

Telling Questions in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Certainly there be them that delight in giddiness, and count it a
bondage to fix a belief – Bacon

If one of the more welcome effects of the theoretical revolution in literary and cultural studies over the past three decades has been an increased recognition of the availability of all cultural forms for a kind of textual inquiry or a textual understanding, one of the less welcome effects has been a reflexive, largely unthinking devaluation of the aesthetic or literary text itself. This has reached the point lately where not only one's over-enthusiastic students but also scholars who should know better are willing to claim that the theoretical text has, or should, supplant the literary text as the main object of our critical and, I suppose, cultural attention. The absurdity of this is only momentarily engaging, because it is too dangerous a view to remain amusing for long; in particular, it betrays the same kind of delirious egocentricity, the wilful narrowness, and the poverty of historical understanding that has too often characterized the reception of and analytical deployment of 'Theory' – indeed, while 'Theory' itself was often guilty of analytical self-absorption and political one-upmanship, its reception increasingly appeared to resemble the mass consumption of the frequently indigestible by the constitutionally dyspeptic.¹ What is most distressing about this is the seeming willingness of many to dump the literary text as if its only value was as a kind of anthropological-*cum*-cultural evidence (of Patriarchy, Capital, whatever) – as if *Middlemarch* could be exchanged for a penny dreadful or an 1860s newspaper

1 It is bad enough when one comes across this sort of thing in undergraduate essays but egregious examples are readily available from the luminaries themselves, especially when put on the spot – see, for example, Hillis Miller's 'The Critic as Host', his 'reply' to Meyer Abrams's 'The Deconstructive Angel', both of which are included in David Lodge's *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (Longman: London, 1988), or Derrida's 'But, beyond ...', a shameful response to McClintock and Nixon's 'No Names Apart', both of which appear in 'Race,' *Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1985).

because all we ever got from it was its witness to its contemporary sociality. Whence arise those grand, and lamentably unexamined, maxims dismissive of whole periods of literary endeavour – ‘The Victorian realist novel came into existence to nourish the imperialist consciousness and to enshrine and propagate its ideological imperatives’, that sort of thing, as if the novel were not the pre-eminent invention of European critical and self-critical consciousness. On second thought perhaps it is the simple arrogance of it all that is most distressing; in any case in the midst of this it is well to assert every now and then that the perspectives and the insights acquired from the theoretical complication of literary and cultural studies (and they are many and considerable) are not entirely unprecedented, and that we have tended to value the literary text partly according to its capacity to make profound and searching claims upon our critical imagination – far more profound and far more searching claims, indeed, than the great bulk of ‘Theory’ with which the zealots wish to displace it.

In this polemical context I wish to offer a reading of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, a text which could be considered valuable in a literary sense for any number of reasons, but especially so in this case because, first, it is an excellent example of that kind of Modernist text that resists an ordered, realist reading, and therefore invites – and perhaps even initiates – a shift in critical apprehension of the kind that has come to be associated with a more theoretical textual understanding; and second, because at a crucial level this text is concerned with dramatizing an endless but passionate effort of interpretation, and this, it seems to me, illuminates in some respects the character of contemporary critical reflection, which has come both to rely upon and yet profoundly distrust the most sophisticated forms of interpretative analysis. That is, a fundamental ambivalence seems to mark the conduct and the conclusions of contemporary textual inquiry, and that ambivalence, or an aspect of it, seems to have been taken up by *Absalom, Absalom!* and made the subject of its textual inquiry. Here, then, is a *literary* text deeply concerned with questioning the motivations, the limits, and the legitimacy of interpretation – absorbing questions, surely, for contemporary criticism. And

further, here is a *literary* text that is equally concerned with the dilemma of representation, a dilemma which arises from this questioning, and which is dramatically figured here in the confusion of tongues that comprises this puzzling, reiterative, and ultimately contradictory narrative.

It is appropriate to muse here on the metaphor of Babel, on that confusion of tongues which signalled a profound discontinuity between event and relation, action and reflection, world and word, because that metaphor is peculiarly, and perhaps compellingly, relevant to a text such as *Absalom, Absalom!*. For unlike *As I Lay Dying* or *The Sound and the Fury* this novel is told, not (by whatever gambit of realism) thought: the whole process set in motion '*because she wants it told*'² imagines Quentin at the opening of the text. And told, too, not by an implied author, but rather constituted by a sequence of radically heteroclitc narrations told by four (perhaps five, perhaps more) narrators all grappling with the problem of how to give representative form to historical actuality, how to arrive at the speech of history itself, how to accommodate word to world – and a world, for Mr Compson, Shreve and Quentin, already lapsed and now delivered in the dubious words of others. The Biblical story of Babel told of the breakdown of language, of the termination of meaningful narrative, and of the irrevocable loss of the *Logos* – the word that is what it says. Now it is precisely this kind of crisis in the relation between word and world that appears to bedevil narrative and narratorial voice in *Absalom, Absalom!*. And the ultimate effect of this confusion of tongues is an ineluctable reduction of speech to the private, arcane language in which the mind discourses with itself – that spoken though publicly inaccessible language that has the residue of a singular existential experience inscribed upon it. It is that kind of language eloquently observed by St. Augustine in the *Confessions*:

Although as for things past, whenever true stories are related, out of the memory are drawn not the things themselves which are past, but such words as ... they, in their passing through

2 William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.7. All subsequent references are to this edition.

our senses, have, as their footsteps, left imprinted in our minds.³

This identity of language and consciousness is of particular relevance to a text such as *Absalom, Absalom!*. For although the image of past or present reality organized from conflicting individuated perspectives may be a familiar literary encounter, the status of the interpretative consciousness to which this image gives rise remains – especially in this instance – problematic. Critical engagement with this text, it seems, will be obliged to seek the manner in which the structure of any single narration will be determined not only by the psychic architecture of the narrating consciousness, but also by the character of its purchase upon a language which, in one way or another (and there are a number of competing ways to consider), seems to make interpretation possible in the first place.

So *Absalom, Absalom!* is not simply an exercise in the interrogation of history and its final reconstitution through a number of dissonant voices: the more one looks at it, the more significant those voices become. They allow us to identify, even at this early stage, two distinct planes of action in this text. There is the plane of ‘event’, consisting of a set of existentially attenuated facts relating to the life of Thomas Sutpen: not a history in itself, this plane offers merely a diagram over which the interpretative mind may play as it seeks to relocate that event in an historical density. This is the problematic action of the second plane, which seeks to recover the real – in this case, what *really* happened – through the actions of interpretation and representation (actions, that is, that pose the two crucial questions of contemporary critical inquiry). Against the plane of event, of a potential truth to be unearthed, there is set then another which might just as well be called the plane of myth, a term I use here in Barthes’s sense. It is ‘human history’, according to Barthes, that

converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, *for myth is a type of speech*

3 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, XI, xviii.

*chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things.*⁴

Barthes implies a formal antithesis between 'nature' and 'myth', between history and the language that speaks it; in *Absalom, Absalom!* the actual structure of this relation is crucial, for at stake in this is not only the question of the text's reflection of the world, but the further question of how those that come after might reflect upon this.

An appropriate starting point for a more detailed consideration of *Absalom, Absalom!* would be, I think, the contradictions and discontinuities that exist between the separate narrations that serve to delimit and individualize the interpretative actions of the narrating consciousness. The dominant motive for this seemingly communal interrogation of history – the visceral necessity to find 'rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse' (Miss Rosa) for all this 'bloody mischancing of human affairs' (Mr Compson) – provides also the dominant motive for the collision of replies; but this apart, one discovers minor and seemingly peripheral discrepancies that disturb and subvert the interrogative flow of the text. There is, for example, the puzzling photograph, first mentioned by Mr Compson:

Because Henry loved Bon. He repudiated blood birthright and material security for his sake, for the sake of this man who was at least an intending bigamist even if not an out and out blackguard, and on whose dead body four years later Judith was to find the photograph of the other woman and the child. (p.74)

Towards the end of the text Shreve, discarding the picture of Bon as a 'blackguard', exults in the ingenuity of his triumph over Mr Compson:

'And your old man wouldn't know about that too: why the black son of a bitch should have taken her picture out and put the octoroon's picture in, so he invented a reason for it. But I know. And you know too. Don't you? ... Don't you know? It was because he said to himself, "If Henry don't mean what he said, it will be all right; I can take it out and destroy it. But if

4 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p.100; my emphasis.

he does mean what he said, it will be the only way I have to say to her, *I was no good; do not grieve for me.*" Aint that right? Aint it? By God aint it?"

'Yes,' Quentin said. (pp.295-296)

While one might find these conflicting readings of Bon's character moderately disconcerting – readings determined by identical evidence – the crucial issue remains the veracity of that evidence, rendered questionable by the witness to the scene, Miss Rosa:

and this too they cannot tell you: How I ran, fled, up the stairs and found no grieving widowed bride but Judith standing before the closed door to that chamber ... holding something in her hand ... and how I saw that what she held in that lax and negligent hand was the photograph, the picture of herself in its metal case which she had given him, held casual and forgotten against her flank as any interrupted pastime book. (p.117)

If one wishes to preserve the integrity of the final version of the Sutpen story, Shreve's and Quentin's version, then Rosa's claim here must either be ignored or accounted for by some mechanism that will render it patently fraudulent. The latter course is a fairly simple one: Rosa's narrative can easily be read as an essentially optative monologue – a reading which provides a convenient mode of suppression whenever difficulties of this kind arise. But this comfortable mechanism of recovery does violence to the text in two ways: it subverts the normal process of empirical detection in which each of the narrators participates by denying Rosa's claim to superior authenticity ('and this too they cannot tell you'); and of course in a banal reduction it converts two full chapters into needless excrescences (Rosa's story), thereby impoverishing the text by circumscribing the play of meaning, installing it in only one of the novel's situations: the dialogue between Shreve and Quentin. It is at the text's insistence that we find this troubling, then; and it is at the text's insistence that our critical interest begins to be directed.

For although the photograph is a minor item the successive accumulation of this kind of contradictory evidence significantly alters a reader's mode of attention towards this narrative complex (or complex of narratives). That is, the fundamental indecision

over the figure in the frame (Judith or Octoroon), over the wounded and the saved (Charles or Henry), to say nothing of the fundamental indecision concerning the motive for the murder of Charles, obstructs *our* interpretative passage from word to world, instances that violation of the mimetic contract that seems to characterise this Modernist phase within the history of narrative, and thus forcibly suggests, as Jonathan Culler has argued of this kind of textual action, 'that the only reality in question is that of writing itself which ... uses the concept of a world in order to display its own laws'.⁵ If not writing precisely (*pace* Derrida), perhaps the only reality in question here is speaking – still, of course, a *textual* activity – and the laws and processes governing the utterances of speakers. And it seems that there are certain laws, certain conventions, which are fundamental to the process of giving voice to history, the process of mythic composition; the problem, however, is that these appear to result in a wilful incoherence of the text at the level of narrated action. There is, for example, the central interpretative-representative process of naming – a technique fully exploited in this text by Faulkner, but one that interestingly signals a dual activity: both narratorial and critical. In each case the effort is to *read* (to interpret and to represent), and to read, Barthes reminds us,

is a labour of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labour.⁶

One of the more disturbing features of this text, then, is its pre-emptive character before critical reflection: here is a text that dramatizes the event of reading itself, rendering any subsequent reading (such as this) not superfluous but merely supplementary, merely one more interpretative action in a sequence of spiralling irony.

- 5 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.193.
- 6 Roland Barthes, *SSZ*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p.11.

'Yes. He named Clytie as he named them all, [Mr Compson tells Quentin] the one before Clytie and Henry and Judith even, with that same robust and sardonic temerity, naming with his own mouth his own ironic fecundity of dragon's teeth. Only I have always liked to believe that he intended to name Clytie, Cassandra, prompted by some pure dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding augur of his own disaster, and that he just got the name wrong through a mistake natural in a man who must have almost taught himself to read.' (p.50)

One might expect figures acquiring 'a quality of solidity, permanence' to emerge from the recapitulative movement of this text – that type of quality Quentin, in the beginning, perceives in the character of Sutpen (p.10). That this does not seem to occur may be due, in part, to the narrators' persistence in confusing names. Mr Compson, for example, refers to Clytie as Cassandra, yet throughout the text it is Rosa's affinity with the Cassandra figure that is insistently remarked. Again Mr Compson here clearly identifies Sutpen as Labdacus, heroic father to the internecine brood of Spartoi; elsewhere he is described as 'the demon', a 'Faustus' who has sold something (although not a soul) to the 'Creditor', and 'Beelzebub'; at the same time he is deific, utterer of the original fiat ('*Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldtime *Be Light*' – p.6); to Quentin he is Adamic, possessor of a pre-lapsarian innocence that is hopelessly incompetent at distinguishing between good and evil; equally he fulfils an Adamic role in Mr Compson's reflection above, teaching himself to read and then designating all things with insuperable patriarchal authority in a seemingly pre-Babelic language that names at once and always – and this, quite literally, confuses the issue further; implicitly King David, explicitly an aging Abraham (p.268), he is also Bluebeard the ravisher in his castle (p.49); again he is not the 'widowed Agamemnon' to Rosa's 'Cassandra' but an 'ancient and stiff-jointed Pyramus to her eager though untried Thisbe' (p.146). The list is far from exhaustive and omits the many references to Sutpen as the protagonist in a Greek tragedy. Yet what emerges from this proliferation of names is a disconcerting fluidity of character that extends to the other characters in the Sutpen story: their identity

collapses under the metamorphic pressures of narrative recapitulation. Bon is 'shadowy, a myth, a phantom: something they engendered whole themselves; some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all' (pp.85-86). Judith and Henry seem to exist almost symbiotically, and are strangely androgynous, as is Bon. Judith

was just the blank shape, the empty vessel in which each of them strove to preserve, not the illusion of himself nor the illusion of the other but what each conceived the other believed him to be – the man and the youth, seducer and seduced, victimized in turn each by the other, conquerer vanquished by his own strength, vanquished conquering by his own weakness, before Judith came into their joint lives even by so much as a girlname. (p.99)

