



archives

Issue Five

The Narrated Truth About Sutpen, *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Jacques Lacan, Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault's view of the episteme and its domination of subjectivity are vitally expressed in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, where the formation of the individual's discursive history is the causal determinant for all action. *Absalom, Absalom!* with its use of obviously prejudiced, self-conscious, self-reifying, superficial but still fundamental story telling, illustrates the development of truth. We see a process of the consolidation of perception by characters through narration, as epic events around Thomas Sutpen are told, retold and reinvented. *Absalom, Absalom!* shows the actions of the episteme (using Foucault's terminology^[1]) of 'The South' as characters relate the way things happened and so the way things are. *Absalom, Absalom!* has been singled out by critics for its confused modernist perspective. The deep impression of Faulkner's work has sometimes been rationalised as being significant for the narrated history's factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies, but as Dirk Kuyk Jr shows in *Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!*, the inaccuracies in the details of the novel are minimal^[2]. Langford in his introduction to his collation of the manuscript and the final text shows that one of the inaccuracies that does exist was the result of the changing of a plot line, with a couple of the necessary revisions of the chronology being missed, rather than any modernist statement by Faulkner.^[3] We have a recognition of the impact of narration in Faulkner's writing in general and in this book in particular, especially so, but we do not have an explanation for this impact. Richard Gray writes: "vast critical labours expended upon it...have left it nothing less of an enigma."^[4] Walter Slatoff writes: "We don't know to what extent we have watched a tragedy, the story of a great man whose destruction of himself and his house is due essentially to flaws in character; to what extent a naturalistic drama in which morality and human guilt are irrelevant and the destruction a result of hereditary, economic, and social forces beyond the control of any of the characters; to what extent a grim and pointless joke to

which the fitting commentary is the howling of the last Sutpen, who is an idiot."^[5] David Kelly's article 'Telling Questions in *Absalom, Absalom!*' (1993), indicates that the view that the text simply fails to produce a coherent narrative and hence demonstrates Modern chaos holds some currency today: "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 of word and world that appears to bedevil narrative and narratorial voice in *Absalom, Absalom!*"^[6] There is an established sense of perplexity with respect to *Absalom, Absalom!* which a number of (mostly earlier) critics have related to the impossibility of communication and the chaotic nature of the universe. Since *Absalom, Absalom!* foregrounds its own narration to the point that it does not support logo-centric assumptions about the formation of knowledge, some criticism - following its own teleology - can see no more radical conclusion than that the narration in *Absalom, Absalom!* does not work. Despite a large amount of criticism of this novel, more recent critics (such as Cobley, Radloff, Sherry and Garfield^[7]) have found it necessary to start again, enquiring into the central themes of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Recent criticism has attempted to overcome the maxim that if things are not as consistent as they claim to be, they must not have any significance at all.

The problem with the methodology of the view that sees Faulkner's text as leading to chaos is that having determined that something more than the conveying of information is occurring in the tales of different characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*, this criticism has labelled these tales 'contradictory' and has not investigated the narrations further. Kuyk shows that the 'contradictions' found by critics in *Absalom, Absalom!* are more an attempt to explain effects of the text rather than a product of manifest inconsistencies: "Some critics have exaggerated the importance of inconsistencies."^[8] In *The Archaeology Of Knowledge* Foucault criticises this kind of search for contradiction. Rather than looking for and being disappointed in a search for as Foucault describes: "an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought", he proposes "to map, in particular discursive practice, the point at which they are constituted, to define the form that they assume, the relations that they have with each other, and the domain that they govern."^[9] That is, the knowledge formed by discourses is by nature inconsistent and we should accept this and incorporate it into the descriptions of the objects formed by them.

