading, forces Quentin into a mode of reading which opens him to the experience of crisis, anxiety, influence. Because Compson shows

---

[1]Here is the relevant passage in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "Quentin had grown up with that [grown up with the voices and stories of Sutpen and the South]; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts..." (12)

Henry winning in this contest, Compson gets Quentin to believe that a non-ironic commitment to a meaning-bearing language will enable him (Quentin) to be a stronger individual, and thereby to be able to control the psychological effects upon him of the voices he hears. Yet, in adhering to a system of reading or interpreting what others say that is rather like his father's, Quentin ends up being the type of reader who is prone to the experience of crisis when listening to others, a state a number of critics believe Compson consciously sought to create in Quentin.

I describe Quentin's openess to vocal influence by using the terms "metalepsis" and "demonstratio." In my last chapter, I observed how words from another can have catachretic and hyperbolic effects, disrupting the listener's discourse with himself or herself. These tropes, in describing the type of attitude or belief in a kind of language which promotes an individual's crisis, are fundamental to the perspective of a readerly reading. While an ironic mode of listening will not allow the other's words to have disruptive power over the self, a metaleptic mode of listening gives the speaker's words more importance or more meaning than the self's own discursive mode. The readerly reader gives the speaker's words more authority than his or her own words, because this type of reader believes that the speaker can 'reveal secrets,' as Krause notes. Associated with the metalepsis is the demonstratio, for, once the other's figure has been given undue authority, the listener is then able to see the other's subject as though it were fully, visually present. The readerly reader expects a demonstratio because his or her belief in the 'mimetic' quality of (textual) utterances is inherently a belief in a type of *metaphysical* presence of the subject [2]

[2]The ironic and semiological mode of reading, on the other hand, as we shall be seeing, doesn't believe in such metaphysical presencing, since it considers aporias or absences to be important too. Semiological readings, in other words, read for the figures of doubt in any given utterances. Had Quentin or Henry read this way, they would have seen their respective teller's attempts to inscribe them within a certain ideological frame, and so would have avoided being influenced by these voices, avoided becoming commonwealths

The term itself, as a Thirteenth century rhetorician notes, refers to a use of rhetoric through which "the subject [of discourse] is revealed so vividly that it seems to be present to the eyes" (Vinsauf, 62). Technically, the demonstratio is even the first trope of Faulkner's text, and is dramatized in that passage where Sutpen is generated out of the dust of the office when Rosa vocally creates him *ex nihilo*. In this respect, the subtextual and self-reflexive drama in the first three opening paragraphs, in trying to get its readers to read in between the lines and so embody Rosa's "long dead object" in the form of a subject, tries to create a demonstratio in the reader's consciousness. The importance of the demonstratio in *Absalom, Absalom!* is acknowledged in one critic's observation that the entire text could be said to be a dramatic rendering of "the interaction between what is said and what is seen" (Sherry, 50). In other words, the text explores the possibility of the "power of words to make things visible" (Sherry, 50)—characters wouldn't be inscribed by narratives if what is heard weren't seen vividly by them and accepted as 'presences' instead of linguistic creations and figures of doubt. It is therefore a critical mistake to believe, as Gray does, that the novel's narrators, in their acts of telling, effectively "privileg[e] the ear over the eye" (Gray, 24), since the synecdochic or scenic method of all discourse in the text indicates otherwise. Estella Schoenberg also indicates the importance of the image here as something present to the eyes, and as the originator of the text's narrative acts. She notes that *Absalom, Absalom!* is "a demonstration of the process by which a complicated story can be derived from an inadequate set of facts if those facts are reinforced by vivid imagery" (Schoenberg, 95). Because of Quentin's obsessive character, the past has more presence for him than the present itself.

The term metalepsis describes Mr Compson's own description of Quentin's position vis à vis the tales of the South.[3] Quentin speaks to himself in "notlanguage" because he is

---

[3]The metalepsis has been described as similar to the metonomy since it "opens, so to speak, the door, says Quintilian, in order that one may pass from one idea to another" [La métalepse "ouvre, pour ainsi dire, la porte, dit Quintilien, afin que vous passiez d'une idée à une autre" (Dumarsais, 104)], "the metalepsis represents an entire combination of ideas, a coign, a thought, through the expression (vehicle) of another coign, another thought" ["la métalepse représente toute une combinaison d'idées, un jugement, une pensée,

overwhelmed, as all characters in crisis are, by the language of others, and so becomes implicated in the past. The reader is introduced to a Mr Compson who tries to place Quentin metaleptically in the past by making Quentin responsible for it and by making him have to tell and think about it. Having asked his father why Rosa had chosen him to listen to her version of the Southern tales, Mr Compson answers:

> ...[Miss Rosa] chose you [to listen to her tales] because your grandfather was the nearest thing to a friend Sutpen ever had in this county, and she probably believes that Sutpen may have told your grandfather something about himself and her, about that engagement which did not engage... And that your grandfather might have told me and I might have told you. And so, in a sense, 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. She may believe that if it hadn't been for your grandfather's friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here... So maybe she considers you partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him (12-13)

We see Mr Compson here in the process of converting his son into a commonwealth by delineating for Quentin a *way of positioning himself in relation to* Southern individuals from the past This metaleptic positioning makes Quentin vulnerable to the experience of crisis since the past authority is given priority over his own existence in the present moment—the past is given, in Mr Compson's explanation, the power to determine Quentin's actions and behaviour. It is this metaleptic position which Shreve's question provokes Quentin to give up. Shreve's question demands of Quentin "that he justify his own existence" (Poirier, 15) and assert his independence from the South. To justify his existence, Quentin would have to show that the voices of the past don't control his existence, show that he has his own voice which instead subsumes the voices of the past.

In Mr Compson's narrative to his son. Bon is described as trying to leave an impression on Henry's psyche. The ground of Compson's metaphor is as follows: knowing that Henry wants him to marry Judith but that Henry's "puritan heritage" (108)

---

par l'expression d'un autre jugement, d'une autre pensée" (Fontanier, 107-8)]. The term may therefore be seen to represent a switching of positions, and so describe a network of interchange (of one voice over another) In more recent definitions, the metalepsis is the trope which describes the revisionistic mode: ephebes owe their sense of weakness to the established power of the precursor, so in order to assert their own voices, they must switch place with the precursor, and hence gain *priority*, firstness. In *Absalom*, however, we are shown characters who get revised rather than those that possess the power to revise. Characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* suffer crises because the other person's words influence the way they perceive themselves Sutpen's linguistic definition of Rosa, for example, is momentarily given priority by her over her own sense-of-self-in-language

will force him to object to the "ceremony" (109) or object to "the fact of [Bon's] mistress and child" (104), Bon assumes he has only to rewrite Henry's moral code in order for Henry to allow Bon to marry Judith and keep the mistress. I show first that Henry's puritan language in the end does not lose to Bon's rhetorical persuasions—that, in effect, the non-ironic Henry is able to avenge his sister's purity and name. I then proceed to analyze the scene of linguistic conflict prior to Henry's victory, noting that the text uses terms of marking and impressing as metaphors for one voice's capacity to influence another.

At the climax of Bon's attempted re-inscription of Henry's consciousness through a confusion-generating narrative strategy, Henry responds to Bon's persuasively rhetorical formulations by articulating his own perspective on the nature of language:

> 'Oh I know. I know. You give me two and two and you tell me it makes five and it does make five. But there is still the marriage. Suppose I assume an obligation to a man who cannot speak my language, the obligation stated to him in his own and I agree to it: am I any the less obligated because I did not happen to know the tongue in which he accepted me in good faith?' No the more, the more ' (118)

Henry, in brief, can't accept the meaninglessness of what Bon proposes. Bon had even admitted that Henry should not consider the ceremony as incompatible with marriage to Judith since, as he says, the ceremony had been "as meaningless as that of college boys in secret rooms at night, [ritualizing] even to the same archaic and forgotten symbols" (118). Rather than prod Henry to dismiss the ceremony as insignificant, Bon's description of the ceremony as meaningless gives Henry further resolve to justify, and not let go of, his puritanical beliefs, for Henry's puritanism or Calvinist ideology rejects the notion of a world in which there is an absence of meaning. As one critic notes, "For Charles, manipulating language gives power; for Henry, abandoning rules means anarchy" (Dowling, 98). Bon is here more of an ironic reader than Henry, who is clearly a readerly reader. Bon's irony manipulates or subsumes other voices, while Henry's lack of irony and his fear of anarchy arise out of his fear of the meaningless and of the breakdown of all (puritanical or Southern) values. Henry had wanted to be inscribed within Bon's discourse

and ideology but only, it would seem, on the condition that Bon's rhetoric show signs of a compatible commitment to a meaning-bearing language.

Prior to this scene, Bon's rhetorical tactics had seemed to be serving their ends. And in these moments we sense the beginning in Henry of a commitment to his friend's figurations because Bon speaks of something of interest to the readerly reader (Bon speaks as though he is going to reveal his "secrets" to Henry). Mr Compson even describes Henry's inscription, literally, as an act of being written upon, of having his psyche receive impressions like a wax surface:

> So I can imagine him, the way he did it: the way in which he took the negative and innocent plate of Henry's provincial soul and intellect and exposed it by slow degrees to this esoteric milieu, building it gradually toward the picture he desired it to retain, accept I can see him corrupting Henry gradually into the purlieus of elegance, with no foreward, no warning, the postulation to come after the fact, exposing Henry slowly to the surface aspect—the architecture a little curious. . and therefore to Henry a little opulent, sensuous, sinful, ...the flash and glitter of a myriad carriage wheels, in which women, enthroned and immobile and passing rapidly across the vision, appeared like painted portraits beside men in linen a little finer and diamonds a little brighter and in broadcloth a little trimmer and with hats raked a little more above faces a little more darkly swaggering than any Henry had ever seen before and the mentor, the man for whose sake he had repudiated not only blood and kin but food and shelter and clothing too, whose clothing and walk and speech he had tried to ape, along with his attitude toward women and his ideas of honor and pride too, watching him with that cold and catlike inscrutable calculation, watching the picture resolve and become fixed and then telling Henry, 'But that's not it. That's just the base, the foundation. It can belong to anyone': and Henry, 'You mean, this is not it? That it is above this, higher than this, more select than this?': and Bon, 'Yes This is only the foundation. This belongs to anybody.': a dialogue without words, speech, which would fix and then remove without obliterating one line of the picture, this background, leaving the background, the plate prepared innocent again: the plate docile, with that puritan's humility toward anything which is a matter of sense rather than logic, fact, the man, the struggling and suffocating heart behind it saying *I will believe! I will! I will! Whether it is true or not, I will believe!* waiting for the next picture which the mentor, the corrupter, intended for it... I can imagine how he did it—the calculation, the surgeon's alterness and cold detachment, the exposures brief, so brief as to be cryptic, almost staccato, the plate unaware of what the complete picture would show, scarce-seen yet ineradicable—a trap, a riding horse standing before a closed and curiously monastic doorway in a neighbourhood a little decadent, even a little sinister, and Bon mentioning the owner's name casually—this, corruption subtly anew by putting into Henry's mind the notion of one man of the world speaking to another, that Henry knew that Bon believed that Henry would know even from a disjointed word what Bon was talking about, and Henry the puritan who must show nothing at all rather than surprise or incomprehension—a façade shuttered and blank, drowsing in steamy morning sunlight, invested by the bland and cryptic voice with something of secret and curious and unimaginable delights Without his knowing what he saw it was as though to Henry the blank and sealing barrier in dissolving produced and revealed not comprehension to the mind, the intellect which weighs and discards, but striking instead straight and true to some primary blind and mindless foundation of all young male living dream and hope—a row of faces like a bazaar of flowers, the supreme apotheosis of chattelry, of human flesh bred of the two races for that sale—a corridor of doomed and tragic flower faces walled between the grim duenna row of old women and the elegant shapes of young men trim predatory and (at the moment) goatlike. this seen by Henry quickly, exposed quickly and then removed, the mentor's voice still bland, pleasant, cryptic, postulating still the fact of one man of the world talking to another about something they both understand . (110-2)

Bon's rhetoric makes use of "painted portraits"—tableaux or scenes, in this case of women, who exist, "enthroned" or immobilized, as objects or possessions which enhance the prestige of the men who keep them—in order to undermine the Puritanical discourse Henry had used to keep himself going. Working as a photographic manipulator of images, Bon seeks to convert Henry with the image of the enthroned women, an image which is sharply opposed to Henry's puritanical values which would reject the notion of a kept woman. Bon's manner of getting Henry to change his self-stabilizing discourse is rather subtle. He tries to indoctrinate Henry gradually, and so (ostensibly) keeps Henry within the bounds of what is familiar to him Shrewdly, Bon does not present the women in the scene as radically different from what Henry is accustomed to. Although in actuality these women are radicaly different from what Henry is accustomed to, Bon presents them as only marginally so, and in a better, "higher" way. Everything in New Orleans is thus seen as "a little more" than what Henry is accustomed to.

Bon's rhetorical strategy is to leave an impression of New Orleans on Henry's psyche by systematically and repeatedly undermining the foundations of the tableau or "picture" he watches resolve there, the picture that becomes present to Henry like a demonstratio before Bon, in an effort to convince Henry of his greater authority, obliterates it to give Henry another image. (Bon is described as "watching the picture resolve and become fixed and then telling Henry, 'But that's not it. That's just the base, the foundation It can belong to anyone,'" with Henry replying: "'You mean, this is not it? That it is above this, higher than this, more select than this?': and Bon, 'Yes. This is only the foundation. This belongs to anybody.'") Henry's psyche, described here as a plate, finally most closely resembles a palimpsest, a slate which is written upon and then erased to allow further inscriptions In some ways, Henry desires this linguistic imposition; he is seen to be "waiting for the next picture which the mentor, the corrupter, intended for [him]." In this respect, Henry actively desires something "more select" and "higher" that would represent a significant change toward Bon's way of looking at things. It is for this reason that Bon tells Henry

that the picture he is given is not complete, that the "opulen[ce]" and "sensous[ness]" which seems to seduce Henry is only the foundation Bon thus builds up in Henry an appreciation for the perceived situation only to remove it, thereby effectively making Henry want *more*. And so Henry is led initially by what Bon can't give him, by a "higher" rationale that he thinks would make everything come clear (and which Bon must continually defer, since it can not be presenced). Bon tries to inscribe Henry within his ideology by promising "secret and curious and *unimaginable* delights," that is, he tries to inscribe Henry by hyperbolic scenes which exceed Henry's psychic capacity to comprehend them.