It is in this context that Mr Compson muses upon the 'perfect and pure incest':

the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. (p.79)

One could go on but I think the point is fairly clear: this reckless will to nominate demands of the reader an awareness of discontinuity as an active principle in the text – an activity reaching beyond the plane of event and working at ever-increasing depths of the textual strata. The recapitulative movements of the narrative – the source and mechanism of contradiction – ultimately transform the Sutpen story into nothing more than a clouded sequence of possible actions performed by enigmatic figures whose only persistent attribute is, paradoxically, a metamorphic capacity exercised under the present exigencies of narration. And yet even in this there lies a potential inter-relatedness, a potential coherence – but a potential that can only be realized by an effort of imaginative projection that can map a mythic landscape onto the gaps in the sequence, thereby endowing these shadowy figures with meaning within history as narration. And this is precisely the task performed by

naming. For to name an object is to invest it with existential depth, to chart its range of significations and, as the medievalists knew, to appropriate and control it.

The further importance of this naming activity derives from the flow of meaning resulting from a powerful reflexive irony to which it gives rise, and to which it is continually subjected. A title such as *Absalom, Absalom!* is itself an inviting and powerful heuristic device: it implies a particular mode of attention towards the text that will seek and explore motifs potentially derived from the story of Absalom – it excites a kind of allegorical attention. But like the mimetic contract mentioned earlier this is an equally problematic feature of the text. For who is Absalom? Charles seems the most likely candidate – the bastard son intent upon claiming his rightful heritage. In fact Shreve, while musing on what Charles might have thought as his determination grew, refers specifically to the story of Absalom:

I will renounce love and all [Shreve imagines Charles declaring]; that will be cheap, cheap, even though he say to me 'never look upon my face again; take my love and my acknowledgement in secret, and go.' (p.270)

Bon's (or Shreve's) allusion is to II Samuel, 15:24:

And the king said, Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face. So Absalom returned to his own house, and saw not the king's face.

The inference is clear, the reference confused. For David is here punishing Absalom for having murdered his half-brother, Amnon, who had committed incest with Absalom's sister, Tamar. Who, then, is Absalom? The dispossessed bastard son moved by the Ahitophel-like scheming of a country lawyer to claim his rightful heritage (perhaps Charles); or the fratricide outraged by incest (perhaps Henry)? If there is allegory at work in this text – and the title certainly invites us to suspect there is – then it too is contaminated by the general fracturing of sign and referent, rendering its operation discontinuous and random, and thus ironically undermining the naming activity undertaken by the narrators while simultaneously exposing the factitiousness of the interpretative operation of which naming is a part.

Naming (a reflective and critical act) is one of the essential principles of mythic composition in this text; the imposition of generic form (again an act governed by a history of literary discourse) is another, which I will be considering shortly. Both of these principles are founded upon a single assumption: that their operation will provide for the narrators a hermeneutic grasp of history. For the interpretative consciousness the act of naming is merely a heuristic device: to name is to connote a context, to clarify relations between events; ultimately its effect is to draw history, the real, within the compass of the understanding. It is not, however, an understanding achieved by the reader: dissonance irrupts into the ironic space between narrations, creating that specifically literary reflex we know as peripeteia. In assimilating peripeteia, according to Frank Kermode, we are required to enact 'a readjustment of expectations in regard to an end'⁷ – an observation appropriate to the kind of response elicited by this text. In *Absalom, Absalom!* that 'end' towards which the interrogative impetus moves is no longer an event, a physical act – Henry killing Charles, say, or the discovery of Henry in the decaying mansion – for as this text proceeds the plane of event dissolves under the mythologizing scrutiny of its interpreters. Rather the end one has in view is a final act of mind: an ultimate and irrevocable disclosure when history yields to the demands of its inquisitors and reveals the answer to the question: 'Why did Henry kill Charles?'

This single question persistently emerges as the dominant structuring unit. To survey the various replies offered is to observe immediately the radical disparities in the interpretative operations of the four narrators. First we have Miss Rosa: 'I saw,' she tells Quentin,

Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birthright and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown'. (p.14)

7 Frank Kermode, *The Sense Of An Ending* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.18.

The 'motive' Rosa divines in all these outrages is motivelessness: they occur 'without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse'. The more speculative Mr Compson suggests, first, the existence of the octoroon mistress and child; second, the 'morganatic ceremony'; and finally,

not the two ceremonies but the two women; not the fact that Bon's intention was to commit bigamy but that it was apparently to make his (Henry's) sister a sort of junior partner in a harem. (p.98)

Sexual violation, and the consequent disruption of the social order, are on the other hand the necessary components of an answer for Shreve and Quentin. Thus incest is considered as the possible motive, until Bon admits to them in their imaginative recreation of events: 'So its the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear' (p.294).

Clearly the choice of any of these possibilities provides a strong factor of determination in the reading of the Sutpen story. Miss Rosa provides the most obvious example: if Sutpen is to be defined as an avatar of innate and furious malignity ('the demon'), then events themselves must manifest that malignity – hence her belief that the prohibition of the marriage and, ultimately, the murder of Bon were performed 'without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse'. Equally clear is the fact that, although this sequence of narrations may be jarringly discordant, each individual narrative obeys its own laws of logical coherence and explicative value. The problem for the reader – or so I will argue – is that the text appears to withhold any axiological criteria against which one could test these conflicting hypotheses.