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* with its high modernist emphasis on the process of narration depicts the formation of truth and knowledge within a

closed community. It is quite explicit in *Absalom, Absalom!* that Sutpen is startling because he does not fit into the town's knowledge with a "name that none of them had ever heard, and origin and purpose which some of them were never to learn."^[10] Any reaction that Sutpen incurs is for this transgression of their order. This is an order set on particular facts of existence they tell and retell each other. If Sutpen had a recognisable name (or possibly, if he could be given one^[11]) he could be placed within the 'meanings' accepted by the community and so according to the rules of the episteme his purpose would be transparent. Nomenclature and its accompanying knowledge are the issue the town holds against Sutpen: "the stranger's name went back and forth among the places of business and of idleness and among the residences in steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen.*"^[12] Sutpen's name can not be placed within the established order of relationships. The narrative about Sutpen is reconstructed by Quentin as an objectifying history but is ambiguous in its effect. The text as a whole is both a retelling of what is already known by a particular group of people and an experiencing of the first events through narration. The narrator's experience as they narrate just as participants narrate as they experience. This experience involves the same perception as that of the characters involved because that perception is determined by the same episteme. The truth is defined for both Sutpen and his contemporaries, and Quentin, by their having lived in the South and grown up to know the same reality. They exist in the same world. The actual narration could be Quentin's or the fifth recounting of it by someone Quentin told it to. Even Rosa's narrative in the first chapter is not as isolatedly subjective as it appears. Rosa Coldfield has accepted parts of the sum of the knowledge about Sutpen later in the text.^[13] Thus we can reasonably look at the text as an ongoing, continuous narrative and history. However inconsistent the sum of the whole is, it is 'true' within the text. As knowledge the narration is not just empirically there, it is as true as any other knowledge because all are constructed in the same way. In the community's dealing with Sutpen their narration must deal with something unknown in an existence where everything is already known. The text mimics this coming to know Sutpen that the town must go through. By analogy he is related to something that is already known about, be it demon or heroic founding father. Events are gone over and relived. At first sketched and obscure the events are then gone over and filled in. This repetition is the way knowledge is formed. All things must be related to the already understood.

In the community's static determined lives Sutpen represents dynamic volition and while they can not explain him with his past, he is simply an element of chaos. It is precisely his initial embodying the purported ideals of the Southern episteme that will make him such a thorny problem for the South. In

starting from nothing and establishing a plantation, and fighting courageously for the South in the Civil War and looking to establish a dynasty, he is an outsider who embodies their ideals and hence makes them uncomfortable with their actual realisation. Ideals are made concrete rather than just being hopelessly aspired to in a comfortable and thoroughly Christian deferment. They are actualised for those who contemplate his history. This is why Sutpen stands as such a mythic archetype for those who retell him, rather than because of his initial challenge to the decency of the town. (The fact of his spectacular failure sits well with the knowledge the South has of things: the natural order as they believe it to be.)

The familiar of the stable Southern hierarchy is disturbed, but the cause of this disturbance is not entirely an other. According to American ideology, Sutpen should be a heroic figure, except for the fact that the community shuns that which it purportedly stands for. The familiar is disrupted by something familiar. In the text Sutpen is a demon for expressing the I's contempt for its present existence and setting out to change it. This discontent is shared by each of the townspeople. Their conditioned inertia is rationalised as being the (morally) appropriate. Sutpen carries the child's belief in his own omnipotence. The townspeople's repression of such concerns is their 'reality principle' and so the Sutpen saga is uncanny for them. It speaks of a pleasure that they have forsaken: the pleasure of contradicting their world. The American Dream has weight in their consciousness. They still laud the pioneering, legend-distilled, founding fathers and Sutpen echoes them with his fantastic property. Hence the interest, manifested in the retellings, that the town continues to have with Sutpen even after his death.^[14] In fact, Sutpen is made into a latecomer by the community when according to Arthur Kinney he is not: "The point is that Sutpen is not a late arrival in Yoknapatawpha but one of its first settlers."^[15] Facts are distorted to suit the mythic narration. Even at its inception it is already too late to fulfil the purported ideals of frontiership and anyone who attempts it is a latecomer, who is trespassing on the already resting 'hopes' of the others. Sutpen is ever affirmed as a violation of an order that scarcely existed when he took over the Chickasaw lands that he was to make into his Hundred.