But the "esoteric milieu" to which Henry's soul is exposed here is indeed just the "base" or "foundation" ("a row of faces. . of human flesh . for that sale") of Bon's means of corrupting Henry Henry, in this passage, is most fully persuaded or seduced by Bon's images of close conversation, his image of two people speaking to one another. This is the image that is most effective for Henry, the key that, once established, will open up everything else to which Bon is referring. Henry is more moved, not by Bon's arsenal of images or pictures, but by the latter's positing or "postulation" of an image of vocal interaction, the "notion" or "fact," that is, of "one man of the world speaking to another," of "one man of the world talking to another about something they both understand." The extreme commitment Henry has to such an ideal of communication is evident in his belief that even though he doesn't speak a word of Bon's maternal tongue, he still expects to know "even from a disjointed word what Bon was talking about."

Henry is initially blinded or stunned by the demonstratio, here, an 'image of voice' developed in Bon's rhetoric. We are told that the wall of Bon's rhetoric (the blank and scaling barrier) does not, "in dissolving," produce or reveal "comprehension to the mind" of his listener, but strikes instead to some primary blind and "mindless foundation of all young male living dream and hope." It is at this point in the tale of influence that Mr Compson's telling repeats Bon's confusing rhetorical strategy (in saying, effectively, 'this is it/this is not it')—Compson's telling generates a figure of doubt which creates absence or

non-closure for Henry, for Quentin, and for the reader We are told that when the paradoxical barriers in Bon's rhetorical strategy fall and Henry is let into the scene, Bon is no longer trying to seduce Henry with the image of two people talking, but returns instead to the generalized image of his wife/mistress in the form of the 'seductive' and 'blinding' prostitutes. Speech here is replaced by seduction, a "row of faces like a bazaar of flowers," since Bon cannot discard this image because it is the very subject he has to get Henry to accept. And so Bon does not want Henry to "understand" or to "know[] what he saw," because this would mean that Henry's puritan rhetoric, a discourse described in the text as logical and requiring understanding, would be maintained In much the same way, as I will be showing, Compson's tale is presented such that his son and *Absalom*'s reader are blinded as to the nature of what is actually being said

Deliberate absences in the language of the text make it impossible for the reader to know with certainty whether the architecture, the carriage wheels, the diamonds, the row of faces, etc, are seen by Henry in an actual trip to New Orleans or through the intensity of Bon's rhetoric. One must consider the following problem: is the "esoteric milieu" linguistic or real? In the Moden Library edition of *Absalom, Absalom!*, pages 106 to 109 and 112 to 118 refer to the New Orleans scene largely as an actual visit, whereas the passage from pages 110 to 112 presents the scene as one in which Bon verbally creates images and impressions of the new and foreign scene for Henry The reader instinctively grasps this passage as both real and verbal. This ambiguity is a *fault* or *aporia* in Mr Compson's telling of the events; something is missing which would otherwise clarify for the reader whether the trip is real or imagined, and this absence creates a figure of doubt in the reader's mind. Initially, Quentin is told: "They went to New Orleans. They rode through the bright cold of that Christmas day.. " (106). Yet the long passage I quoted a few pages back tends to demonstrate that what Henry 'sees' of New Orleans is due to Bon's rhetorical tactics, and that Henry's consciousness develops as a palimpsest of Bon's array of images. Another passage underlines this development, in the text, of this figure of doubt:

> ...now slowing: now would come the instant for which Bon had builded—a wall, unscalable, a gate ponderously locked, the sober and thoughtful country youth just waiting, looking, not yet asking why? or what? the gate of solid beams in place of the lacelike iron grilling and they passing on, Bon knocking at a small adjacent doorway from which a swarthy man resembling a creature out of an old woodcut erupts... and now, the solid gates closed behind them instead of before.. and the voice—the mentor, the guide standing aside now to watch the grave provincial face—casually and pleasantly anecdotal . (112-3).

Here, Bon seems to be part of two scenes: he seems to be riding on horseback with Henry, but he also seems to be talking about the horseback ride as though he were describing it to Henry and not involved in it. In the long quote a few pages back, no scenic groundings were given for the metaphors used to describe that scene—there was no description of the milieu in which the "surgery" took place. Yet in the passage above, the "background" of the other passage seems to become more real The theme of the attempted inscription of Henry is reflected in the imagery: the unscalable wall, the "ponderously locked" gate—images which serve to hide the 'secrets' to a hedonistic ideology. This is the wall which at first can't be passed, but then is passed subsequently to wall Henry in. The implication is that Henry will become fully inscribed within the boundary-lines of Bon's narrative, as he is walled in both by Bon's rhetoric and by the physicality of an inner sanctum in New Orleans.

One may ask: How specifically are Quentin and the reader blinded by such a linguistic passage? Bon's language of imposition is designed to lead Henry into "a scarce-seen yet ineradicable... trap": "a riding horse standing before a closed and curiously monastic doorway in a neighbourhood a little decadent " It is this horse which implicitly leads us as readers and leads Henry to "what the complete picture would show": the foundation of male hope, a row of prostitute faces. At first apparently another component in Bon's array of images, this horse "trap[s]" the reader into seeing movement, into *seeing* Henry (and Bon) move along and past the row and corridor of faces, until they are in the presence of the latter's mistress.[4] The entire section, then, arrests the reader's process of reading by

[4]The riding horse is a "trap" too since it can be interpreted as either a rhetorical vehicle or physical vehicle (*i.e.*: means of transport), or both at once. Ultimately, the riding horse performs the function of leading us to Bon's wife, the "woman with a face like a tragic magnolia, the eternal female, the eternal Who-suffers," and his son, "the child, the boy, sleeping in silk and lace to be sure yet complete chattel of him who, begetting him, owned him body and soul to sell [if he chose]" (114) The image of the horse functions to

presenting, as it does, a fundamental ambiguity in the text. the question of whether Mr Compson describes an actual trip or the mental travel of someone listening to a story? Compson, like his figure Bon, is a creator of images (this is indicated by his repeated insistence to Quentin: "So I can imagine him, the way he did it..."), and so is able to create a demonstratio in the mind of his hearer. Slyly, Mr Compson's image of the horse 'slowly' leads us as readers out of the esoteric milieu of Bon's rhetoric of imposition and into the milieu of the place described, a place which contains Henry and Bon within it, as agents within the scene. In other words, Henry and Bon have been assimilated into the New Orleans "foundation" or "background," as we readers have been, since we are blindly led along like Henry, and so are uncertain as to how we arrived at the home of Bon's mistress and child. Compson's and Bon's rhetorical tactics force their listeners to accept a passive position in relation to what is being told The only reason that Quentin and the reader could be lead astray and be blinded by such rhetorical strategies is that Compson's words are not received ironically, and are received instead as a readerly reader would receive them.

Compson knows that Quentin will identify with Henry because of his own obsession with his sister Caddy. Compson's story, in its dramatization of Henry's protection of Judith, is, as Dennis Slattery notes, "too close to his [Quentin's] own history" (Slattery, 49). Compson imposes a certain belief on Quentin through his story of Henry's belief in a puritanical language, but blinds Quentin to this fact Compson knows that Quentin expects the story to serve as a model for his own obsession with his sister. Having shown, in my second chapter, Quentin stopped—arrested, in fact—on the threshold of the scene where Henry tells Judith that he has murdered Bon, the reader is already familiar with the effects

---

bring the reader into this chamber and thus out of the implied room in which Henry is verbally exposed to the esoteric milieu. This transition is achieved through a minor alteration of detail: the question of the identity of the narrator who describes the scene at hand. For at this point Bon is apparently silent –he is not the one describing the mistress and child to Henry Mr Compson's voice in this passage deprives Bon of the power of speech and so demotes him from the status of teller to mere agent in the scene Therefore Quentin's greatest confusion is that both his father and the figure in his father's narrative (Charles Bon) seem to be equally involved in creating the scene

of this narrative on Quentin's psyche. The significance of this narrative lies for Quentin in the fact that Henry is capable of avenging his sister's name and purity, while Quentin wasn't, as the reader who has read *The Sound and the Fury* would know.

Quentin falsely prizes an image of vocal intimacy with his father, as Henry had with Bon: he sees in Compson's image of Henry the figure of an avenger who is able to avenge because he is committed to a language of coherence, but this is merely Compson's sleight of hand, intended to weaken Quentin to Compson's powers of influence, and thereby to convert him into a commonwealth for Southern voices Compson, having told Quentin a story about how Henry rejected Bon's non-puritanical, and therefore, meaningless beliefs, nonetheless imposed, in an indirect manner, Quentin's belief in the same, so that while Quentin is shown Henry rejecting his mentor, we as readers watch as Quentin is indoctrinated or inscribed by his father. Because Compson's story is analogous to Quentin's own situation, this story forces Quentin to perceive himself in Henry's puritanism, and so reject identification with Bon's more ironic manner.

Yet even though Compson seems to side with Henry's puritanism, his own semi-ironic stance is actually (superficially) closer to Bon's ironic stance than it is to Henry's puritanism, despite the fact that he indirectly inveighs against Bon. Thus, in wanti g to give his father's words a metaleptic authority or priority over his own, so that they may present their subject in full presence, Quentin ends up being inscribed by a system of beliefs which has no definite, definitive source, since Henry's stance, which Quentin hopes to take as his own, is not a perfect representation of Mr Compson's.[5] Quentin's ability to be influenced by Henry, as though Henry were fully present to Quentin's eyes, indicates Quentin's capacity to be influenced by many voices, no matter how distant—indicates, in effect, Quentin's capacity to be a commonwealth.

---

[5]Quentin desperately desires authority, as we shall be seeing, and continually sees, in a vivid way, the things he is told about. For, after asking his father why Rosa chose him as hearer, the voice over observes Quentin's demonstratio· "Whatever the reason for choosing him... as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence" (13)

Compson's vested interest in Bon the mentor and in his rhetorical strategies, along with his interest in Henry as a docile and impressionable blank slate, is partly due to his identification with Bon as "just the sort of outsider," in John Matthew's words, who can "incarnate his own feelings of the alienation and weak despair suffered by the sons of the South" (Matthews 1982, 139).[6] The major principle of Compson's identification with Bon is that he wants to inscribe his son within his own Southern ideology, as Bon, in his tale, had wanted to inscribe Henry within a New Orleans cultural vision Compson is thus well qualified to discourse upon the rhetoric of inscription. As one critic suggests, "the easiest way to begin to recognize and measure the extent of Compson's circumscription (and inscription) of his son is to count the number of times Quentin says 'Father said' when trying to retell the Sutpen story" (Krause 1986, 364)

While analyzing the intricate network of vocal threads which tie different voices to each other, it is important to think through Mr Compson's relation to his narrative and his relation, as teller, to Quentin. For even though Compson is a readerly reader, his cynicism and detachment from the tales he tells suggest ironic characteristics In contrast to Compson's mode of ironic telling, Shreve's mode of ironic reaction to the tales he hears, as we shall be seeing in my next chapter, seems grounded by a sustained reference to non-meaning, to a belief in the contingencies of our beliefs as opposed to a blind adherence to absolute values. Irony doesn't attempt to *priviledge* one language-use over another, and so will admit numerous voices into its own without being infected by any of them (without becoming a commonwealth), because its vocal identity is more detached and doesn't entertain ideas of (metaleptic) priority. It also is important to understand that Quentin's

---

[6]Compson's ideology is expressed more clearly in *The Sound and the Fury*, where Compson, in John Irwin's paraphrase, says to Quentin "'We cannot exist because there exists no virginity to avenge and because there exists no authority by which we could avenge since we have no originality We are second-hand. You are a copy of a copy'" (Irwin 1981, 149-50). Mr Compson has, in Olga Vickery's terms, "rejected the gambit of life for the sake of sitting on the sidelines and playing the role of ironic commentator," and so by making himself an uninvolved spectator, he is "less of a man" (Vickery, 101) Compson articulates a "vacuity of purpose" which deprives his son, as Poirier notes, "of the possibility of abstracting human values from a historical context" (Poirier, 12); or, as Krause observes, "Compson meditates on fate and death, rather than communicating love to his son" (Krause 1986, 362).

crisis of listening to his father's tales of the South must not be attributed to Compson's telling Quentin that his actions, as John Irwin notes, are meaningless. (Irwin writes that "Quentin's father, with his failure and defeatism, his blend of cynicism and nihilism, has psychologically castrated his son by telling him that his actions are meaningless, worthless, that no masculine act is possible" [1975, 75].) While Quentin may be looking for a world of semantic coherence and thus react with psychological repulsion to the notion of the replacement of coherence by contingencies and semantics by semiosis, it must be remembered that Compson too falls prey to such non-ironic beliefs. Compson talks about how "something is missing," but only because he thinks it can be found or that it can be said to have existed once. He thinks meaning exists, and believes that if it can be found, it can be deciphered. Compson can be said to use the ironic or semiological mode (Olga Vickery has referred to Compson's "role," in the text, as that of the "ironic commentator" [Vickery, 101]), but it must be stressed that he uses this mode *only* out of the desperation of having failed in his own personal search for meaning

Given the dual nature of Compson's vocal identity, it can be deduced that Quentin is indirectly told to believe in the importance of a readerly reading or the importance of puritanical discourse, and is also told to accept the fact that his actions are meaningless and that there is no absolute authority. Quentin's feeling that he doesn't hate the South is really an expression of vocal vacillation; he feels that the past exerts an authority over him but at the same time is forced to accept his father's own sense of vacuity, of meaninglessness. Even though Compson doesn't understand the nature of ironic play (for he would much rather find that something which is missing), parts of his narratives impose upon Quentin a sense of the universality of loss, of something which is missing and which can't be presenced. Compson, in one passage, thus describes Henry as

> the provincial, the clown almost, given to instinctive and violent action rather than thinking who may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was a false quantity which must incorporate in itself an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend upon its loss, absence, to have existed at all (96).