Any reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* that seeks to interpret the text in terms of a linear progression through interrogation and disclosure will be seriously undermined by these kinds of dissonances. For the mystification at the hermeneutic centre of this text is purposive and indicative: it points to a level of coherence above itself, subsuming that mystification, and explaining not the mystery but the reasons for that mystery's existence. The effect of this textual constraint upon critical attention is to invert the normal priority of word and world: the

former *precedes* the latter here, and it is thus the speaking voice, not the object of speech, that becomes the primary element. Similarly the primary critical task becomes in consequence the differentiation of voices and, further, a reappraisal of the literary conventions in which those voices deal. For the dissolution of action (of historical actuality) implies also a dissolution of form (the representation of action in and by an order of generic resemblance). That is why, while often considered a tragedy, this text might better be served by the term (if one be needed) 'meta-tragedy'. To explain this it is necessary to turn to a closer inspection of the text's narrative mode, and in particular it is necessary to concentrate upon the contribution of Quentin, for not only is he the central narratorial figure, he is also the 'author and victim too'⁸ of the meta-tragedy.

As Shreve and Quentin move ever more enthusiastically toward the conclusion of their tale, Faulkner alters the style of description with a seemingly ingenious dramatic conflation:

So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two – Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry. (p.275; significantly Quentin is identified with Henry, whom he describes as 'an academic Hamlet'.)

Yet despite the dramatic vigour such a mode of description imparts to the scene, the specific identification of Quentin-Henry and Shreve-Charles should elicit a guarded response. For this is only the most overt signal of the extreme, and extremely suspect, historicism of these narrators: that is, their attempt to divine the subterranean flow of history through vicarious immersion in an imagined past. It is important to recognize too those moments not specifically identified by the text in which Quentin – through a similar projection of self – trespasses beyond the legitimate limits of narration. Significant instances are those in which he insists upon characterizing the precise motions of Sutpen's mind:

there was only himself, the two of them inside that one body, arguing quiet and calm: *But I can shoot him ...* and the other:

8 A typically illuminating phrase from Mr Compson (p.73).

No. That wouldn't do no good: and the first; What shall we do then? and the other: I don't know: and the first: But I can shoot him. (p.193)

We might be reminded of Quentin's own consciousness as it is described on the second page, become the arena for debate between 'two separate Quentins'. Similarly we find Quentin ascribing to Sutpen that quality of mind exclusively his own throughout the narrative:

He [Sutpen] could even seem to see them: the torch-disturbed darkness among trees, the fierce hysterical faces of the white men, the balloon face of the nigger. (p.191 – my emphasis)

The 'balloon face', the poor white's image of the black, refers to a particular event Sutpen putatively recounts to General Compson:

You knew that you could hit them, he told Grandfather, and they would not hit back or even resist. But you did not want to, because they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit; that you knew when you hit them you would just be hitting a child's toy ballon with a face painted on it, a face slick and smooth and distended and about to burst into laughing. (p.189)

Although seemingly less contentious than the previous two examples – at least in the sense of narrational propriety – Quentin's report of Sutpen's conversation with General Compson presents a further ironic possibility when contrasted with a previous situation. The scene is Caddy's wedding, the monologist is Benjy:

'Go on,' T.P. said. 'Holler again. I going to holler myself. Whooeey.' Quentin kicked T.P. again. He kicked T.P. into the trough where the pigs ate and T.P. lay there. 'Hot dog.' T.P. said, 'Didn't he get me then. You see that white man get me that time. Whooeey.' ... Quentin hit T.P. again. Then he began to thump T.P. against the wall. T.P. was laughing. Every time Quentin thumped him against the wall he tried to say Whooeey, but he couldn't say it for laughing.⁹

9 William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p.26.

The Sound and the Fury is, of course, crucial, and its effect here can be read as corrosive, because the contextual trappings Quentin brings from *The Sound and the Fury* to this story serve only to imperil further the authenticity of his narration, pervert it at its very source – the interpretative consciousness. The Quentin Compson who unearths the crucial motives of incest and miscegenation from the bare data of the Sutpen story is the same Quentin Compson who – at a later date, on the day of his suicide – sits ruminating alone in his room at Harvard:

It was a while before the last stroke ceased vibrating. It stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and St Francis talking about his sister. Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. *I have committed incest Father I said it was I not Dalton Ames* and when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. When he put the pistol in my hand I didn't. That's why I didn't. He would be there and she would and I would.¹⁰

From *The Sound and the Fury* we learn that the Harvard chimes – which insist on punctuating the morbid colloquy of Shreve and Quentin in the later text – are associated already in Quentin's mind with the major themes of incest and death. We learn too that Dalton Ames had offered Quentin a pistol with the words 'you'll need it from what you said',¹¹ an incident that re-surfaces in the later text:

Now it is Bon who watches Henry; he can see the whites of Henry's eyes as he sits looking at Henry with that expression which might be called smiling. His hand vanishes beneath the blanket and reappears, holding the pistol by the barrel, the butt extended toward Henry. [Dalton Ames, Quentin remembers, had 'handed it to me butt first'.¹²]

– Then do it now, he says.

Henry looks at the pistol; now he is not only panting, he is

10 *Ibid.*, p.76.

11 *Ibid.*, p.146.

12 *Ibid.*, p.146.

trembling; when he speaks now his voice is not even the exhalation, it is the suffused and suffocating inbreath itself:

- You are my brother.

- No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.

Suddenly Henry grasps the pistol, jerks it free of Bon's hand, stands so, the pistol in his hand, panting and panting; again Bon can see the whites of his inrolled eyes while he sits on the log and watches Henry with that faint expression about the eyes and mouth which might be smiling.

- Do it now, Henry, he says.

Henry whirls; in the same motion he hurls the pistol from him and stoops again, gripping Bon by both shoulders, panting. (pp.294-5)

In *The Sound and the Fury* memory continually saturates Quentin's consciousness of the present; it is not surprising, then, that Faulkner should exploit this known characteristic in *Absalom, Absalom!*. And this kind of identity between the incidents of the two texts strongly suggests that Quentin's recovery of the past here, his mythologization of history in which personal experience is inscribed fundamentally within the historical process, is symptomatic, certainly of Quentin's pathologically obsessed state of mind, but symptomatic too of a language that ceaselessly diverts itself from the apparent, and that directs itself towards the articulation of something other than what it says.

Everything, unfortunately, points to this conclusion - points, that is, to the futility of the act of interpretation. In the case of Quentin the attempted encounter with historical truth takes the form, not of hermeneutic understanding, but rather of compulsive, albeit unconscious, recollection in a language composed of the very fabric of memory. The story of Sutpen is nothing more than the occasion for this critical confrontation with language and truth, a confrontation precipitated by a collective effort of interpretation that short-circuits at every point under the stress of (narrative, psychic) repetition. It is not only that stories are being repeated here - the story of Sutpen in multifarious forms, the story of Absalom, the story of Babel, and indeed the story of Quentin Compson - it is also that repetition itself has

become the active principle in this text, serving to dramatize (textually, individually) the rhythms of neurotic obsession with vicious and compelling urgency. And nowhere is this compulsion to repeat – but to repeat too much, too often – more clearly visible than in the character of Quentin; which is why, from his partially glimpsed infancy in the earlier text and through the narrative assignment of *Absalom, Absalom!* the inexorable development of his incest-fixated consciousness towards suicide is starkly traced.