The process of absorbing something into the knowing of the community is both a technique and a theme in the novel. Some members of the community exhibit conceptual 'fore-knowing' (using Heidegger's term)^[16]: "there were several who even anticipated in believing"^[17] and this is paralleled in the 'foreshadowing and returning to' structure of the text. In Chapter One the French architect is preemptively mentioned as "that French architect who looked like he had been hunted down and caught in turn by the Negroes"^[18] with no other

explanation or reference, and then he is returned to in the second chapter and explained, just as the main points of the plot are revealed, but are meaningless without an intelligible context. When they are returned to, the process of knowing is simulated and we participate as readers in making the situation intelligible. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the last in a line of constitutive knowings starting with Sutpen himself and emanating outwards from General Compson (whose 'steadfast' demeanour suggests that there is not necessarily something personally at stake in these retellings) and the community to Quentin and then to us. 'Pre-known' so many times, the context which is needed for the reader's understanding is sometimes forgotten in the first telling. As the events between Sutpen, Henry and Charles are 'filled in', given greater detail, so that they become 'intelligible', we have the sense of a developing of knowledge. The context which gives significance is 'experienced'. Only part of the context that gives things meaning is given, which leads the reader to project, in the same way characters 'fore-know' and this is verified in the discourse later by things that are already known and that are confirmed within the system.

Obscure details are related: "Henry had just vanished...And then something happened. Nobody knew what."^[19] When the plot is given without context, as events by themselves, and thus the meaning of events is lost, we see how the narrating of events within a history gives things significance. When events are told, they happen in the discourse: "That's what Miss Rosa heard...That's all Miss Rosa knew."^[20] Retold a number of times, the material is shaped by semantic logic and epistemic perception and 'the event' comes about. The event 'happens' again and again with the retelling. The text poses the question: 'If none involved in the dispute between Henry and Sutpen described it, did it happen?'

Understanding is the bringing together of two elements which are by nature already known ("fore-known"): "So the legend of the wild men came gradually back to town...it was [men from the community] who told how..."^[21]. The town's interpretation of his actions, a "working-out of possibilities projected in understanding",^[22] as Heidegger defines 'interpretation', is uncomfortably consistent with the community's original opinion of the unknown new-comer. Information is not gained about Sutpen for them to act on, rather an opinion confirms itself, without reference to independent facts. The interpretation feeds its view of things with its own premises and bolsters itself with time. Town members believe they have objective confirmation of the truth when others, who are constructed in the same way by the same episteme, agree with them. The amorphous community can not act without discourse to give significance to things: "They...did not accost him now. They just waited while reports and

rumours came back to town of how..." . The (unsubstantiated) descriptions are the mechanism for their action: " 'Boys, this time he stole the whole darn steamboat!' So at last civic virtue came to a boil."^[24] Someone has to say Sutpen is a criminal and then they will act on the statement. In the same way, actions that are not described do not happen: "Doubtless something more than this transpired at the time, though none of the vigilance committee ever told it that I know of."^[25] We see in Faulkner's work a community that can not stand success and the change it brings. If this change is brought by a stranger then this behaviour is criminal and must be punished. It is by his disruption of the perceived equilibrium of the community that he is a malefactor.

The opposition encourages Sutpen. It reinforces his belief, already well formed, that the town is out to get him. His conviction overextends itself more in its belief in an adversary's intention, than in the idea of obstacles to be overcome and the opposition of the system to change. Zizek comments on this type of feeling: "The paranoiac's mistake does not consist in his radical disbelief, in his conviction that there is a universal deception - here he is quite right, the symbolic order is ultimately the order of a fundamental deception - but rather, in his belief in a hidden agent who manipulates this deception"^[26]. Similarly, what the town begrudges in *Absalom, Absalom!*, that: "He had been too successful"^[27], Sutpen believes and works into his narration of himself. Sutpen wants to believe the town or someone is holding him back. This is part of his 'innocence'.

The obscurity of Sutpen's motivation and general rationale for his life is a recurrent question to be resolved within the novel. Much of the dramatic tension, the reason for reading *Absalom, Absalom!*, resides in the development of an explanation of that which drives Sutpen. Sutpen is made obscure by Rosa's depiction of pure evil and the plethora of speculations within the different accounts that follow. The difficulty with understanding Sutpen extends to the rest of the text. The doubtful authority of the details related, the foregrounding of the process of filling in the account, and the subversion of the verity of the act of producing an explanation have lead to the celebration of failure to understand what has been related within the text^[28]. It has come to the point that much criticism doubts that anything can be reliably seen to have occurred. The description of events, of both actions and motivations, must be deliberately vague and unknowing. It must pull up and wait for a key to explain the desires involved. The other characters of the drama appear, from the description given of them in the text, to drift without any discernible motivation according to the arbitrary dictates of the Father. These "acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable"^[29] need the self-generated

significance of Sutpen's personal history. The narration is the point. The events themselves are an old "chemical formula"^[30] with something missing: "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."^[31] Any answer lies beyond absolute signifiers of a divorced reality, in a set of discourses with contextual meaning. The meaning is derived from narrated history. The actions and reality of the characters do not have a meaning until one is assigned by the discourse. The desire that explains the actions is imbued by the structure of the subject which is in turn constructed by predominant 'truthful' statements.