Henry's valuation of his sister's virginity only in its integral, unbroken, unified form is for Mr Compson a weakness, an avoidance of an unavoidable state of loss which predicates existence. Through the distance of a story about Henry, Mr Compson mocks Quentin, but also advises him to preserve Caddy's virginity and honour from the threat of Dalton Ames as we know from the story in *The Sound and the Fury*. Yet in this passage, Henry is not characterized as the hero and champion of puritanical discourse, but as an instinctive clown. Here, rather than paralyze Quentin, Mr Compson forces him into a state of mourning over the threat of Judith's, and by implication, Caddy's virginity-as-existing-through-loss. Here mourning can be described in Stanley Cavell's terms: "the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something which exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss" (Cavell, 172). Or, in Ronald Schleifer's words: "mourning is the scene of rhetoric, the place where the 'rhetoricity' of rhetoric cannot be erased, where there is nothing else between our ordinary lives and the nothingness or pure non-sense of death than the gestures of rhetoric" (Schleifer, 228). Compson teaches his son that the gestures of the past have meaning but that this meaning can't be focused except through a recognition of absence, and that one must therefore become a commonwealth, a repository for other people's voices since the only things which, in Mr Compson's words, "endure," are already, necessarily, dead, in the distant past

In respect to Quentin's final utteran e in the text, another critic notes that

> the reader has to accept the paradoxical conclusion that Quentin both hates and loves the South. Each repetition of the statement displaces what is being communicated so that the utterance is deprived of a stable center. The conflict between love and hate is irreconcilable; the repetition indicates that Quentin experiences both and neither of the two emotions. It is not that Quentin cannot decide what he feels, he expresses a radical undecidability (Cobley 1983, 257-8).

This radical undecidability is emotional or critical because it is not representative of a detached perspective. In other words, Quentin is a readerly reader who despairs, like his father, at not having what he most desires: the security of full presence and of coherent meaning. David Dowling also notes that "Quentin's cry points to the excluded middle,

neither hate nor love but a precarious safety of non-committal" (Dowling, 103). Yet while Quentin's cry doesn't commit him or pin him down to either the position of hating or of loving the South, his outcry nonetheless indicates his inscription within the South, and so of his continuing commitment to the ideals of the Southern, Sutpenian, or puritanical belief in a language of full presence and of coherent meaning. Quentin cannot carry himself beyond the figures of his father's narrative because 1) his father doesn't speak *in his own voice,* so Quentin cannot object directly, and 2) his father himself speaks in the puritanical meaning-based form which criticizes Bon and so wins Quentin over. The result: Compson gets Quentin to carry on the obligation that was anticipated in Compson's story of Judith's mandate to pass a letter on even if you don't understand it, as Compson, in telling the story, as we have seen in my second chapter, doesn't fully understand the letter and tale of the letter's circumstances he passes on to Quentin. Quentin's apparent hatred of the South thus reflects his frustration at still being unable to understand the South, and this is because he cannot determine the source of his influence because Mr Compson does not *tell* Quentin what to believe in explicitly, but imposes these beliefs through an intricate system of vocal influences.

Many different parts of many different narratives illuminate each other. I have tried to read the duplicitousness of Quentin's assertion by seeing how it tells a story of vocal influence, rather than trying to determine whether this exclamation means what it seems to say (either that he loves the South, or that he hates it). In Empson's words, as I apply them to this condition, reading with the double plot in mind is a necessary way of reading *Absalom.* Empson writes that "the strengh of the double plot" occurs "once you take two parts to correspond, [for then] any character may take on *mana* because he seems to cause what he corresponds to or be Logos of what he symbolizes" (Empson, 34). The difficulty of reading Faulkner's text is mitigated, I believe, once it is realized that a consideration of any narrative thread must recognize that thread's place in the general con-text. It is impossible to look at one voice, say Quentin's voice which ends the text, and grasp what it

is trying to say, because many other voices speak within that one. The utterance, "I dont hate the South," can then be seen to reflect this predicament of inscription or influence, for Quentin is really saying 'I don't like being inscribed by the South but I must be because I am inscribed by it due to a commitment to a form of language of which I don't know the source.' It is thus, as Forster says, that

> Quentin's negation places him within the pattern of repression and narrative that dominates each speaker's relation to the past. His reasons for hating the South are easy enough to imagine; but the South also implies forms of history, legend, and family that Quentin absorbed like the air he breathed. They have become his forms of understanding.
>
> Shreve seems not to understand that to admit his hatred would lead Quentin to a rejection of the basis of his hatred: his lifelong obligation to hear and interpret the narratives of the South... (Foster, 103).

In my next chapter I investigate the way Shreve tries to get Quentin to renounce the forms of his understanding, and so escape paternal and Southern inscription.

Chapter Four.

The Ironic Voice: Shreve's Semiological Readings.

Like any honest heretic, Derrida has to retain what he attacks if only to pervert it. He does not claim to have stepped beyond metaphysics but to have read the metaphysician in a spirit of suspicion. If we were speaking naively within the philosophic terms, we would say that he is a skeptic, but that term has meaning only within a naive relation between mind and concept. Derrida's spirit is more properly called ironic. Irony smiles upon contradiction and speaks blithely of catastrophe: it dislikes residence and offers itself as a philosophy for nomads. Derrida tries to circumvent residence by resorting to the idiom of play, of *le jeu* as an act logically prior to the possibility of presence or absence. The intention of *De la grammatologie* is "to make enigmatic what one thinks or understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy,' and 'presence.'" Could any stated aim express the spirit of irony more precisely? Not to clarify, to divide, to discriminate, but to enlarge the enigmatic state; to put every crucial or ambitious noun within the skepticism of inverted commas (Donoghue, 157).

"...Wait. Listen. I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I dont know how to say it any better. Because it's something my people haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves and bullets in the dinning room table and such, always reminding us to never forget. "

...Quentin said[:] "You cant understand it. You would have to be born there."

"Would I then?" Quentin did not answer. "Do you understand it?"

"I dont know," Quentin said. "Yes, of course I understand it." They breathed in the darkness. After a moment Quentin said: "I dont know" (AA, 361-2).

Shrevlin McCannon's presence in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the presence of an ironic voice. This is to say that Shreve's mode of interpreting or reading what others say to him is not that of a "readerly reading." One can speak of doubt or aporia in relation to this character, but it must only be with the qualification that his is a healthy, or at least a less neurotic, mode of dealing with the things others say. Indeed, the difference which marks him off from the other characters and from the experience of crisis is this: Shreve believes, with Mr Compson and the other characters, that "something is missing," but he doesn't expect or hope to find it or restore it, as they do. Instead of perorating upon the crisis of loss in relation to the self, Shreve strives, in his way of reading, to read this loss in a constructive way, by looking at the aporias themselves and seeing what these gaps have to say. In other words, Shreve reads the Southern tales he hears (from Quentin, the commonwealth of voices) in the same way that I read the opening paragraphs in the text itself. Shreve looks at the gaps in the South's narrative fabric as I had looked at the grammatical gaps at the novel's opening, Shreve tries to ascertain what these gaps disclose in and of themselves.

This type of reading is what I have been calling a semiological mode of reading. Associated with this mode of reading is the ironic mode. While the semiological mode considers what is not there, the ironic mode takes what is there and treats it as though it were not. The ironic mode of reading does away with notions of presence, of meaning--of reading what is said literally. When there is something to analyze (*i e* when the grammatical subjects in a sentence are not occluded, but are *there* or *present* in the text), the ironic mode of analysis consequently focuses not on what the signifiers may mean, that is, not on the signified, but on the signifers themselves. By reading at the level of the signifier, Shreve reads in an "idiom of play" which I, in harmony with the Donoghue motto cited above, consider an important element of the ironic stance. In other words, Shreve's ironic mode of reading involves the freeplay of signifiers: he does not let the signifier's

signified distract him from the *political orientation of any given utterance*. This is to say that Shreve would not read Quentin's final utterance in the text ("I dont hate [the South]") as a straightforward expression of Quentin's lack of hatred toward the South. Shreve would recognize that his exclamation is political, that is, that it speaks within a network or con-text of other voices, other voices which oppress and inscribe the individual who speaks those words.

To say that Shreve is aware that statements are political or strategic in nature is to say that he is aware that statements seek to achieve some end or that they express the speaker's awareness that he or she exists within a certain type of socializing (inscribing) system (the vocal tradition of the South, for instance).[1] Consider, from a scene in everyday life, any common example of flattery—for example, a friend complimenting your cooking because he wants to partake in the feast, or seek some other favour of you. In such cases, the phrase 'you make the best blueberry muffins' does not *mean* only what it seems to say and should not be taken as such. The meaning is other than what the signifiers indicate. To analyze at the level of the signified is to analyze with the intention of consolidating meaning, of achieving closure of one's knowledge of the given subject. To read at the level of the signifier is to see how different signifiers could have been used, and indeed, in the true ironic spirit, to see how the full sense may in fact be the very opposite of what the utterance may initially have been taken to mean. To apply this insight to the text: had Quentin perceived his father's hidden purpose of inscription (of indoctrinating him into the tradition of the Southern stories), he would at least have had an opportunity to defend himself against it, just as the person who is aware of the hidden political agenda behind flattery can deal with those displaced intentions more directly and more efficiently.

[1]This is why Shreve, as we will be seeing in this chapter, tries to get Quentin to recognize his (Quentin's) inscription in the South, that he may finally renounce the South's claims on him. Shreve, in other words, tries to get Quentin to recognize that his statements are strategic, Shreve hopes Quentin will see that his claim "I dont hate it," along with his many other claims, like his claim that he is not related to Rosa, do not speak some form of truth, but merely reflect Quentin's present, and hopefully soon to be transcended, position in a complex vocal network.

I am therefore defining irony in a rather generic fashion, having to look no further for my definition than the less than academic (Penguin) *Dictionary of Literary Terms*. As J. A. Cuddon remarks, "most forms of irony involve[] the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, or between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality" (Cuddons, 338). Ironic readers like Shreve are well aware of the incongruities or aporias in the speech acts they encounter. This is why they read semiotically and ironically—they think, that is to say, in terms of doubt and not in terms of absolutes. Reading semiotically, they imagine speculatively what is not there; reading ironically, they recognize that what is there isn't the main thing, since signifiers are so indeterminate; reading through a combination of these two modes, they perceive speculatively the subtext of the utterance, a subtext which is about the ways voices interact with each other. For the ironic and semiological reader who is detached from what he or she hears will not succumb to an anxious search for a fully present meaning. Such readers then recognize that an utterance like Quentin's "I dont hate it" must be read less in terms of its surface signification (its simple denial of disliking the South) than in terms of its reflection of the situation of its articulation (and so as expressing, on other levels, that its voice is not its own, that its voice has been inscribed by previous utterances).

Donoghue's description of the Derridean spirit as one which "circumvent[s] residence by resorting to the idiom of play," thus serving to "make enigmatic what one thinks or understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy,' and 'presence,'" usefully describes Shreve's project in the text. Shreve does not receive the tales he hears as though his psyche were being written upon. While his distance from the tales may be attributed to his actual status as a foreigner in relation to the South (Shreve is a Canadian), Shreve's character is still manifested in his way of reacting to the tales, and this mode of reaction still marks a departure in tone from the other characters, and is therefore best undestood as expressing a new and refreshing *way of reading*, regardless of his origins. In not experiencing a crisis in relation to the things he hears, Shreve's perspective on the nature of discourse, of

I am therefore defining irony in a rather generic fashion, having to look no further for my definition than the less than academic (Penguin) *Dictionary of Literary Terms*. As J. A. Cuddon remarks, "most forms of irony involve[] the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, or between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality" (Cuddons, 338). Ironic readers like Shreve are well aware of the incongruities or aporias in the speech acts they encounter. This is why they read semiotically and ironically—they think, that is to say, in terms of doubt and not in terms of absolutes. Reading semiotically, they imagine speculatively what is not there; reading ironically, they recognize that what is there isn't the main thing, since signifiers are so indeterminate; reading through a combination of these two modes, they perceive speculatively the subtext of the utterance, a subtext which is about the ways voices interact with each other. For the ironic and semiological reader who is detached from what he or she hears will not succumb to an anxious search for a fully present meaning. Such readers then recognize that an utterance like Quentin's "I dont hate it" must be read less in terms of its surface signification (its simple denial of disliking the South) than in terms of its reflection of the situation of its articulation (and so as expressing, on other levels, that its voice is not its own, that its voice has been inscribed by previous utterances).

Donoghue's description of the Derridean spirit as one which "circumvent[s] residence by resorting to the idiom of play," thus serving to "make enigmatic what one thinks or understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy,' and 'presence,'" usefully describes Shreve's project in the text. Shreve does not receive the tales he hears as though his psyche were being written upon. While his distance from the tales may be attributed to his actual status as a foreigner in relation to the South (Shreve is a Canadian), Shreve's character is still manifested in his way of reacting to the tales, and this mode of reaction still marks a departure in tone from the other characters, and is therefore best understood as expressing a new and refreshing *way of reading*, regardless of his origins. In not experiencing a crisis in relation to the things he hears, Shreve's perspective on the nature of discourse, of

language, contrasts sharply that of the other characters mentioned so far. As James Snead notes, "Shreve sees conversation as living communication, not as a fixated ritual of authority" (Snead 1986, 133). Characteristically discursive, Shreve's idiom of play dismantles, in a rather detached or transcendent manner, the Southern commonwealth of voices, by "enlarg[ing]," as Donoghue would say, "the enigmatic state." Shreve suspects the metaphysical claims made by the Southern figures of authority (claims made by the Sutpens and the Compsons). These figures search for meaning and only elegiacally cede to semiosis, to an absence of meaning, to an absence of fully revealed secrets. In questioning the validity of the basis of the Southern claims to proximity, immediacy and presence, Shreve doesn't need to reach after fact and reason and instead maintains his reading on the level of semiotic play Shreve's semiotic mode of reading, in other words, brings attention to the absence of authority in the Southern narration, or draws attention to the way an individual's search for meaning destroys that individual's ability to play, and so be healthily detached. Shreve's semiological focus explains his interest in Jim Bond; Shreve reads Bond as the Sutpen heir who dismantles the Southern stance in order that he (Shreve) may bring Quentin to a state in which he (Quentin) can escape the paralyzing influences of his Southern inheritance.