This becomes even more evident in the larger patterns of the narrative. I have already mentioned that the imposition of generic form on the recondite traces of history constitutes, like naming, another device within the hermeneutic endeavour of the narrators. Rosa's narrative, for example, composes a teleologically patterned vision of the real: history exists for Rosa as a process both allopathic and conspiratorial, the mere contrivance of a grand Manicheistic epic that finally brings together Rosa-Cassandra – prophetess and avatar of the good – and Sutpen-Demon – motiveless destroyer of the good. For Quentin, on the other hand, history exists in another guise: with the assistance of Shreve – whose acquaintance with the story comes exclusively from Quentin – he recovers and speaks a history encumbered with the design equipage of tragedy.

It is for this reason that I have characterized Quentin's narrative as meta-tragedy: having grasped history as tragedy, Quentin lives in its aftermath. The text frequently signals a dramatic context for the Sutpen figures. Sutpen arrives in Jefferson to the sound of his own name going

back and forth among the places of business and idleness and among the residences in steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen.* (p.26)

His face, 'whose flesh had the appearance of pottery' (p.26) a 'faience appearance' (p.39), later becomes

like the mask in a Greek tragedy, interchangeable not only from scene to scene, but from actor to actor and behind which events took place without chronology or sequence. (p.51)

Again he is described as being

unaware that his flowering was a forced blooming too and that while he was still 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. (pp.59-60)

These remarks of Mr Compson, however, merely anticipate the full realization of the tragic form, which takes place during the Shreve-Quentin narration.

This section of the novel (Chapter 6) begins with the weight of the central enigma bearing heavily on Quentin – that enigma that forms the dominant structuring unit: the motive for Bon's murder. He is described as having 'stopped listening':

since he had something which he was still unable to pass: that door, that gaunt tragic dramatic self-hypnotized youthful face like the tragedian in a college play, an academic Hamlet walked from some trancement of the curtain's falling and blundering across the dusty stage from which the rest of the cast had departed last Commencement, the sister facing him across the wedding dress which she was not to use, not even to finish, the two of them slashing at one another with twelve or fourteen words and most of these the same words repeated two or three times so that when you boiled it down they did it with eight or ten. (pp.143-4)

There is no confusion here: Quentin, or Faulkner, is letting us know that these were Quentin's thoughts immediately prior to the journey with Miss Rosa out to Sutpen's Hundred – musings evoked by the arrival at Harvard of Mr Compson's letter. But it is less the content than the dramaturgy of Quentin's mind that is of interest, for we are witness here to the operation whereby he transmutes chaos into form, world into word – into words that eclipse and supersede the world irrevocably.

And it is Quentin alone in whom the true tragic impulse is sustained,¹³ an impulse only fully realized in that section of the

13 It is true that the pitch often slips uncomfortably into the accents of melodrama and the impetus of the narration threatens to topple over into bathos. There is, for example, Bon requesting of Judith as they meander through a moonlit garden: 'Go. I wish to be alone to think

narrative from which I have already quoted: Shreve's and Quentin's imaginative vision of the Southern camp. Cleanth Brooks has suggested that these imagined events are, through the mode of presentation, 'given something like the authority of objective events'.¹⁴ This may be so, but these events are also the most wilfully stage-like of any in an already theatrical text, and to be entirely faithful to this mode of presentation one should take full account of the implications of this staging, of the cues, the directions, the lighting, the dressing of the set. For example:

about love' (p.275). There is also that hopelessly melodramatic scene between Bon and the 'Mississippi lawyer', interrupted at one point by an episode of hiss-the-villain heritage in which the lawyer murders Bon's mother and absconds with her money to 'Texas or Mexico', leaving the octoroon mistress destitute (pp.278-280). But this, of course, is Shreve's narrative, and Shreve is speaking a history not his own, and thus he mythologizes by an alien set of rules. If (as I am seeking to argue here) Shreve is there to witness to Quentin's profound sense of personal implication in cultural guilt - which his name, evoking both the ecclesiastical (shrive) and the judicial (sheriff) figures of confession, would suggest - he is a perverse confessor indeed. Quentin's obsession is for him only a game whose playfield is an image of 'the South': 'Jesus,' he tells Quentin, 'the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it' (p.230). And he is a sophisticated agonist: he purposely postpones the denouement so as to savour the detail of the narration ('Wait, wait, wait,' is his characteristic expression); he enjoys ironic play with the significations of others (Rosa's 'demon', for example); and he does not hesitate to distort, contradict, or simply manufacture facts in order to arrive at a personally satisfying explanation. (His naming Miss Rosa 'Aunt Rosa' is a particularly telling instance - he composes *his* thoughts on all of this by forging fictive relations between elements that confer upon the whole a coherence for him; thus he reacts incredulously to Quentin's assertion that Rosa was 'neither aunt, cousin, nor uncle':

'You mean she was no kin to you, (he asks Quentin) 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? (p.143)

It is of passing interest that for Shreve 'the South' is populated only by 'Bayards' and 'Guineveres', but no doubt more important is his sense of the fatality that hangs over the *Compson* 'South' - a sense he could only have acquired from Quentin.) Little wonder, then, that he will say as he interrupts Quentin: 'No, you wait. Let me play a while now' (p.230).

14 Cleanth Brooks, 'The Narrative Structure of *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Georgia Review*, Summer (1975), 382.

there was enough light somewhere, enough of it for him to distinguish Bon's sleeping face from among the others where he lay wrapped in his blankets, beneath his spread cloak; enough light for him to wake Bon by and for Bon to distinguish his face (or perhaps something communicated by Henry's hand) because Bon does not speak, demand to know who it is: he merely rises and puts the cloak about his shoulders and approaches the smouldering fire and is kicking it into a blaze when Henry Speaks:

- Wait.

Bon pauses and looks at Henry; now he can see Henry's face. He says,

- You will be cold. You are cold now. You haven't been asleep, have you? Here.

He swings the cloak from his shoulders and holds it out.

- No, Henry says.

- Yes. Take it. I'll get my blanket.

Bon puts the cloak about Henry and goes and takes up his tumbled blanket and swings it about his shoulders, and they move aside and sit on a log. (p.293)

Faulkner at one point describes Shreve's and Quentin's activity as one of creation, composition:

the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too, quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath. (p.250)

In the vision of the Southern camp the 'rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking', the scrappy texts of a memorial history with which each narrator must work, are finally transfigured into that most compelling of all forms: the tragic drama.