We have a depiction of Sutpen giving an account of himself and his life when he comes to explain himself to General Compson. The senselessness of his account and his earnest need to give it underline the actual process of giving such a narrative. The narrating of events comes to be the most important element in the saga that occurs in *Absalom, Absalom!*. This has already been seen in Rosa's account of her life, but it is given a greater dimension when the prime mover of so much that happens is seen to live according to a particular history's significance. The process of Sutpen working out an order of where things stand within his design is seen in his monologue to General Compson: "sitting there and talking...Grandfather said he did not believe that Sutpen himself knew because even yet Sutpen had not quite told him all of it"^[32]. We can presume this is because Sutpen keeps part of the history from himself. Sutpen has an 'innocence', which dictates that the only obstacles to be faced are external and that there is a way to finish his design. Because of this he will never have the answer to what went wrong. Freud's description of the obsessive neurotic parallels Sutpen's failure to perceive: "In the manifold forms of obsessional neurosis particularly, 'forgetting' consists mostly of a falling away of the links between various ideas, a failure to draw conclusions, an isolating of certain memories."^[33] In this vein Sutpen is "trying to explain to circumstance, to fate itself, the logical steps by which he had arrived at a result absolutely and forever incredible, repeating the clear and simple synopsis of his history"^[34].

Sutpen comes to Grandfather to explain his life so that he "might perceive and clarify that initial mistake"^[35]. Sutpen's innocence is shown in his searching after a "mistake" rather than seeing what has been demonstrated to him a number of times: the functioning of desire. He never sees the problem of desire: "Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make my mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it"^[36]. He always assumes that his design is reachable. He never questions his own goal: "no matter which course he chose, the result would be that that

design and plan to which he had given fifty years of his life had just as well never have existed at all by almost exactly fifty years"^[37]. His life has been ordered and recounted in terms of the alienated endeavour to fulfil a design. If he were to disregard his history and give up his struggle, then his life would not be as it is. The events he has gone through are his life only after they have gone through his narrative. The significances stand within his personal narrated historical context. The logic involved is highly personal, involving the narration by which the subject constitutes himself: "Grandfather not knowing what choice he was talking about even...this second choice, need to choose, as obscure to Grandfather as the reason for the first, the repudiation, had been"^[38]. The repudiation of his first wife is not explained and only makes sense within his history. Sutpen's continuing narrative is a little too idiosyncratic. A causal sequence must be worked out as he tells the story. His story is so obscure he is advised to "start over again with at least some regard for cause and effect"^[39]. The rationale for his action is comprehensible only after his alienation and unsatisfiable desire are considered. Certain details in the events are insignificant to Sutpen. They have no effect on him, for example: "not how he managed to find where the West Indies were"^[40]. In Sutpen's narration the context and significance is personal not communicative.

There is a teleology that needs to be expressed for Sutpen's explanation to Grandfather to be intelligible. We see a feeling of dissatisfaction with something, but we need a fuller account of Sutpen's history for it to have meaning. Sutpen displaces understanding his 'alienation' with the belief in a mistake or a conspiracy. This gives conscious manifestation to his innate desire. Sutpen discards his present scene for one he projects from his past. The belief in a mistake is repeated throughout his narrative suggesting its importance in his narrated history. It attempts to plug the gap in his conscious, rational explanations about his striving that uphold his view of the design he identifies his being with. The belief is a displacement as it does not express his striving or show its nature, and yet the nature of his striving can be seen by the reader once his history is understood.