Shreve is first introduced to the reader in chapter VI as Quentin's roommate. The thread which ties this introductory scene to the rest of what the reader has read is the subject that engages the attention of both youths: a letter to Quentin from his father, in which Quentin is informed of Rosa's death. It is this letter, the voice over tells us, that forces Quentin to explain his relation (or desire for a lack of relation) to the letter's subject:

> ..[Quentin] soon needing, required to say 'No, neither aunt, cousin, nor uncle, Rosa. Miss Rosa Coldfield, an old lady that died young of outrage in 1866 one summer' and then Shreve said, 'You mean she was no kin to you, no kin to you at all, that there was actually one Southern Bayard or Guinevere who was no kin to you? then what did she die for?' and that not Shreve's first time, nobody's first time in Cambridge since September: *Tell about the South What's it like there What do they do there.* ' (174).

The asylum which Quentin seeks from his cultural (geographical) heritage at Harvard neither frees nor protects him from having to re-cognize (to continue to think about) this

heritage. Quentin cannot escape the tales of the South because he must tell them repeatedly, and in telling them, listen to them over and over again himself. His attempted disassociation from Rosa is a denial of this heritage, even though Rosa is, afterall, no blood-relation. Having divulged many details of his legacy to Shreve prior to our first meeting Shreve, Quentin is now attempting to tell his life story with some sort of authorial objectivity, by distancing himself from a cultural relative, from another individual who is also a commonwealth of voices. Quentin's attempt to speak of Rosa objectively, as though from a distance, is a psychological as well as a linguistic attempt to deny or negate the hold of the past on him; his insistence on his lack of blood-filiation to Rosa takes place through a form of negation: Rosa is none of the things Shreve calls her; she is simply, for Quentin, as is evident in his formal reference to her as "Miss Rosa Coldfield," a person who bears no nominal relation to himself

Shreve pokes fun at Quentin's commitment to the South, thus ironizing Quentin's narrative and his genealogical relation to it. From the moment Shreve makes his first appearance in the text, he marks a deep contrast to the obsessive voices of Rosa, Quentin and Mr Compson. Shreve's playfulness, evident in the citation above, is ironic, for, like sarcasm, it speaks a form of truth, while also subverting its own claims to truth. Shreve's question, "You mean she was no kin to you?" is not only a rhetorical question, it is also a sarcastic dig which misrepresents the South's mythic status and present situation. Shreve overextends or hyperbolically distorts Quentin's relation to the South by aggrandizing all characters into Bayards and all women into a variety of Guineveres.[2] In the same way, when Quentin "emphasizes the distance and formality in his relationship with Miss Rosa" (Ragan 1991, 70), Shreve revises Quentin's attempted formality into a hyperbolized mythic greatness by calling her either "*this* Aunt Rosa" or "*the* Aunt Rosa" (starting on page 176). Shreve's quotational method is his means of resistance to becoming a mere listener. Shreve

[2]David Ragan gives the historic and mythic derivations of these names, noting that Faulkner gives the name Bayard to several characters in the Sartoris family, and adds that Shreve uses the names "mockingly, suggesting a Southern preoccupation with romance and gallantry" (Ragan 1991, 71).

puts such references to characters from a culture other than his own within what Donoghue calls "the skepticism of inverted commas," as his way of keeping the voice of the heritage distinct from his own. Even though Quentin had apparently clarified Rosa's (non-)relation to himself, Shreve continues to refer to her as (Quentin's) aunt. And, more than this, as if to show that this catachretic 'misnaming' is more than just a misunderstanding or 'mis-listening,' Shreve also adds the definite article 'the' or 'this' to highlight the fact that the South can be deconstructed by its own aggrandizing rhetoric, that theSouthern pretension toward greatness is merely rhetorical and not real In Minrose Gwin's words, Shreve "distances and diminishes the authority of Rosa's narrative by misnaming her" (Gwin 1990, 117). Initially, Quentin attempts to correct Shreve's catachretic misnamings of Rosa Coldfield, but eventually gives up because Shreve playfully persists in his ironic mocking of Quentin's connection to the South As Dale Parker has noted, Shreve's bluntness is ironic in that it makes fun of the involvement that Quentin and other Southerners invest in the Sutpen legacy (Parker 1991, 119) In other words, Shreve does not modify his mode of discourse that it may suit Quentin and reflect Quentin's Southern ideals, for the reason that Shreve intends to show that the Southern search for greatness, the search for a fully-present meaning, undermines or subverts its own claims to mythic status.

Shreve's distance from Quentin's narrative is also presented in scenes like this:

'...[Sutpen] was born in West Virginia, in the mountains—' ('Not in West Virginia,' Shreve said. 'Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808 And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808 because—' 'All right,' Quentin said. '—West Virginia wasn't admitted—' 'All right all right,' Quentin said '—into the United States until—' 'All right all right all right,' Quentin said)... (220-1).

Shreve is the Canadian, the foreigner, who (ironically) (re-)tells Quentin about his Southern heritage. He listens with an analytic ear, citing or quoting history where convenient, or calling Rosa by other names in order to create dissonance in Quentin's telling, in order to generate a lack of meaning or to gloss the fact that what Quentin talks about is defunct and no longer 'present.' Shreve's mannerisms urge Quentin to accept that these characters or figures from the past survive only linguistically, and that to transcend the attendant anxiety

in relating (to) the South, one must admit that the "ghosts" which haunt Quentin exist only in language and are not real. By correcting Quentin's reference to West Virginia, Shreve tries to make Quentin more aware of the language he uses; Quentin's tale must be either historicaly distanced from its subject matter in its attention to small details, or present itself as a self-reflection on the fact that it is a mere linguistic fabrication. Shreve listens to Quentin's tales that he might make a hole in the fabric of that narrative. Here we have the essential difference between a critical type of criticism or listening and the more analytical type which Shreve exemplifies. For characters in the text who experience crises experience this anxiety because of the frustration of their initial search for meaning, for presence. Shreve, on the other hand, is here seen actively creating figures of doubt in Quentin's narrative. Shreve seeks to enlarge the enigmatic state which for other characters is that state which is perceived as a threat to their sense of self-identity. Shreve interrupts Quentin's tale by reminding Quentin that Rosa has now been renamed, or by pointing out an historical oversight, and so makes the detail a larger issue than the whole. Shreve's objective stance clearly identifies him as the figure of an abruptor—but an ironic abruptor, since, as Cuddon would say, his remarks upon Quentin's narrative show that Shreve takes an approach which actively perceives "a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, ...or between appearance and reality."

Shreve is described as watching Quentin "from the beginning with intent detached speculation and curiosity" (256), with an intensity, that is to say, not of one engaged with a crisis, but of one who must listen closely in order to break up the speaker's narrative. Because Shreve can be both engaged and then disengaged, one critic has noted (in rather extreme terms, I find) that he can be considered "the only *psychopathological* case in the novel—in his capacity for sadism, the emphatic *viciousness* of his pleasures, and so on" (Guetti, 75, note 2, italics added). How then is the reader to deal with passages in the text which try to clear Shreve of any such detached, let alone sadistic, motives? In one passage, for instance, it is noted that:

> [Shreve's] remark was not intended for flippancy or even derogation. It was born (if from any source) of that incorrigible unsentimental sentimentality of the young which takes the form of hard and often crass levity... (275)

It must be recognized that the voice over in this statement only appears to contradict Guetti's vision of Shreve's sadism. For Shreve's personal irony must be seen to comprehend *dual* and *contradictory* positions. On the one hand, Shreve on the exterior seems flippant to the point of being sadistic, considering Quentin's involvement with the tales and his search for meaning or "understanding," while on the other hand, this same character just wants to understand (361) or sentimentally identify with what he hears.[3] This opposition, also necessarily an apposition, is characteristic of irony. Irony allows us to sustain both internal and external states which may differ significantly from one another.[4] Furthermore, Shreve's detachment or flippancy is primarily a defensive way of listening and telling. Shreve becomes the semi-engaged listener so that he may also become the ironic teller—he listens closely but with levity, so that he may pervert the tales, and speak for himself instead of being inscribed by these tales. To see external sadism and internal understanding as mutually exclusive is to overlook the intentions of Shreve's flippancy. his goal is to get Quentin to speak for himself. It must be noted, to his credit, that Shreve is relatively successful: chapters VI-IX present a Quentin who is less neurotic in Shreve's company, a Quentin who benefits from Shreve's ironic presence. Shreve's sadism inflicts (at its potential worst) the pain of renunciation upon Quentin—had Quentin accepted and externalized his hatred for the South by saying 'I do hate the South' instead of "I dont hate it," Quentin would be less ensnared within the Sutpen filigree. (The ultimate importance of the desirabilty of Quentin's renunciation is evident in the context of *The*

---

[3]This passage where Shreve expresses his desire to understand the South and where Quentin admits that he doesn't know whether or not he himself understands the South is quoted more extensively on the title page to this chapter.

[4]The voice over even describes Shreve as the embodiment or incarnation of the ironic principle, telling us that Shreve "looked exactly nineteen; he was one of those people whose correct age you never know because they look exactly that and so you tell yourself that he or she cannot possibly be that because he or she looks too exactly that not to take advantage of the appearance so you never believe implicitly that he or she is either that age which they claim or that which in sheer desperation they agree to or which someone else reports them to be " (294)

Sound and the Fury, where a more practically detached Quentin may not have committed suicide.)

Shreve's ironic detachment must be understood within the context of his understanding that the only healthy discourse is the discourse of play. One critic notes that Quentin and Shreve share "a critical attitude toward historical knowledge which stimulates the search for an adequate explanation of past events" (Rollyson, 76). Yet Quentin and Shreve do more than try to find adequate explanations for past events. They also doubt historical knowledge and find any epistemological certainty in this respect to be suspect. Shreve and Quentin, however, do more than simply try to situate their beliefs in relation to one type of historical knowledge over another. More importantly, their narratives also try to situate themselves in relation to prior narratives on the same subject. Shreve's influence in the latter half of the book creates and opens up space for new linguistic forms and newly perceived narrative figures, both for himself, and, at times, for Quentin. Shreve's capacity for play allows him not only sarcastically to misrepresent some of the Southern figures, but also to create new ones. By creating new tales, Shreve indicates to Quentin a way for him (Quentin) to transcend the influence of the Southern narrative voices that Quentin would never have been able to transcend (even mometarily) on his own. As John Basset notes: Shreve "develops a series of new metaphors and new narratives. Shreve, after all, is the only true inventor in the book" (Basset, 139).

Shreve's ironic or detached association with the Southern tales allows him to recontextualize things said by prior voices so that he effectively immunizes himself against experiencing a crisis and becoming a commonwealth. Consider for instance the complex presentation of his transgression of Mr Compson's injunction to Quentin against imagining the forbidden. Here is the Compson injunction which Shreve eventually transgresses:

> You can not even imagine [Charles Bon] and Judith alone together. Try to do it and the nearest you can come is a projection of them while the two actual people were doubtless separate and elsewhere--two shades pacing, serene and untroubled by flesh, in a summer garden--the same two serene phantoms who seem to watch, hover, impartial attentive and quiet, above and behind the inexplicable thunderhead of interdictions

> and defiances and the repudiations out of which the rocklike Sutpen and the volatile Henry flashed and glared and ceased .. (97)

Nowhere in the text do we see Quentin break out of his father's inscription. Shreve, however, while referring implicitly to Mr Compson's words to Quentin, not only imagines Judith and Bon walking together, but even (re)describes Bon as thinking, while "he walked with Judith and talked to her, gallant and elegant and automatic" (333), about the sign he wants to get from Sutpen which will confirm his suspicion that Sutpen is his father—Shreve ironically imagines or extrapolates a story in which Bon attempts to settle his relationship to a father who shirks his responsiblity of *inscribing* him, of giving him his rightful name. Shreve's transgression here develops as a tale about the interplay of voices. Shreve's imaginative act, then, ought not to be read merely as a vision, for, as a commentary upon the relationships between voices, it is more precisely a revision. Furthermore, Shreve's poetic act simultaneously comments upon its subject's desire to be affiliated to Sutpen (to be a Sutpen 'relation') As a sign of the intricate network of interacting voices in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve's revision of Mr Compson's injunction is actually anticipated a few pages earlier by the voice over's own imagining:

> ...and they—Quentin and Shreve—thinking how after the father spoke and before what he said stopped being shock and began to make sense, Henry 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 (294).