Of course it could be objected that the Sutpen Story, such as it is, is inherently tragic, eminently suited to the tragic form. But this is to return the text to an order of representation – of generic form adjusted to the nature of the real by a principle of propriety – which this text has already radically interrogated and seemingly subverted. Presence and representation, as I have already

suggested, are not linked in a causal sequence but rather by a relation of affiliation (be it Quentin's or Shreve's or Rosa's or Mr Compson's reading of history, or our reading of them): that is why our critical concern is not with the events of the Sutpen saga (although the *narrators* are critically concerned with these events) but rather with the specific character of the utterance of those events. Further, neither Miss Rosa nor Mr Compson brings tragedy to her or his material. Rosa, 'the county poetess laureate', provider of 'poems, ode, eulogy and epitaph' (p.8) clearly speaks history as epic. To insist upon the generic propriety of tragedy here is to initiate a line of inquiry that can only end in a proliferation of tragedies. For surely – if indeed it is at all desirable to characterize her monologue in this way – it is not the tragedy of Sutpen (or Henry or Charles or even Judith) that Rosa unearths from an incoherent past, but the tragedy of Rosa Coldfield. It is this very formlessness of history, its indecipherability, however, that attracts the more speculative Mr Compson, even as it brings him to the very brink of silence:

It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not meant to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation and signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection that sounds to us like Sanskrit or Choctaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their actions of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable – Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes

themselves, shadowy, inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (p.83)

Mr Compson has no anxiety over a misreading of history, he simply senses that it cannot be read at all (the metaphor of illegibility is a telling one here): his narration remains mere speculation, and threatens always to retreat into that silence of aporia that knowingly speaks of the impossibility of ever knowing. He has not, of course, acquired the new knowledge that completes Quentin's drama, but then that knowledge has yet to be examined in terms of the critical foreground of the text: the language of the interpretative consciousness.

If the Sutpen story is tragic only for Quentin, then why is it so? In the first place to give form to history is to elaborate a concept of duration: to assume that the past can be grasped and represented implies the further assumption of an end. But Quentin's understanding of the structure of time is not one of a string of isolated epochs each with its own linear development towards closure; it is, rather, circular.¹⁵ This image of time is captured broadly in the movements of narrative recapitulation, and figured in more concrete form in the activity of naming – the idea of archetype and avatar working to produce a vision of history recapitulating itself. And this is the concept of time assumed by tragedy, for, like the rhythm of neurotic obsession, the rhythm of tragedy is recurrence. At the close of the tragedy there is, Clifford Leech maintains,

nothing reassuring in the new situation, no promise that a new chain of evil will not quickly ensue, no lesson that men or the gods have learned. No message of hope for the future has been brought. The tragic situation, it is implied, is recurrent in human life; that is why we feel terror.¹⁶

- 15 The endlessness of time and events tortures Quentin equally in *The Sound and the Fury*, whence his despairing reflection on the day on which he ends it all: 'Finished. If things just finished themselves' (p.76).
- 16 Clifford Leech, 'The Implications of Tragedy', in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. Laurence Lerner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.297.

It is, of course, this tragic rhythm that tyrannizes Quentin's sick consciousness:

Am I going to have to hear it all over again *he thought* I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do. (p.228)

For Quentin history has become the morbid echo of an action, a blind and endless re-enactment of a vicious atrocity: incest and murder. In this act all past and future are summed, and in it too the tragic life of Quentin Compson is instantaneously dramatized, from his (delusive) incestuous encounter with Caddy to his self-murder (which takes place shortly after he has unravelled for himself the Sutpen mystery).

In Quentin's view, then, tragedy (or the tragic form) is the necessary pre-condition for historical knowledge: without tragedy the real is literally inconceivable. Roland Barthes, on the other hand, has suggested that tragedy is 'a means of "recovering" human misery, of subsuming it and thereby justifying it in the form of a necessity, a wisdom, a purification'¹⁷ – a view which, I think, illuminates Quentin's situation. In this sense it could be argued that the 'tragedy' of Sutpen crystallizes the guilt Quentin actively seeks as atonement for his incest fixation (whence his need for a confessor in Shreve). But it is not simply incest that is tragically operative throughout history; its secret spring, Quentin determines, is miscegenation – the neurotic obsession of an entire culture, 'the South':

More shocking to the imagination of the South than the fantasy of a white man overwhelmed by a hostile black world is the fear that finally all distinctions will be blurred and black and white no longer exist ... Precisely this prevision of total assimilation and chaos is entrusted to the young Canadian Shreve at the end of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*:

17 Quoted by Alain Robbe-Grillet in *For A New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p.49.

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont 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 wont 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.¹⁸

But then again Shreve's 'prevision' which, according to Leslie Fiedler, focusses the obsessional fear of 'the South' arises from the rigorous and obsessed logic of Quentin's drama. The logic of the text is of another kind entirely. That 'South' Shreve has become familiar with – and upon which, at this point, he has chosen to comment – is at best a more or less accurate construct communicated through the interpretative workings of Quentin's consciousness. And just as the antinomies of history are resolved through 'that best of ratiocination', as Faulkner calls it, 'logic and morality' (pp.230-31), so too does 'the South' undergo a similar mythic transformation.

It is, in fact, this mythic 'South' that prompts Shreve's inquiry towards the end of his narrative:

We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are freed and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining-room table and such, to be always reminding us never to forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? (p.297)

'I don't know,' Quentin replies after some indecision; and yet Quentin might easily strike us as one morbidly unable to forget, destined and even damned to recollection in his own pathological way, since he cannot avoid

the listening, the hearing in 1909 mostly about that which he already knew, since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which those church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833. (p.25)

There is really no doubt that Quentin's apprehension of 'the

18 Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, second edn. revised and enlarged (London: Paladin, 1970), p.382.

South' is determined and determinative; he no longer needs even to listen:

But you were not listening, because you knew it all already, had learned, absorbed it all already without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it, with it, as children will and do; so that what your father was saying did not tell you anything so much as it struck, word by word, the resonant strings of remembering. (p.175)

This 'South', Quentin's 'South', has infiltrated and laid hold upon his consciousness with an insistence that profoundly shapes its mode of apprehension and its mode of speaking. And Faulkner, too, is insistent on this point:

Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous and defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. (p.9)

'Sonorous and defeated names' *echo* through Quentin's 'very body' – marked by reverberation and recurrence, his 'commonwealth' can only exist within the domain of tragedy. And as the actions are recurrent, so the names are 'interchangeable': Absalom-Henry, Absalom-Charles, and perhaps, finally, Absalom-Quentin – who apprehends and narrates history in such a way as to reveal the figure of the archetypal Father whose deeds have so worked upon destiny that his children must perform and suffer their expiation through the internecine power of incest and murder:

Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (p.215)

It is not that Quentin misreads the situation or misapprehends or misconceives (by this stage these are fancifully inappropriate categories anyway); it is simply that he is fully subject to prior interpretative imperatives that serve to render everything, from the very first, painfully clear. This is the significance of his refrain, 'Too much, too long' – 'Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen too much, too

long' (p.171) – significant because Quentin's 'Southern' understanding is predicated upon a sense of tragic origins, tragic ends, and ultimately (as *The Sound and the Fury* shows) a tragic and damning eschatology. Quentin, like Miss Rosa, has 'got the picture from the first word' (p.62), the drama has been instantaneously enacted and his consciousness demands that its central action hinge upon a manifestation of the guilt of 'the South': 'Why God let us lose the war' (p.8). Thus it is in and through the figure of Thomas Sutpen that Quentin projects his archetypal figure of the Father: Father to Quentin – pathologically concerned with incest and death (Caddy and Dalton Ames) – and Patriarch to 'the South' – the figure who focusses its endemic fear of miscegenation, who symbolically answers to 'why we lost the war'.