There is a suggestion that some realisation may occur for Sutpen during his description of his dilemma. Events are to gain their significance in the telling. He might go beyond his innocence: "*the shrewdness acquired in excruciating driblets through the fifty years suddenly capitulent and retroactive or suddenly sprouting and flowering...Because he seemed to perceive without stopping.*"^[41] However, the retelling fails to bring any realisation. The text of his own speech holds the realisations of an unconscious acting in accord with an unthinkably innate and unrealisable desire, but he can not hear or understand himself. Any

recognition is lost before it has a corresponding effect. The suggestion he may transcend his innocence is in vain: "*the shrewdness failed him again. It broke down, it vanished into that old impotent logic and morality which had betrayed him before*"^[42]. The 'old' narrative and its consequent morality of a final justification and justice according to his design, takes away the significance of his own text. In Lacanian terms, the Other of his desire is obscured by the logic of his ego-ideal^[43]. As other narrators take up Sutpen's story, relaying previous narration and adding their own speculations the corpus feeds into Sutpen's subjectivity. All the narratives progress an emerging realisation.

The prominence of narrative undermines the causal chain that the story wishes to create. Events and their protagonists are constituted in the telling of a tale:

it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too.^[44]

The legendary figures may never have existed and yet in their being told they are formed. Narrative can create a sense of retrospective effect within a character:

when the brief all is done you must retreat from both love and pleasure, gather up your own rubbish and refuse...and retreat since the gods condone and practice these and the dreamy immeasurable coupling which floats oblivious above the trammelling and harried instant, the: *was-not : is:* was: is a perquisite only of balloony and weightless elephants and whales.^[45]

Here the logic of 'anamorphosis' is made explicit in the text. The narrative of characters creates something that previously was not present but is now an establishing cause. As Slavoj Žižek writes: "anamorphosis distorts the "real" preceding cause, so that [the subject's] act (his reaction to this cause) is never a direct effect of the cause, but rather a consequence of his distorted perception of the cause."^[46] A story is told where causality is filled in and this filling in rather than actual events in the past, brings about the subject's relationship to itself. From this anything is possible and in retrospect a desire can have always been there even though it has only just come into being: "you find that you don't want anything but that sherbet and that you haven't been wanting anything else but that and you have been wanting that pretty hard for some time"^[47]. The emphasis on the narrating, together with the constant reminder that narrative constitutes the reality of characters, gives the sense that events occur *within* the narrative. That which is described may never have happened and it makes no difference to the story's truth. That which is

described only gains its significance from problematic, guessed-at causes, from a future retelling of the story by people who were not there, who can not, in rationalist or empirical terms, know what has happened and yet, in terms of narrative truth, do know. What might be called the same event because it involves the same characters at a particular moment in time, is known to be different events with different tellings. As Lacan makes clear, the effect of an event is determined by the context it is given within the predominant discourses of the time:

Events are engendered in a primary historization. In other words, history is already producing itself on the stage where it will be played out once it has been written down, both within the subject and outside him.

At such and such a period, some riot or other in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine is lived by its actors as a victory or defeat of the Parlement or the Court; at another, as a victory or defeat of the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. And although it is "the peoples" (to borrow an expression from the Cardinal de Retz) who foot its bill, it is not at all the same historical event-I mean that the two events do not leave the same sort of memory behind in men's minds.^[48]

An event only exists within a context that gives it meaning and relates it to an encompassing narrative or metanarrative.

Someone is explicitly foregrounded as telling the story of Quentin and Shreve: "he had yet to go to the bedroom and return first with his bathrobe on and next with his overcoat"^[49] as they tell a story again. Quentin and Shreve are just two in a long line of narrators developing knowledge. There is another teller beyond Quentin and Shreve giving his opinion: "both he and Shreve believed - and were probably right in this too -"^[50]. This reinforces the fact that the tale is told a number of times. What is the perspective? That of a tale being told. The tale is given the possibility of being a telling of the story many tellings removed from the original action. It is to be seen as knowledge as it has come down to the hearer or reader. Rather than events being told, what has become the truth is given "with intent detached speculation".^[51]

With events occurring within the narrative itself, events have always already happened, as well as never having happened. Patricia Tobin comments on the "fragmentation" of historical consciousness into mythical consciousness, which:

would know the past through an immediate experience of its reality by means of a ritualized reenactment of that reality. By thus identifying the past in the present and the present in the past, mythical thought overleaps the temporal distinction between past and present that permits linear continuity within process to be discoverable, and generates instead a reversible or circular time sense.^[52]