Shreve's revision partly consists of staging this walk at Christmas time, while Compson's injunction sets the (non)event in the unimaginable imagined time of summer But from the reader's perspective, Shreve's move is anticipated by the voice over This narrator suggests that, even though Quentin and Shreve had imagined Henry observing the pair "disappear slowly beyond some bush or shrub starred with white bloom—jasmine, spiraea," these 'observed' or imagined objects are nevertheless 'names, blooms which Shreve possibly had never heard [of] .." (294-5). The voice over's comment is strategic—it serves the purpose of undermining Shreve's authority/voice. Shreve creates a scene, it is implied, but he really doesn't know what he is doing in respect to the details; he doesn't build upon fact; he doesn't understand what he creates. The voice over corrects Shreve

while excusing the misreadings that result from the collaboration of Shreve and Quentin's imaginations, noting that, "It would not matter here in Cambridge [the place of the collaborative and creative telling] that the time had been winter in that garden too [and that] it had been night in the garden also" (295), thereby making the presence of blooms and spiraea impossible. This anticipated false imagining does not matter because the telling is now a healthy and not a repressive one, since Shreve and Quentin are aware that they are speculating in a non-committed fashion on the events past. This imagining must be judged by its results: it makes possible Quentin's ability to transgress his father's injunction. Such mis-readings explore a freedom of perspective and indicate a freedom from an anxiety of influence, the anxiety which could result in one's becoming a commonwealth.[5]

Another outward sign which links Donoghue's comment on irony to Shreve's (and, because of Shreve's influence on him, Quentin's) approach to telling and listening is contained in the injunction "Wait!" In one respect, this refers to Quentin's injunction to Shreve not to disrupt the structure of his (Quentin's) telling. In another, it refers to Shreve's exclamation that he be allowed to revise Quentin's past without being interrupted by Quentin. Though speaking so as to be heard by the other, neither wants his discourse to be punctured. One of the most exciting expressions of Shreve's ironic intentions occurs when Shreve counters Quentin by telling him "No. . you wait. Let me play a while now" (280). It shows that, as Snead notes, "In order to interpret, Shreve interrupts" (Snead 1986, 134). These are moments in the text where both Quentin and Shreve are depicted as individuals engaged in the activity of keeping their own discourses going, so that the other can't puncture their respective narrative efforts. Shreve's mode of telling here is more mature than Quentin's, as it admits the fact that narratives occur between two people and so

---

[5]I wish merely to note that this drama of conflicting imaginings supports a reading of the text which sees it as concerned with the dynamic relation of different voices and is, even in this example, less concerned with the truth of the story, the picturing forth of what really happened, than with verbal economy and power-play. One critic thus misses the mark in noting that Quentin and Shreve's engagement with Henry and Bon throughout the text represents a "gradual merging of perception" to the point that Quentin and Shreve see the things that Henry and Bon had seen with equal intensity (Ragan 1987, 128). In my reading of these passages, the main story told is of the agon of voicing.

exist as a type of "play." Quentin doesn't want his discourse to be interrupted because he wants to unearth the something which is missing in the tale. Shreve doesn't want to be interrupted because he wants to play with the loose threads of the narrative, play with the very fact that something is missing in the narrative, that the individuals are less than what Quentin makes them out to be and that the past cannot be treated like the present. Shreve's injunction reflects a more dialogical bent, while Quentin's indicates a more monolithic or meaning-oriented assertion.

It is in this passage where Shreve wants to "play" that Shreve offers a remarkable account of Wash Jones's murder of Sutpen:

> Now, Wash. Him (the demon) standing there with the horse, the saddled charger, the sheathed saber...' the voice of the faithful grave-digger who opened the play and would close it, coming out of the wings like Shakespeare's very self. (280)

Shreve's voicing here once again oversteps the voice of a precursor, as it is a reformulation of Mr Compson's 'play' metaphor for the Sutpen drama:

> [Sutpen] was unaware, that while he was playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony-- the stage manager, call him what you will—was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one. (72-3)

The difference between the two versions of Sutpen's downfall is in degree; Shreve's imagining hyperbolizes or, in Pitavy's term, "inflates" Mr Compson's (Pitavy 1984, 195). Compson accounts for the Sutpen downfall in terms of arrogance (or, in more literary terms, hamartia). Knowing that Wash Jones was the final voice/instrument in Sutpen's downfall, Shreve revises Compson's metaphors of "Fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager," and transforms Jones, an otherwise marginal character in the text, into the faithful gravedigger who would both open and close the play—not the stage manager, but the very author of the play, its playwright. In an ironic twist, Compson's figure of the stage manager becomes in Shreve's story someone who is perhaps the greatest single 'author' of all time. Wash's presence as a presence greater than Sutpen's presence is thus a surprise. Shakespeare on the stage would remind us of the play's artificiality. Wash as author or playwright reminds us of the fragility of the past, of its linguistic reconstruction,

the playwright thus serving as Shreve's self-reflexive figure for his (and Quentin's) creative production in a Harvard dormitory.

Shreve's playful revisionism is itself given an ironic or dualistic characterization in the text. The voice over tells us that, while "there might be paradox and inconsistency" in Quentin and Shreve's cooperative recreations of portions of the Sutpen myth, there is still "nothing fault nor false" (316). Yet, paradoxically, the text also states, a few lines above, that through

> some happy marriage of speaking and hearing.. each .. forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other--faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed .. and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and preserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived (316)

What is the meaning of this paradox? How can there be both "nothing fault" and at the same time "faultings both in the creating . and in the hearing"? In order to explain this paradox, I would suggest that the term "fault" refers to a misreading, a general misunderstanding or misapplication of historical facts As we have seen, Quentin and Shreve's narratives are "false" in this sense, because they are not historical and are indeed misreadings. It therefore becomes apparent that the voice over's comment that their tellings are not false more clearly means that Quentin and Shreve's tellings are true to some other standard, namely the standard of the imagination, since the facts are tailored, as we are told, to "fit the preconceived," and not the other way around. It is for this reason that their tellings do not exhibit the "fault" of crisis. Shreve and Quentin's selves here influence and change the Southern narrative rather than vice versa By not allowing the tales to influence their mode of self-perception (by not allowing the tales to make them into commonwealths), no fault is to be found in Quentin and Shreve's relation to the Southern tales

As one critic suggests, Quentin and Shreve's 'speculations are poetically true because they realize possible ways of telling—i e , possible meanings inherent in the rhetoric of the particular heritage by which Shreve is set into play" (Radloff, 263) Yet, more consistently, as Faulkner himself suggested, Quentin's "friend" Shreve is the one who "had a much truer picture of Sutpen from what Quentin told him than Quentin himself did"

(Faulkner 1959, 274)---for Quentin's maturity of vision is *dependent* upon the influence of his roommate's more naturally ironic approach. Therefore, it is not altogether accurate to state that Shreve is set into play by the rhetoric of the Southern heritage which he hears from his roommate, for Shreve's narrative efforts are instead the product of his ironic vantage. Although he may require certain facts which he derives from Quentin in order to ground the subject of his own narrative, he nonetheless achieves a "truer picture" by virtue of his more detached perspective, a perspective which is in direct contrast to what Faulkner has called Quentin's "opthalmia" (Faulkner 1959, 274).

Shreve achieves a truer picture (and so does not suffer from opthalmia) because he ironically prevents the Southern tale of authority, of full presence from having metaleptic priority over his own versions of the tale. Unlike the other characters mentioned so far, Shreve does not become inscribed by and then recite the tales he hears. As James Gray says, "Unlike Sutpen at the door, unlike Miss Rosa on the stairs, unlike Bon at the ultimate gate, Shreve has never been barred by the inscriptions of patrimonial hierarchy" (Gray, 34). In fact, rather than be bounded within the margins of and abused by another's figurations, Shreve himself finally inscribes the tale. This movement is suggested, as one critic notes, in the etymology of his name. "It derives from 'scribe,' one who 'scratches,' 'writes,' but who is also one who hears confession and allots penance; his name grows from the root word found in 'to circumscribe,' 'describe,' 'Scribble,' 'transcribe' (Webster 1403)" (Slattery, 51).

It is possible to advance the argument that Shreve is only able to evade the inscriptions of the South because his own birthright, his own heritage of being a Canadian, prevents him from understanding and *identifying* with the South, as Quentin himself suggests (AA, 361). This would be to say that Shreve's ironic detachment is due solely to the fact that he isn't a Southerner. If one were to take this as a given, it would have to be inferred that Quentin, or any Southerner, would never be able to gain 'ironic distance' from that heritage. In this respect, it would seem difficult to argue that it is Shreve's *irony* which

offers a way of listening to Quentin which would safeguard his self against influences, against inscription. For isn't it easier for Shreve to be detached from the tales for the very reason that he is not part of the Southern heritage? Yet the question still remains: Does Shreve's ironism offer a better way of reading than that offered by the metaphysicians of the South? Shreve's ironic way of listening, it must be maintained, in its ability to avoid the experience of crisis, is still preferable to the metaleptic and demonstric modes of listening I discussed in my last chapter. By not giving the speaker's words greater authority than his own, Shreve represents a new trope in the text. By analyzing the rhetorical forms voices take when they interact with each other in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve's origins as a Canadian come to have little bearing on what he does for the situation of discourse in the text. James Mellard, for instance, is a reader who approaches Faulkner's text in a way which is similar to mine. He argues that Shreve's "account or interpretation is dominated by the trope of irony and emplotted as satire or antiromance," his "basic tactic" being to "deflate the language of the previous enfigurations" (119). As a critic of Faulkner's text, one can do no better than trace the dramatization of the rhetorical forms therein, as Mellard does by aligning the four main voices in the text and their subject with four different tropes, Shreve's tropic manner representing an escape from the other forms of consciousness.[6]

Nonetheless, to fully understand the purpose of the ironic voice in Faulkner's text, it is important to admit the contradiction (or textual impass). the text is structured such that irony offers a *model* for a way out of inscription, while the character (Shreve) who embodies this principle is (authorially) given attributes which make of his ironic usage no heroic feat. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, all impasses in *Absalom,*

---

[6]Mellard maps out *Absalom*'s tropic landscape by linking Rosa's romance themes to a metaphoric perspective, Mr Compson's tragic themes to a metonymical perspective, the "comic" story of Sutpen's design to synechdoche, and Shreve's antiromatic persuasions to irony. Clearly, in focusing more upon the notions of one voice's influence upon another, I have had to resort to a different tropological scheme to describe the series of 'weak' readings prior to considering the 'stronger' reading-perspective exemplified in Shreve's ironic character, concluding my reading of the text nonetheless on much the same (tropological) ground as that explored by Mellard

Absalom! can be seen to fulfill a purpose once it is discovered that these impasses or aporias themselves have something to say, that they have a voice. A weak textual reading merely notes its frustration (or anxiety) at a particular textual impass, while a stronger reading makes this impass, stalemate or conflict between two elements speak, thereby achieving an understanding of the text's parapraxes. This act of giving a voice to the text, differing as it does from 1) the simple common-sense reading which strives for a vantage which may assert textual unity, and 2) the form of deconstructive reading which immerses itself in the rhetoric of the text to demonstrate how any textual pretensions to unity dismantle its own claims, nonetheless combines them to describe, speculatively, a more encompassing textual voice. In this case, with this particular section of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in mind, a collusion of these two types of reading (the unity-bound common-sense type of reading and the type of deconstructive reading which looks for aporias in what is said) produces a very simple insight here into the problem of the significance of Shreve's ironic stance in relation to the fact of his being a Canadian. The conspicuous absence of a fully sketched Southern Shreve who escapes his would-be inscriptions through an ironic relation to the tales is Faulkner's way of saying the following to the reader. 'I show you the way out, but not entirely. So that only if you are so truly detached as to avoid becoming fully inscribed by the world I create, and only if you are capable instead of imagining what such a full fledged ironism would be, have you understood the significance of irony. If you, as a reader, can imagine what a Southern ironic voice would be like, then you have made the impasses in my text speak.'

I now turn to Shreve's reinscription of or commentary upon Jim Bond, the last of Sutpen's living heirs. I believe that Shreve hones in on this character at the end of the book for what Shreve takes to be Bond's ironic re-presentation or dismantling of Sutpen's great design to have a pure (that is, in Sutpen's eyes, a white) lineage which will extend his name and honour into the future. Bond is significant to Shreve as he represents Sutpen's failure in this respect. As James Snead remarks:

> Shreve has punctured this smooth fabric [of the narrative heritage], saying that the story makes sense if you restore the black, but it fails otherwise; but even by mentioning the black he has already failed the story. And Quentin has failed even more grandly, because he and his Southern informants have failed to impose through their narrations the South's influential magic upon the shrewd Canadian listener (Snead 1986, 131).

Shreve abrupts into the Sutpen filigree of whiteness or 'purity' and then asks Quentin why he hates the South. One critic remarks: "That Shreve does not seem more concerned with Quentin's mental balance is a reflection of his lack of comprehension of both the nature and the extent of Quentin's involvement" (Ragan 1987, 154). Yet, in my view, Shreve perceives Quentin's involvement and then tries to get him to ironize it, and he tries to do this mainly through his characterization of Jim Bond Shreve realizes that for Quentin to be able to say that he hates the South at least a little bit would be to admit a certain distance from the South and thereby confirm that his collaboration with Shreve, in revising parts of the legend as it had been told to him, was more than a mere anomaly in his outlook, indicating the assumption of a healthier attitude, one which doesn't restrict him to being a mere commonwealth of voices.[7] In this respect, it seems mistaken to assume that Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South?" is Shreve's "pathetic" rhetorical tactic to conceal his engagement and identification with the tale, as Pitavy argues (Pitavy 1989, 30-1) To argue this point is to misread the orientation of utterances as dramatized or expounded in the text: a remark happens in a context of other remarks and tries to do something to that context; if it is weak, it aligns itself with that context; if strong, it realigns or revises that context. Pitavy's remark misses Shreve's function or role in the text as a voice among others, a voice which tries to remark those voices (to achieve, as Faulkner says, a "truer picture") and tries to suggest to Quentin that he do the same.