Quentin's is, of course, a limit case. Before turning even the first page of this novel we know he is a suicide; we know something of the character and force of his obsessions; we know we are dealing with a figure at the extreme, on the edge. But that is probably what makes his case so instructive; it is precisely this excessiveness in Quentin that allows him (in terms of narrative psychology) to complete the discovery, just as it is this excessiveness that makes his story the most formidable, the one narration that seems to have the greatest purchase upon the truth of the matter. The problem is to distinguish between a truth that is uncovered by an obsessive determination, and a truth that is determined by an obsession. And frankly the text conflates the two, effectively forbidding distinctions of this kind. For if we are borne along by Quentin's inquisitive persistence and thereby compelled, as he is, to accept his final version of the Sutpen story, we are also forced to acknowledge along the way, as he is, that all of this includes (or at the very least is always attended by) a discomposing element of the fantastic. Indeed a certain oneiric quality is insisted upon from the very beginning:

It should have been later than it was; it should have been late, yet the yellow slashes of mote-palpitant sunlight were latticed no higher up the impalpable wall of gloom which separated them; the sun seemed hardly to have moved. It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of the logic-and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows

must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second [as indeed the Sutpen drama *does* take place – instantaneously – for Quentin], yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity – horror or pleasure or amazement – depends as completely upon a formal recognition of elapsed and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale. (p.18)

For Quentin the Sutpen story is an oppressive blend of the fantastic and the irrevocably real. And that is why, as I have already suggested, the text can offer no grounds for proof, nothing against which Quentin's resolution can be tested.

We are left in no doubt that it is Quentin who resolves the enigma:

'Your father,' Shreve said. 'He seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years. If he knew all this, what was his reason for his telling you that the trouble between Henry and Bon was an octoroon woman?'

'He didn't know it then. Grandfather didn't tell him all of it either. Like Sutpen never told Grandfather quite all of it.'

'Then who did tell him?'

'I did.' Quentin did not move, did not look up while Shreve watched him. 'The day after we – after that night we –' (p.219)

The critical scene is that of the meeting between Henry and Quentin, a scene the reader experiences 'with maximum intensity', according to Cleanth Brooks,

not only because it has been delayed and delayed and most cunningly led up to, but also because he feels the power of its impact upon Quentin ... It is Quentin's imagined vision that is presented to the reader.¹⁹

Certainly the position of this scene signifies its importance – important as the final revelation of the hermeneutic scrutiny of history, the act that discloses once and for all the dominant structuring unit of the tale – but this 'imagining' will bear closer inspection. For one needs only to reconstruct the scene under new conditions of emphasis, which I have tried to outline here,

19 Brooks, *op.cit.*, p.385.

to see that history, in the figure of Henry, discloses nothing on that September night; nothing, that is, that we may take to be a solution of any kind.

The climactic interview is prefaced by a renewed concentration upon the oneiric character of the event:

he [Quentin] said 'I have been asleep' it was all the same, there was no difference: waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling, toward the faint light which fell outward from the last door and paused there, saying 'No. No' and then 'Only I must. I have to' and went in, entered the bare, stale room whose shutters were closed too, where a second lamp burned dimly on a crude table; waking or sleeping it was the same: the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived. (pp.306-7)

It is a passage clearly intent upon evoking the sensations of nightmare and unreality, forcing the scene ever further into the mind's recesses of fantasy and dread. Quentin's remembrance of his conversation with Henry follows immediately – his unmediated encounter with the actuality of history, the interview at which, presumably, all morbid suspicions are confirmed. And yet it is not to the sense of living presence, of the naked apprehension of truth, that one attends, but rather to the conspicuously wrought form of the dialogue that takes place:

And you are - ?
Henry Sutpen.
And you have been here - ?
Four Years.
And you came home - ?
To die. Yes.
To die - ?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here - ?
Four Years.
And you are - ?
Henry Sutpen.

The exchange traces a perfect arc, a perfect reflecting surface, and in the vicious circularity of his questioning Quentin not only encounters the recalcitrant face of history, but inevitably recognizes his Godforsaken self, and his Godforsaken 'South'. The question of authenticity is entirely inappropriate here: the truth or falsity of Quentin's spoken history is no longer of any importance – and indeed it never was at issue. He has inherited either the reality or the imagination of guilt, and it destroys him. Real or imagined, the sins of the past in a land stolen from its original inhabitants and worked by the pain and death of an enslaved race return to haunt the present. This is the meaning of 'the South' to Quentin, and it is a meaning which, for all of its qualifications, the text nevertheless vividly imparts to us.

Earlier I suggested that the examination of the interpretative consciousness demands the concomitant analysis of the character of its purchase upon language, a language which, I suggested, appears to make interpretation possible in the first place. Now in Quentin's case there are some crucial features of that 'character' to be observed (the following exchange is between Mr Compson and Quentin):

It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said You don't know. You can't know and he said Yes. On the instant we come to realize that tragedy is second-hand.²⁰

For Quentin – 'author and victim too' of the tragedy of Sutpen, victim to what I have called the 'meta-tragedy' – words, 'just words', have a terrible power. It is a power he recognizes himself in *The Sound and the Fury*, in a remark which is as good a description as any of *Absalom, Absalom!*:

They all talked at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words.²¹

There is where interpretation takes place; *that* is the point at which language seems to license and authenticate interpretative

20 *The Sound and the Fury*, p.107.

21 *Ibid.*, p.109.

inquiry: 'when ... desires become words'. It is this that guarantees, incontrovertibly, the reality of the case – as Faulkner seems to suggest on the very first page of this text:

[Miss Rosa] 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, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked. (p.5)

This power of language to substantiate the desired truth persists as motif throughout the entire text; it is most typically referred to by the words 'Quentin could see':

Quentin seemed to watch them (p.6);

Meanwhile, as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man whom she could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality of almost solidity, permanence (p.10);

It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them (p.156 – and so on throughout the text.)

In fact as Quentin hears for the first time a full account of the Sutpen story he confers upon this inescapable entelechy of words its most pointed metaphor:

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*. (p.6)

In a profoundly ironic way the *Logos* exists in the speaking voice, creating always its own unreality (even though it be taken for truth) – as Quentin himself, on the day of his suicide, seems compelled to admit. And it is this capacity for compelling self-delusion, for absorption within and by a language of truth, that is critical: for only when the possibility of meaning can be guaranteed within the word, only when it *is* what it *says* (only when the ironic *Logos* exists), can interpretation take place.

And this, it seems to me, is the point. All of the seemingly

penetrating devices employed variously by the narrators of this text – the naming, the allegorizing, the fashioning of forms – are so many images of language itself. For language here is poised between illusion and disillusion (in all senses of these terms): it is, on the one hand, that which ‘makes human knowledge possible’, yet it also constitutes a denial of the real;²² and something of this wretched ambivalence of language is suggested to Quentin by his grandfather, who describes it as

that meagre and fragile thread ... by which the little surface corners and edges of men’s secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either. (p.207)

This solipsistic horizon of private language is one rarely trespassed by Quentin, and within that horizon tragedy assumes the form of a condition of existence. Language, calling forth its compelling world, constricts the obsessed consciousness within its own tragic domain, for it is the ‘linguistic structure’ of the mind ‘which renders possible the fixity of the fixation, the repetitiveness of the obsession’.²³ In the end it is the interpretative and representative apparatus of the psyche, the deep textuality of his tortured Southern mind, that determines finally the nature and import of the Sutpen story for Quentin.

22 Jan Miel makes the point this way:

The imposition of single forms or terms on the disparate variety of what we experience is what enables us to know and control our environment, and is essential to intellectual development. Yet this very essential function of language, when it is not part of a human dialogue, and thus subjected to the ordinary laws of human discourse and dialectical thinking, can apply all its powers of displacement, condensation, transfer, to a denial of reality governed by the pleasure principle. Thus is constituted the ‘forgotten language’ of the unconscious, an archaic language lurking beneath our supposedly objective discourse, just as our primal narcissism lurks beneath all our relations to others. Underlying both is an illusion, an illusion of autonomy, objectivity, stability, where there should be a recognition of intersubjectivity and becoming.

‘Jacques Lacan and the Structure of the Unconscious’, in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), pp.99-100.

So Quentin is the true Oedipal detective, ineluctably moving towards that vision of 'the South' that will destroy him. Wherever he chooses to look, he will discover only his own image: his apprehension of history (even in its moribund actuality in the person of Henry) appears to consist in nothing more than individuated mythic projection, an externalization of massive inner (personal, cultural) guilt. The richness and actuality of history dissolve under his scrutiny, under his dedication to 'that best of ratiocination' which, Faulkner continues, 'after all was a good deal like Sutpen's morality and Miss Coldfield's demonizing' (p.231). And just as Sutpen had proclaimed the narrow and arrogant order upon which his 'design' was based, just as Rosa is unable to envisage a history deprived of epic sweep and egocentric design, so too does Quentin, in mythologizing history as the recurrence of a tragic condition, take word for world in an unknowing but inescapable denial of the real. 'For the very end of myths,' Barthes concludes, 'is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possessions.'²⁴

If, in the course of this confusioEn of tongues, language becomes fragmented, Babel-like, among men and women, the original loss, the *Logos*, returns with a heavy irony to determine the divergent courses of individuated and conflicting modes of discourse. In my analysis of Quentin's narration – fashioned in the tragic mode – I have attempted to show why this happens, and its significance within and for the text. These modes of discourse are carefully juxtaposed, contrasted in such a way as to mutually define both the limits and the effect of any one; and there is an image that, quite self-consciously, suggests itself as the appropriate figure for this juxtaposition. It is Judith's:

You get born and you try this and you don't 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 and the others all trying and they don't know why either except that the strings are all

23 *Ibid.*, p.100.

24 *Mythologies*, p.155.

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. (p.105)

There is no ambiguity here: the emphasis of the text falls precisely upon this image of the site of a tangled creation, in the same way as this tangled text arises out of a language that is the site of its action, a language in and out of which the real (the joke is Faulkner's) can be truly fabricated. The revelation one should seek from this confusion of tongues, then, is not the bead of exfoliated historical truth – desirable though that might appear – but the relation that obtains between the self and history, consciousness and the real. And that relation is one mediated by language – mediated, that is, by something that, here, appears to refuse the status of medium utterly. That, in any event, seems, theoretically, to be the lesson of this text.

But let me say one last thing, which might indicate why I feel a literary text might be valuable even in excess of its theoretical lessons. Paradoxically what is most compelling about these assembled stories is the very thing which their assemblage and juxtaposition denies: the *effect* of the real, the *effect* of truth. For this text brilliantly *rehearses* that effect – correlated as it is with the ancient action of the clue being traced, the mystery being unfolded – even as it dramatizes the dissolution of the real and the dissolution of truth, and thus dramatises the twin crises of interpretation and representation. Read from one perspective a truth is revealed to Quentin – he discovers it, he acquires a purchase on the real through it, and it kills him. Read in the context of the emphases of the text, and that discovery can only be read as, not truthful, but compelling, certainly for Quentin. But to the extent that it is compelling for us as readers – and because it is tracing Quentin's compulsive inquiry the text *makes it compelling for us*, that is the nature of and the effect of its literariness: its poetics, its rhetoric, its figurations, its narrative methods – to that extent it will function as true, even if we know that Quentin might have fashioned this truth for himself from deep within his pathological sensibility. The conceptual emphases I have traced within the text can only qualify, they cannot nullify, this effect. Certainly our reading is necessarily

awakened to and contaminated by the ambivalence of language, certainly it too is poised between illusion and disillusion, but as long as we still find *Absalom, Absalom!* absorbing, as long as we still find it compelling, to that extent it will still function for us as revelation, an uncovering of the sinful real, a disclosure of profound cultural tragedy whose consequences unfold across generations in the deaths of the guilty or the guilt-obsessed. And so this text will still make its claims upon us, will still move us as if real, even if it leaves us in a reality not quite as familiar, not quite as solid and as reassuring as it once was – because it will leave us in a reality which it now asks us to recognize as always haunted by our own textual fashioning. If *Absalom, Absalom!* is a text that, in its complex telling, raises many questions – about textuality, about critical reflection, about the transactions between word, world, and consciousness – I am compelled to say that, on the matter of the enduring value of literary texts such as this, no question remains.