---

[7]In theoretical terms, Shreve attempts to force Quentin to assume a more detached because more private and less social relation to the Sutpen filigree as this would allow him to indulge in his own (private) re-creations of the legacy. I owe this insight to my application, to Faulkner's text, of Richard Rorty's insight into the nature of irony. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty limits irony's use to the realm of the private, arguing that any attempts to convert its use to social ends are mistaken Shreve tries to get Quentin to create, to separate out, a private world for himself, and thereby cease being a commonwealth, to get Quentin to play as he (Shreve) does with the loose ends of the legacy Shreve's irony, in turn, seeks only to promote this attitude and so is hardly, as Guetti and Ragan have suggested, unaware of Quentin's stance in relation to his 'complex' of tales

Shreve, never having met Bond, sees in him a symbol of the "fault" or aporia in Sutpen's legacy, a fault which topples Sutpen's grand narrative schemes of filial continuation. Earlier on, Shreve had criticized the events he had heard for their tragic outcome by reductively stating of Sutpen (and the South): "So he just wanted a grandson... That was all he was after Jesus, the South is fine isn't it?" (217). Thus, Shreve's ultimate critique of the South is made clearer once he expounds upon who/what this grandson is. Jim Bond, like Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, is a Faulknerian figuration of idiocy. Unlike his counterpart in the Compson family, Jim Bond can speak (it is implied that he can't form sentences beyond "Calls me Jim Bond" (371)), but again, like Benjy, he mainly howls, or forms inarticulate sounds Bond, the type of grandson Sutpen would have wanted least (because of the taint of black blood), completely negates the things Sutpen cherished most: the ability to say 'I am a Sutpen,' and to be able to proudly verbalize the Sutpen genealogy, to tell of it. Being the last remaining Sutpen, Bond mocks the design or master narrative through his babble. Here is the passage where Shreve gives his own interpretation of Jim Bond's significance in relation to the Sutpen design:

> "So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Clytie; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?" Quentin did not answer; evidently Shreve did not want an answer now; he continued almost without a pause: "Which is alright, it's fine; it clears the whole ledger, you can tear all the pages out and burn them, except for one thing. And do you know what that is?" Perhaps he hoped for an answer this time, or perhaps he merely paused for emphasis, since he got no answer "You've got one nigger left One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you can't catch him and you dont even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still You still hear him at night sometimes Don't you?"
>
> "Yes," Quentin said
>
> "And so do you know what I think?" Now he did expect an answer, and now he got one:
>
> "No," Quentin said.
>
> "Do you want to know what I think?"
>
> "No," Quentin said
>
> "Then I'll tell you. I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won't quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won't show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. Now I want you to tell me just one thing more Why do you hate the South?" (377-8)

As has been noted, Bond is Shreve's figure for the trace or taint of the other in Sutpen's narrative design and actual lineage, a taint which creates an irrevocable gap in, and thus

undermines, the Sutpen dream of total coherency, of "undisturbed self-presence" (Flores, 150).[8] It makes sense that Shreve would chose Bond as the 'obscured or half-concealed black(-sheep)' of the family. For, having heard Quentin's account of the ur-scene, Shreve would know that darkness of pigment (or 'tainted' blood) had come to represent for Sutpen, ever since his experience at Pettibone's plantation, a presence which undermines his designs, a destructive "darkness" or aporia in his intended legacy (Guetti, 98).

Olga Vickery also remarks upon Shreve's representation of Jim Bond as an individual who negates the system of caste differences which became the foundation of young Sutpen's dream or "design." She says, "The half-mocking conclusion of Shreve's refers to Bond's survival both as 'Negro' and as idiot. Lacking reason, this last descendant of Sutpen is incapable of realizing that he is colored or that there are conventions which define his position with respect to other men" (Vickery, 100). This said, we have an account of Shreve's focus on Bond at the end of the text. For this last member of the Sutpen filiation is unable to perform the distinction between men so essential to Sutpen's design. Bond is unable to read, and is thus incapable of understanding his position in the world about him as Sutpen had hoped his successors would. Now, the Compson filigree or narrative offers the only account in the text of the story of Sutpen's literary education. It tells us that, at an early age—at a time when he was unable to read his own name (AA, 142), and, as Krause observes, at a time when Sutpen was unable "to read and interpret texts for himself"—Sutpen had discovered "that he cannot read or interpret himself or others" (Krause 1984, 227). Dennis Foster takes this general insight further, by commenting that Sutpen's illiteracy meant that he "still had no concept of a discrete self, as if he had no 'I' to set him

---

[8]The extent to which Jim Bond is Shreve's figure, that is, his creation, is evident in his renaming of Charles Bon's grandson. Suddenly he announces to Quentin. "...the name was Bond now." (215). This is Shreve's deliberate misprisal or catachretic misrepresentation of the name in an effort to make his mark, or leave an impression, on the story of the Sutpens. That he was successful in leaving a mark on the story of the Sutpens is evident in the fact that Shreve's naming is adopted in the "Genealogy," with the real name "Bon" in parentheses beside it.

apart from the rest of the world" (Foster, 92) [9] Sutpen discovers that in order to interact with others he too must learn to "see essential differences between people" (Foster, 92), and, in seeing these differences, not only learn, as the text tells us, "the difference... between white men and black ones," but also the "difference between white men and white men" (AA, 226). For Shreve, Bond's illiteracy is an ironic contrast to Sutpen's eventual literacy, as the ability to read implies, for Sutpen, a non-ironic sense of authority.[10] Simply, Shreve's figure of Bond signifies a return to Sutpen's original self, a return to unevolved man. Reading for Sutpen entails the discovery and solidification of meaning. But for Shreve, reading is a reflection on the fact that an all-answering meaning is an idealism. Aware of the escape of meaning, Shreve starts any effort of reading in a manner of semiological play. Shreve uses Bond as a symbol of a fault or gap in the Sutpen filigree, as a symbol for the escape of meaning within that Southern tradition that is still so important to Quentin.

---

[9]We are told that as a boy, Sutpen "didn't listen to the vague and cloudy tales of Tidewater splendor... because he could not understand what the people who told about it meant, and when he became a boy he didn't listen to them because there was nothing in sight to compare and gauge the tales by and so give the words life and meaning..." (222). This is a stage of non-listening which differs from Quentin's as it is an act in which he truly does not listen Yet Sutpen discovers that to get a discreet self he must listen to other authority. For, as Sutpen comments to General Compson "'I learned little [at school] save that most of the deeds, good and bad both, incurring opprobium or plaudits or reward either, within the scope of man's abilities, had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books. So I listened when he [the teacher] would read to us though I did not know that in that listening I was equipping myself better for what I should later design to do than if I had learned all the addition and subtraction in the book'" (241-2). Even in this respect, Sutpen's authority can never be considered as having attained monological status, bent as it was toward other, more authoritative, voices

[10]Sutpen, for example, is aware that in order to ground himself authoritatively in Jefferson he must thread his filiation with a well established filiation, and that this connection will be affirmed and indisputable once it is written down. It is for this reason that Rosa says Sutpen cannot be called a gentleman, for he married only that he might have a voice inscribed in the town register by being thus 'affiliated': "all he would need would be Ellen's and our father's names on a wedding license (or any other patent of respectability) that people could look at and read" (16) Having learnt how to read and then write, Sutpen then overvalues the significance of the literary, of established and written codes, as both Walter Brylowski and Wesley Morris have observed "Like Lord Jim, Sutpen will attempt to live his life in terms of an idea established by society's propaganda, an attempt that can only be accounted for by his innocence, while the rest of society, protected by an ironic sense against too complete acceptance of the very words they mouth, look on puzzled and try to understand this fanaticism" (Brylowsky, 22), Sutpen's "model of success was the Tidewater aristocratic planter, an image composed largely from the material trappings of plantation life, a simplified and purified version created in literature and movies Sutpen is a representation of a representation and not a figure of actuality" (Morris, 24)

Shreve's ironism means that he begins his commentary upon the Sutpen legend in the assumption that any semblance of meaning in his revision of the tale will not lead to the sort of full-presence through which the Sutpen world would be explained and rendered completely coherent for him and his roommate. I have been describing this approach as one which eschews semantics in favor of semiology. I believe that this semiological characteristic of the ironic is explained by Paul de Man, who writes that the ironic structure is such that "the relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous," for "the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the *thematization* of this difference" (de Man 1983, 209, italics added). Shreve thus uses the figure of Jim Bond to serve as a thematic embodiment of his own ironic method of listening to the tale of the South. To Shreve, Bond's howling is an expression of the impossibility of reading the South through its utterances. Bond's sounds don't mean anything in themselves, have no signifieds attached to them in the way that the concept of a tree is 'attached' to the word 'tree.' With Bond's howlings, one needn't move from the level of speech sounds to conceptual meaning. As James Guetti notes, Shreve therefore uses Bond to represent "the entire story: he is potential meaning, always just out of reach, but asserting in his idiot howling the negation of meaning" (Guetti, 102)

Prior to considering Bond, Shreve focuses on another element which challenges the Compson re-presentation of the Sutpen filigree. In order to understand Shreve's figure, or his narrative imposition of an aporia or (literal) "blackness" into the South's story of its heritage, it is necessary to see what references lies behind Shreve's imaginings. Shreve's vision of Bond works within a vocal tradition, while also working to escape that tradition. To separate his story from the Compson stories, Shreve ironically relies on many of its essential features. He thus creates creates his own genealogy, a tracing of the genesis of a semiological mode of reading from a more semantically-based reading. Shreve uses Charles Bon as a figure who is less authoritative than his true (genealogical) father. Before mentioning Bond, Shreve creates a story about Charles Bon's search for a trace of

recognition from his father. In Shreve's narrative, as in Mr Compson's, Charles Bon becomes a figure who falls between Bond's world of semiology and Sutpen's world of semantics. This figure thus buys into the notion of authority while also finding it suspect. Specifically, the difference between Mr Compson's figure of Charles Bon and Shreve's is this: In Mr Compson's tale, it is Bon's ironic detachment which leads to the tragedy of his death, while in Shreve's tale, Bon's tragedy is due to a largely metaphysical belief in notions of authority and presence As a result of this metaphysical bent, Bon looks to Sutpen as his unacknowledged father-figure, but tragedy results because, as Ragan notes, he "follows the pattern of several other Faulkner characters. in accepting his supposition without proof" (Ragan 1987, 133). Bon assumes a connection between sign and meaning or sign and reality. Following his idea that Bon haunts Sutpen as a return of the repressed, Shreve has Bon sympathetically look for a sign of recognition from his possible father. In Shreve's version, Bon is ignorant of the truth, working only on supposition. He will not accept what is referred to in the text as "traces" or "signs" in themselves; he wants something beyond the sign; he insists on full signification, no matter how secretly conveyed to him. But, as Ragan says, "Sutpen offers no sign. His lack of acknowledgement fascinates Shreve, who uses it to create some of the novel's most vivid and emotionally wrenching scenes" (Ragan 1987, 134).[11] Bon not only desires a meaning which is prior to him, which is antipitatory of his existence, as Sutpen had; Bon wants this visible, present trace to have metaphysical dimensions. Bon also expects a "flash, a glare" (AA, 313), and so expects "that instant of indisputable recognition between them [that he may] know for sure and for ever" his true lineage (319). Shreve's version mocks the hyperbolic nature of this search for a meaningful trace, a search characteristic of the

[11]Not coincidentally, Bon's tragedy is also Sutpen's, as both John Hunt and Gail Mortimer have indicated: "Quentin and Shreve believe that one simple act of recognition from Sutpen toward Bon would have saved his whole design" (Hunt, 133) but since Bon gets no sign, a "rapid series of absences or non-events precipitate the turning point of Sutpen's life" (Mortimer, 82)

Sutpens and the Compsons. For Bon, in Shreve's story, thinks not merely, in looking at Sutpen:

there but for the intervening leaven of that blood which we do not have in common is my skull, my brow, sockets... but *there, just behind a little, obscured a little by that alien blood whose admixing was necessary in order that he exist is the face of the man who shaped us both out of that blind chancy darkness we call the future, there—there—at any moment, second, I shall penetrate by something of will and strip that alien leavening from it and look not on my brother's face but on my father's, out of the shadow of whose absence my spirit's posthumeity has never escaped* (317)

This description indicates that Bon doesn't have the freedom that is an essential part of the ironic vantage, the "freedom" which is gained from "the unwillingness of the mind to accept any stage of its progression as definitive"—in de Man's germane definition of a form of irony (de Man 1983, 220).[12]

Shreve, picturing Bon as falling between Sutpen's semantic drive and Jim Bond's negation of this drive, also therefore imagines him as having tendencies toward irony. In Shreve's narrative, as David Dowling interestingly observes, Bon's French lineage means that he is at home with differance and play (Dowling, 98). For after the passage quoted above, Shreve imagines Bon shrugging off such metaphysical concerns, deciding that "such coincidences only happened in books" (AA, 318) A more extreme example of Bon's detachment is seen in his nonchalance toward his mother's rough and strange treatment of him, for Bon takes or accepts as this rough treatement as "a matter of course" (297, 298). Bon accepts this treatment, I would argue, largely because he sees himself from the start as having been born with many other people, all of whom are playing roles (a facet of existence which Judith, at the metaphorical loom, found unbearable). While Bon looks for a trace of recognition, he doesn't concern himself with the sort of trace which was of such significance to Sutpen as to lead him to reject Charles. Shreve imagines Bon

[12]Rorty makes similar claims about freeing the mind from absolutes through the type of irony which recognizes contingencies: "a recognition of... contingency leads to a recognition of the contingency of conscience, and [this recognition will lead] to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (Rorty, 9) In Rorty's terms then, Shreve, as an ironist, does not search for a final vocabulary as "a way of getting something distinct from this vocabulary right" (Rorty, 75)

speaking to his mother about Bon's wife/mistress, referring to the ceremony in much the same way that Compson referred to it in his imagining of Bon's conversation with Henry:

> 'Why not? All young men do it. The ceremony too. I didn't set out to get the child... And this is one whom I know, who makes me no trouble. And with the ceremony, that bother, already done. And as for a spot of negro blood—' (308)

Bon's "irony," in Dale Parker's words, "shrugs off the [most significant] issue in trivializing terms" (Parker 1991, 131). In turn, Shreve's irony here is of course great: having decided that Henry killed Bon not for the incest threat but for the threat of miscegenation, Shreve imagines Bon as an individual who is socially oblivious to and unconcerned with the implications of his liason with another individual who 'happens' to be part black. In saying to his mother "And as for a spot of negro blood," Bon makes it awkward and impossible for his mother to argue with him. Bon effectively silences his mother by saying of his mistress what Eulalia would wish Sutpen had said of her. For, had Sutpen been so nonchalant on the issue of the *presence* of negro blood, he might not have discarded her. Moreover, this picturing of Bon's shrugging off of the issue functions to anticipate Jim Bond's utter obliviousness to any such societal distinctions.

In light of his treatment of certain elements in the Southern myth, Shreve is thus Quentin's perfect opposite. When Quentin reneges on his hearing, he is still listening, in the sense that he is metaleptically engaged with the tale. Shreve, on the other hand, listens in order finally not to listen, that is, to distort what he hears, to misrepresent it rather than give it the full force of a demonstratio. Shreve changes the ground of their discussion from a content-based interchange to a discourse which reflects on discursive themes such as vocal influence. Rather than ask Quentin for his thematic analysis of Sutpen's failure and the tragedy it wrought, Shreve asks Quentin to stand back and consider his 'relation' to the final denominator in the Sutpen filiation. So Shreve asks whether Quentin still hears Jim Bond's howling, asking him once and for all to renounce his liason, his metaleptic connexion to the past, and thus to renounce his status as a commonwealth, a commonwealth which allows Quentin to be influenced and paralyzed even by an 'idiot's

howling.' But Quentin cannot face the howling and continually evasive stream of signifiers, and remains committed to finding meaning in this babble of Southern figures at the loom, from Sutpen to Bond.

To distance himself from the filigree and to distance Quentin by demanding an answer from him, Shreve focuses on the symbol of the Sutpen filigree and the eventual failure of Sutpen's filial line. Shreve says, in effect, you can ignore this last voice and no longer listen to the South. Had the Sutpens or the Compsons possessed an ironic consciousness like the one we have seen that Shreve has, the repressor (oppressor) might not have been undone by what he had repressed since an ironic consciousness, being able to assert/contain two contradictory things at once (a meaning, and something other to the apparent meaning), would not have allowed repression (oppression) to occur in the first place. Shreve even reduces the Sutpen story to the narrative of perpetuated repression: "So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?" As one critic comments in reference to Shreve's ultimate vision of the return of the repressed:

> Shreve's vision is not simply that the black race (like metonymy run wild) will conquer the world, but more precisely that whiteness will cease to be a marker of difference, the absolute metaphor of achieved ends, once the various races mix *under the gurevise of* whiteness. For the Southern aristocracy, then, the great fear is the threat of nondifferentiation, of the collapse of the boundaries and polarities that allow for the repression and subjugation of otherness constitutive (in this case) with white male identity (Boone, 227)

Shreve's ironic stance consists in an active theory of non-discrimination, for irony accepts plurality: black and white; meaning and non-meaning. Irony, as Culler has noted, accepts discrepancies and incongruities (without trying to resolve them into a whole). As the trope of maturity, or of complexity, irony does not search for a resolution of that complexity (in a mutually exclusive dualism—the sort that Sutpen's racist design sought to perpetuate, for instance). As Ragan observes:

> [Shreve] uses Jim Bond to forecast interracial breeding to the extent that racial distinctions will no longer be of any consequence at all At that point, the regional differences and the cultural taboos which precipitated the downfall of the house of Sutpen would no longer matter either Thus, Shreve is able to sublimate his involvement with the tragedy into a farcical theory of social Darwinism (Ragan 1987, 153)

That Quentin can't perform a similar type of sublimation indicates that the clash between understandings here, between Quentin and Shreve, is also a clash between two beliefs in how to use and analyze language Having told Shreve that Shreve can't understand the South because he wasn't born there, Quentin is forced to admit that he doesn't know whether he understands it himself. Quentin's "I dont know" on page 362 becomes, after Shreve pesters him still further on the subject of his connexion to the South, the anxious and italicized"*I dont hate it*!" on page 378 This sense of commitment to his Southern past leaves Quentin in mental and emotional confusion, his sense of his own selfhood disrupted. Shreve's farcical theory of social Darwinism is Shreve's attempt to promote in Quentin an intellectual or ironic (dis)association with his heritage, by showing Quentin that, at the point when the "regional differences and the cultural taboos which precipitated the downfall of the house of Sutpen would no longer matter," the entire rhetoric of the South will have collapsed and will no longer have painful effects on him. Quentin despairs, "Nevermore of peace" (373) in one instance, when he realizes that his involvement with the South must signify to Shreve some form of relation to it and to "the Aunt Rosa " Shreve's intellectual games try to get Quentin to assume an intellectually playful relation to his past but, as Hunt has noticed, "Quentin evaluates the failures of traditional and modern men emotionally rather than intellectually" (Hunt, 134). By twisting the Southern narrative or filigree as much as he does, Shreve tries to lift Quentin out of his crisis-causing mode of reading/listening. To evaluate the failures of his tradition "intellectually," as Hunt suggests, Quentin would be evaluating or reading its aporias or blacknesses and allowing them to speak, to have a voice, but Quentin is not able to read in this semiological and ironic manner.

Despite his efforts, Shreve's irony does not rescue Quentin from the commonwealth. Instead, the text ends with Quentin's *italicized thoughts*, representing in this last page, as in

the others, an individual's anxiety at the recognition that he or she has been inscribed by the language or voices of other people. As John Bassett has noted, the italicized passages in the text can mean that what is italicized has happened in the past (and so is discontinuous with the time of the narration), or that what is italicized is happening in a character's mind (Bassett, 143, note 13). Yet in terms of voices relating to one another, the italicized sections say something simpler. The italics refer to something that has happened in both the mind *and* the past. More specifically, the italicized passages reflect an anxious mind critically looking back at a proximate crisis. And so the text ends as it began, on the theme of Quentin's entrapment in a vocal tradition. On page 9, we had seen Quentin's anxious interior dialogue, where he attempts in "notlanguage" to deal synoptically with the details of Rosa's story and the critical, disruptive effects that story has on the unity (integrity or 'wholeness') of his own voice. Finally, on page 378, we see Quentin attempt to convince Shreve and then himself that he doesn't hate the South, that, in effect, he is not worried about its influence on him because, as he is saying, it has none because he is 'whole.' The italicized exclamations that end the text thus show us that Quentin has not learned to read with irony and that he will continue to be inscribed by the voices to which he has committed himself. Far from being "irrelevant," as Ruppersburg has suggested (Ruppersburg, 130), Quentin's answer to Shreve's question brings us back to the issue thematized, in a somewhat occluded manner, at the opening of the text: the theme of an identity's rupture by another's voice; the theme of the success (or lack of success) of such attemps at linguistic (vocal) self-possession.

Conclusion: Reading Faulkner, Reading *Absalom.*

I will protest to the last. no photographs, no recorded documents. It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books (Faulkner 1977, 258).

In its last analysis, [the author's] hope and desire to uplift man's heart is competely selfish, completely personal He would lift up man's heart for his own benefit because in that way he can say No to death. He is saying No to death for himself by means of the hearts which he has hoped to uplift, or even by means of the mere base glands which he has disturbed to that extent where they can say No to death or their own account by knowing, realizing, having been told and believing it; *at least we are not vegetables because the hearts and glands capable of partaking in this excitement are not those of vegetables, and will, must, endure*

So he who, from the isolation of cold impersonal print, can engender this excitement, himself partakes of the immortality which he has engendered. Someday he will be no more, which will not matter then, because isolated and itself invulnerable in the cold print remains that which is capable of engendering still the old deathless excitement in hearts and glands whose owners and custordians are generations from even the air he breathed and anguished in; if it was capable once, he knows that it will be capable and potent still long after there remains of him only a dead and fading name (Faulkner 1954, x-xi)

Throughout this paper, I have demonstrated a way in which *Absalom, Absalom!* can be read so that its central subject, its theme of 'relation,' comes to the fore and thus grounds the stories of its two main characters, Sutpen and Quentin. I have called my method of reading semiological and ironic. To conclude my reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*, I wish to provide the reader with a few examples of Faulkner's own semiological and ironic method of reading, examples which illustrate Faulkner's idiosyncratic tendencies to "play" with the other's utterance and to "enlarge the enigmatic state" in discussion. I draw my instances of Faulkner reading not from his other novels, as these could not be said to provide us with Faulkner's own voice and views, since the novels involve narrative personas. Instead, it may be best to gauge his views on reading from his direct, personal responses to questions or statements from other people. By turning briefly to his interview responses, I will also be analyzing Faulkner in just the sort of situation that is so familiar to his characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In stressing Faulkner's ironic detachment as his characteristic type of reaction to another's speech, I will also link this stance to Shreve's irony and indicate the potential for taking Shreve as Faulkner's representative within *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In their introduction to *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, James Meriwether and Michael Millgate note that

> Faulkner remained consistently indifferent to the errors which marred nearly all accounts of his career... [given that] articles him about which were submitted to [him] for correction contain as much misinformation as those which were not (Faulkner 1968, x-xi)

Faulkner's non-reaction contrasts sharply with the portrayal in *Absalom* of characters, like those considered in my second chapter, who react with critical anxiety to the disabling figurations (*i.e.*: narratives concerning one's person) presented by any 'other.' Faulkner is "indifferent" to the faults or "errors" which potentially "marr" his career; he effectively overlooks such misrepresentations and even indulges or endorses them by not preventing or correcting them.

By not caring too much about the accounts people form of him when they speculate on his existence, Faulkner exhibits a similar attitude of speculation when it is his turn to give an account of other people's existences. Faulkner describes his approach to the foreign, to the other, or, simply, to *other people* as engaging a similar speculative manner. He says, "I have never been much of a sightseer or traveller... I much prefer to look at faces. And speculate on what's behind those wrinkles... what that life could have been that that face shows" (1968, 150). Faulkner does not, in this manner of reading, seek to attain an absolute signified; he does not seek out facts about the foreign land he is travelling in (here Japan), but instead interests himself on what *may* be. I would suggest that Faulkner effectively endorsed such conjectures or misrepresentations, whether his own or other people's, due to his own sense of the modern. John Matthews defines Faulkner's "distinctive modernity" as "an understanding of meaning as the infinite play of signifiers, and not as the attainment of an absolute signified, the 'facts' of the story itself" (Matthews 1982, 118). Faulkner's interpretative mode is playful, so he doesn't mind when other people interpret in a playful, speculating manner; he doesn't care whether he gets the facts right about other people, nor does he care whether they get the facts right about him.

It is this sort of detached speculation that is an essential counter to the obsessive neuroticism of the characters in *Absalom*. In Donald Kartiganer's words, "Faulkner knew that you could never tell it all, that there was no 'metaphysical presence'... despite the myth of the South" (Kartiganer, xv), so that an obsessive drive to get the facts right, in order that everything may be explained coherently, reflects a self-damaging or self-disrupting idealistic attitude. In this sense, conjecture is important for Faulkner as long as it is not presented as a form of universal truth. It is for this reason—the importance of the speculative stance in Faulkner's eyes—that Faulkner underlines in an interview the importance of Shreve's presence to Quentin: "[Quentin's story] had to have a solvent to keep it real [*i.e.*: less ideal], keep it believable, creditable, otherwise it would have vanished into smoke and fury" (Faulkner 1959, 75). Faulkner considered Shreve, an individual who

reduces the Southern metaphysics to a speculative revision of past events, to be a necessary component in the textual fabric of his novel, since Shreve is a foil to Quentin's desire for the metaphysical, for absolute signifieds

One interviewer wisely noted that Faulkner's presence and statements are not to be read literally or even figuratively, but rather in a way that is similar to the approach I call here an ironic and semiological reading, the approach which, because detached, allows the gaps or aporias in a given utterance to speak:

> there is no use looking at Faulkner. You must read him To someone who has read him, Faulkner has given all that he has, and he knows it. Then one can understand that when he keeps saying 'I am a farmer,' or 'I wrote that book so that I could buy a good horse,' it is only another way of putting first things first—what Faulkner wants one to be interested in are his books (Chapsal in Faulkner 1968, 230).

Madelaine Chapsal is correct in noting that one must read Faulkner the way she does. When Faulkner says 'I am a farmer,' this is really neither a literal statement (one which simply means that he is a simple farmer) nor a figurative statement (one which uses the figure of farming to refer to his activity as a reaper of words, or something to that effect). One must seek the political orientation behind his statement and also speculate on what is not said; one must see how Faulkner says something by not saying it, so that the indivdual who perceives it, may perceive it as his or her own vision (I call this method of saying political or strategic because it seeks to produce an effect upon a social individual and get him or her to do something—in this case, to think about Faulkner's text in itself, without looking to Faulkner's life or interview responses for [absolute, authorial] explanations of what is in the text). An interviewer, in other words, who asks Faulkner a question about a book of his but receives the response "I wrote that book so that I could buy a good horse" must confront the fact that Faulkner is saying something important about his books even though this may not be clear from his response. Faulkner doesn't say what he means in order to say something about the way readers shouldn't expect his authorial, determining *presence* to guide their readings of his text; his utterance is political, as the statement 'the texts speak for themselves' is expressed in an underhanded way To say he is a farmer is

to say that he abdicates responsibility for his books, that he will not speak for them, and that he wants his readers to be interested in and therefore read those books, as Ms Chapsal simply notes.

Faulkner creates aporias not only in his works; he also hides behind the things he says in interviews. He thus gave the following information about his 'self' to an interviewer:

> I was born male and single at an early age in Mississippi. I am still alive but not single. I was born of a Negro slave and an alligator, both named Gladys Rock I had two brothers, one Dr Walter E. Traprock and the Eagle Rock, an airplane (Faulkner 1968, 9).

Faulkner's prose and pose both impede access, in order that something "more" but not something metaphysical (something that will explain all) be sought after by the individual trying to understand the author. Faulkner places these barriers or aporias in his speech not so that a hidden truth may eventually be found, but so that the play of speculation may begin. The interviewer would have failed in his understanding of Faulkner's speech had he commented on Faulkner's statement above by saying something to effect of 'Faulkner said he was born of an alligator but I discovered instead that...' Of course one can only speculate here, but it seems that Faulkner is saying that it doesn't matter what he says about his life because it will not put a stop to all the marred accounts of his career and get everything straightened out—Faulkner is saying in his own occluded manner, that he might as well add to the myth, and indulge in a myth of his own creation, to anticipate other such attempts.

A critical comment in reference to the way Shreve and Quentin cooperatively re-envision the past in *Absalom* thus also applies to Faulkner's rhetorical strategy in interviews: "fiction is neither lie nor document but a kind of knowledge which has no substitute and to which there is no unimaginative shortcut" (Waggoner, 169). Faulkner's answers to interview questions articulate a special kind of knowledge, as they indicate that utterances come to have meaning only in their context of discursive interaction. Faulkner's interview responses, whether on the subject of his person, his books, or his approach to

other people, indicate his special way of listening, of not allowing (his or other people's) imaginations to be killed by loss, but to be inspired instead to play with loss.

From my reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* and now my reading of Faulkner himself, it can be seen that this author who doesn't like authority makes understanding difficult for his readers as well as his interviewers. To make the most sense of *Absalom*'s otherwise confusing texture one must, as Mortimer notes, give the figure of doubt an opportunity to speak. She says: "Faulkner's use of abstract things... means that not happening, not knowing, and not seeing or hearing are important events in their own right" (Mortimer, 83). Or, as another critic writes:

> The gaps that disturb us in Faulkner [the things left untold, like the shooting]. . elide disturbing events that we have come to expect and, in effect, to want within the story And by reminding or accusing us of that desire, the unexpected skipping over of such events may make us feel vicariously guilty of them; or at least it should make us wonder what they mean to us, whether that meaning comes through their presence or their absence (Parker, 1985, 8)

Oftentimes, as I hope to have shown, meaning or understanding will come not through something that is there, but through something that is 'missing ' Speech acts in the text must be read as expressions of or thematic renderings of the speaker's inscription by other speech acts, or, in Shreve's case, of the speaker's avoidance of such inscription. The reader must recognize that any vocal pronouncement here is part of a network. The task in reading Faulkner's text is to see how any discourse therein expresses the impossibility of self-presence through language, and so communicates the ruptures common to all forms of talk. Read this way, *Absalom* becomes the story of many characters who agonize over not having their own unified voices, with the obvious exception of Shreve McCannon, who jubilantly plays on and with his ironic detachment All of its various scenes can be seen to grow out of and reflect this predicament, the core concern of the book

As the exemplar of this type of reading, Shreve's role in the text cannot be overstated, and it is finally a consideration of Shreve's role in relation to *Absalom*'s reader that illuminates the significance of Shreve's voice. Having, in my last chapter, cited Faulkner's observation that Shreve had a better perspective upon the Sutpen myth than Quentin had, I

wish to cite Faulkner's response to a question when asked whether any character in the text had the "right view." Even though Faulkner disclaimed "responsib[ility]" for "any construction" made in any of his interview responses (quoted from *Time* magazine, in Faulkner 1968, 255, note 1), I wish to speculate once more on something Faulkner said in an interview, this time working under the assumption that there is a fair degree of truth in what he says here. To the student's question of whether anyone had the right view in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner replied:

> I think that no one individual can look at truth It blinds you You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. So these are true as far as Miss Rosa and Quentin saw it. Quentin's father saw what he believed was truth, that was all he saw But the old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr Comspon to see all at once. It would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive o. ore thoughtful person to see him as he was. It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking a blackbird. S. the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different w ys of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I wou' like to think is the truth (Faulkner 1959, 273 4)

Shreve is a more sensitive or tolerant reader who has, in Faulkner's words, as I h..ve noted elsewhere, "a truer picture of Sutpen." Yet even though his reading is a rather radical departure from Rosa's, Mr Comspon's, and Quentin's, his reading still does not necessarily produce the fourteenth, truthful image. One critic has noted that "Shreve's role," as someone who is detached from the Southern myth, "makes him the character most like the novel's readers" (Parker, 1991, 84) Yet to say this is not to say that Shreve simply offers the text's reader the fourteenth image of the blackbird, as it were. Shreve's role in the text is not that of a purveyor of truth, for if this were the case, my semiological and ironic method of reading would have no relation to Shreve's method of reading. For, given that Faulkner's text is a difficult one to read, the reader requires, in some sense, an *indication* as to how it ought to be read, and Shreve indicates this principle. Thus the reader musk ask, 'To what degree does my reading conform with and live up to Shreve's *method of reading*?' I would (speculatively) argue, in other words, that Faulkner did not want Shreve's reading to be the final, fourteenth reading. For if Shreve's reading represented the truth, then the reader would have only to say, 'I have read the book, and in

following Shreve's revisionistic interpretation, have been shown the truth of the story.' The very presence of all the impasses or aporias in the text show that Faulkner did not want his readers to be passive readers. Faulkner would want his readers to find their own truths—to follow, that is, not Shreve's interpretation itself, but his *method* of interpretation.

The varied body of critical writing on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* indicates that many readers have undertaken an analysis of Faulkner's text, in their respective efforts to produce that all-inclusive fourteenth image of the blackbird which Faulkner liked to think of as the true one. As yet another belated analytical reader, I hope to have added to the conception of this fourteenth image by suggesting that Shreve's way of reading the gaps in discourse could be used to good purpose toward a reading of the gaps or aporias in Faulkner's own text (aporias seen in both the voice over's telling and in the rec(o)uperative tellings of the novel's many characters).

Bibliography

Primary Works.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Modern Library, 1936.

_____. *The Faulkner Reader Selections from the Works of William Faulkner.* New York: Random House, 1954.

_____. *Faulkner in the University*, ed Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner. New York: Random House, 1959.

_____. *Lion in the Garden Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michel Millgate. New York: Random House, 1968.

_____ *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed Joseph Blotner. New York: Random House, 1977.

Critical and Theoretical Works.

Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin University of Texas, 1981

Bannet, Eve Tavor *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan* London: Macmillan Press, 1989.

Basset, John E *Vision and Revisions Essays on Faulkner.* West Cornwall: Locust Hill Press, 1989.

Blake, Nancy. "Creation and Procreation: The Voice and the Name, or Biblical Intertextuality in *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Intertextuality in Faulkner*, ed Michel Gresset and Noel Polk, pp 128-143 . Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985

Bleikasten, André. "Fathers in Faulkner." In *The Fictional Father Lacanian Readings of the Text*, ed. Robert Con Davis, pp 115-46 Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press, 1981.

Bloom, Harold *A Map of Misreading.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

_____. *Poetry and Repression Revisionism from Blake to Stevens.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

_____. *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate.* Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1977.

_____. "The Breaking of Form." In *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al, pp. 1-37. New York: Continuum 1979.

_____. *Agon Towards a Theory of Revisionism.* New York. Oxford University Press, 1982(a).

_____. *The Breaking of the Vessels* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982(b).

_____. "From Topos to Trope, from Sensibility to Romanticism: Collin's 'Ode to Fear.'" In *Poststructuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris, pp. 176-192. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

_____. *Ruin the Sacred Truths. Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Boone, Joseph. "Creation by the Father's Fiat: Paternal Narrative, Sexual Anxiety, and the Deauthorizing Designs of *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, ed. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, pp. 209-237. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989.

Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner. The Yoknapatawpha Country.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.

Brylowski, Walter. *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968.

Cavell, Stanley. *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Cobley, Evelyn. "Sameness and Difference in Literary Repetition." *Semiotic Inquiry / Recherches Semiotiques*, 3 (September 1983): 248-61.

_____. "Desire and Reciprocal Violence in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *English Studies in Canada*, 13 (December 1987): 420-37.

Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Revised Edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1979.

Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism.* Second Ed., Revised. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983 [1971].

Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

_____. *Dissemination*, trans. Barabara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

_____. *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Donaldson, Susan V. "Subverting History: Women, Narrative and Patriarchy in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South*, 26 (1988 Summer): 19-32.

Donoghue, Denis. *Ferocious Alphabets.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.

Dowling, David. *Macmillan Modern Novelists: William Faulkner.* London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989.

Dumarsais. *Les Tropes.* Vol. I. Geneve: Slatkine Reprints, 1967.

Duvall, John N. *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral.* London: Hogarth Press, 1986 [1935].

Flores, Ralph. *The Rhetoric of Doubtful Authority. Deconstructive Readings of Self-Questioning Narrative, St. Augustine to Faulkner.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Fontanier *Les Tropes* Vol. II Geneve. Slatkine Reprints, 1967.

Forster, E M *Aspects of the Novel.* London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1945 [1927].

Foster, Dennis A *Confession and Complicity in Narrative.* Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Friedman, Alan Warren *William Faulkner.* New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984.

Gibbons, Thomas. *Rhetoric, Or a View of its Principle Tropes and Figures.* Menston: Scolar Press Limited, 1969 [1767].

Gray, James D "Shreve's Lesson of Love: Power of the Unsaid in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *New Orleans Review,* 14 (Winter 1987) 24-35

Gresset, Michel "Faulkner's Voice" In *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium,* ed. Lothar Honnighausen, pp. 184-194. Tubingen Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989

Guetti, James. *The Limits of Metaphor. A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967

Gwin, Minrose C. '(Re)Reading Faulkner as Father and Daughter of His Own Text.' In *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy,* ed. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, pp. 238-258. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illionois University Press, 1989.

_____. *The Feminine and Faulkner. Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference.* Knoxville: University of Tenessee Press, 1990

Hartman, Geoffrey *Criticism in the Wilderness The Study of Literature Today* New Haven. Yale University Press, 1980.

Herget, Winfried. "The Poetics of Negation in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium,* ed. Lothar Honnighausen, pp. 33-7. Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989.

Heywood, Leslie. "The Shattered Glass: The Blank Space of Being in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *The Faulkner Journal* (Spring 1988) 12-23

Hollander, John. *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981

Humphries, Jefferson *Losing the Text Readings in Literary Desire.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986

Hunt, John W *William Faulkner, Art in Theological Tension* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965

Irwin, John T. *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner.* Baltimore John Hopkins University Press, 1975

_____ "The Dead Father in Faulkner" In *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text,* ed. Robert Con Davis, pp 147-68 Amherst University of Massachussetts Press, 1981

Kartiganer, Donald *The Fragile Thread The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979

Krause, David. "Reading Bon's Letter and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *PMLA*, 99 (March 1984): 225-41.

_____ "Opening Pandora's Box. Re-Reading Compson's Letter and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" *The Centennial Review*, 30 (1986 Summer): 358-82.

Langford, Gerald *Faulkner's Revision of* Absalom, Absalom! *A Collation of the Manuscript and the Published Book*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971.

Lemaire, Anika. *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977 [1970].

Lukacher, Ned. *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

MacHale, Brian. "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing." In *Approaching Postmodernism: Papers Delivered at a Workshop on Postmodernism, 21-23 September 1984, University of Utrecht*, ed. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens, pp 53-80. Philadelphia John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986.

McPherson, Karen. "*Absalom, Absalom!* Telling Scratches." *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33 (Autumn 1987): 431-450.

Marcusse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* New York: Vintage Books, 1962 [1955]

Matthews, John T. *The Play of Faulkner's Language* Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1982.

_____. The Sound and the Fury: *Faulkner and the Lost Cause* Boston Twayne Publishers, 1991

Mellard, James M. *Doing Tropology: Analysis of Narrative Discourse* Urban & Chicago. University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Miller, J Hillis. "The Two Relativisms: Point of View and Indeterminacy in the Novel *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Relativism in the Arts*, ed. Betty Jean Craige, pp. 148-70 Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983

_____ "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism " In *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer, pp 96-126 Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986

_____ "Topography and Tropography in Thomas Hardy's 'In Front of the Landscape'" In *Poststructuralist Readings of English Poetry*, ed Richard Machin and Christopher Norris, pp 332-348 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987

_____. *Versions of Pygmalion*. Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1990

Millgate, Michael *The Achievement of William Faulkner* London Constable, 1966

Morris, Wesley. *Reading Faulkner* Madison University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Mortimer, Gail L. *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss: A Study in Perception and Meaning* Austin University of Texas Press, 1983.

Parker, Robert Dale. *Faulkner and the Novelistic Imagination* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985

_____. Absalom, Absalom!. *The Questioning of Fictions* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

Pitavy, Francois "Some Remarks on Negation and Denegation in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*. ed. Lothar Honnighausen, pp.25-32. Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989.

_____. "The Narrative Voice and the Function of Shreve: Remarks on the Production of Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!, ed. Elizabeth Muhlenfeld, pp. 189-205. New York Garland Publications, 1984

Poirier, Richard "'Strange Gods' in Jefferson, Mississippi. Analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Absalom, Absalom!: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Goldman, pp 12-31 Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971.

Porter, Carolyn *Seeing and Being The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* Middleton. Wesleyan University Press, 1981.

Radloff, Bernhard "Dialogue and Insight. The Priority of the Heritage in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture*, 42 (Summer 1989): 261-72.

Ragan, David Paul. *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom! *A Critical Study*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987.

_____ Absalom, Absalom! *Annotated by David Paul Ragan.* New York: Garland Publications, 1991.

Rollyson, Carl E Jr *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*. Ann Arbor UMI Research Press, 1987

Rorty, Richard *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Ross, Stephen M. "Oratory and the Dialogical in *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Intertextuality in Faulkner*, ed. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk, pp. 73-86. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

_____ *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice Speech and Writing in William Faulkner* Athens University of Georgia Press, 1989

Roudiez, Leon S "*Absalom, Absalom!* The Significance of Contradictions" *The Minnesota Review*, 17 (1981) 55-7

Ruppersburg, Hugh M *Voice and Eye in Faulkner's Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989

Schlefter, Ronald *Rhetoric and Death The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* Urbana University of Illinois, 1990

Schoenberg, Estella *Old Tales and Talking Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom! *and Related Works* Jackson University of Mississippi, 1977

Sherry, Charles "Being Otherwise Nature, History, and Tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Arizona Quarterly*, 45 (Autumsn 1989) 47-76

Slattery, Dennis Patrick "And Who to Know: Monuments, Text, and the Trope of Time in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *New Orleans Review*, 14 (Winter 1987) 42-51.

Snead, James A. *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* New York Menthuen, 1986.

_____. "Litotes and Chiasmus: Cloaking Tropes in *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. Lothar Honnighausen, pp. 16-24 Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989

Swartzlander, Susan. "'That Meager and Fragile Thread': The Artist as Historian in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Southern Studies* (Spring 1986): 111-9.

Vickery, Olga W. *The Novels of William Faulkner. A Critical Interpretation* Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 1964 [1959].

Vinsauf, Geoffrey of. *Poetria Nova*, translated, Margaret F. Nims Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967 [13th Century].

Waggoner, Hyatt *William Faulkner. From Jefferson to the World* Lexington University of Kentucky Press, 1959.

Wilden, Anthony. "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," pp 159-311. *The Language of the Self: The Function of Langauge in Psychoanalysis By Jacques Lacan*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.

Wittenberg, Judith Bryant. "Gender and Linguistic Strategies in *Absalom, Absalom!*" In *Faulkner's Discourse: An International Symposium*, ed. Lothar Honnighausen, pp 99-108. Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1989.