The break in chronological sequence reinforces the discursive logic that dominates that which is narrated. Within the narrative, objects from disparate times can be juxtaposed. A description of an earlier event can be made to

incorporate things from one hundred years later, such as:

the odor, the scent, which five months later Mr Compson's letter would carry up from Mississippi and over the long iron New England snow and into Quentin's sitting-room at Harvard. It was a day of listening too - 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 the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833^[53]

The narration is foregrounded by this hindsight comment and at the same time the importance of the contextualisation of knowledge is emphasised. The forming of significance is all important. It is the centre of activities, pushing aside other factors and in *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrating its overdetermined character. All that has happened is in the past, crucially important to the present, but given a dynamic by the formation of the narrative. The giving of significance makes all events in the text equally true no matter what prejudices gave rise to their presentation, or how they were formed and made their way into it: "that best of ratiocination which after all was a good deal like Sutpen's morality and Miss Coldfield's demonizing"^[54]. This formation is demonstrated in infinite reiteration, repetition of phrases and descriptions of events and thus endless recurrences of the events for the characters and the reader. Several things are happening at once as the present and the past is relived ('is' again) through narration. The past holds more power now in its narrated and renarrated form, and of course, that past has already relived a previous past, the past's past, which had even more weight again. The events remembered and constituted stand outside of conventional categories of temporality. Nancy Blake comments on the relationship of past to present:

The use of the present-perfect tense maintains the curious a-temporality that is so typically Faulknerian. The real present is devoid of action since all has been acted, spoken in the past; the text bears witness to the telescoping of past and present. Moreover, in a supreme negation of the axiom concerning the irreversibility of temporal sequence, the narrative present speaks the past and thus calls it into existence after the fact.^[55]

Truth occurs in the order established by the telling.

Both the town and Sutpen attempt to account for Sutpen. The account is obscure to begin with. There is a sense of lack of understanding of Sutpen. The reader is exposed to what seem to be poorly told stories where events are given without context and the characters' subjectivity seems outside the control not only of their own rationality but of all rationality. Yet rather than *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrating inconsistency a growing sense of inappropriate consistency develops. A convergence of disparate factors occurs. Characters telling the story of Sutpen up to a hundred years after its beginning can 'discover' the essential thread. Events are consistent with the episteme's expectations. They become a primordial repetition. Sutpen's being is ironically understood (in Heidegger's sense of the word) despite the ongoing mystery surrounding him to the point that 'the solution', a stereotyped scene from his

childhood, is an anticlimax and afterthought. The processes of narrative, anamorphosis, alienation and the ensuing desire are made explicit in *Absalom, Absalom!* in the figure of Sutpen. He is the greatest example of an individualistic search for transcendence and he comes to be a beacon of this search for the townspeople who continue to tell his story within the novel.

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- [1] Michel Foucault uses the term extensively in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972) and also in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, tr. unidentified collective, (New York: Vintage, 1994). See also my article 'Pinter and Foucault: Duologues as Discourse' *Sydney Studies in English*, 20 (1994-5).
- [2] D. Kuyk, *Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 60
- [3] G. Langford, *Faulkner's Revision of Absalom, Absalom!* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 3-4
- [4] R. Gray, 'The Meanings Of History: William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 3 (1973), 97. He cites Cleaneth Brooks, '*Absalom, Absalom!*: the Definition of Innocence', *Sewanee Review*, (1951).
- [5] W. Slatoff, *The Quest For Failure: A Study of William Faulkner* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 201-2. This is quoted in the notes of E. Cobley, 'Desire and Reciprocal Violence in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *English Studies in Canada*, 13.4, 436, n. 2. Cobley writes: "The tragic outcome of the Sutpen story has variously been attributed to psychological flaws, to social or historical circumstances, to Greek, or Biblical notions of destiny, or to existential absurdity" (420). Cobley cites a number of critics. (Cobley does not take these contradictory views as being indicative of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s unintelligibility.)
- [6] D. Kelly, 'Telling Questions in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 19 (1993-4), 101.
- [7] B. Radloff, '*Absalom, Absalom!* An Ontological Approach to Sutpen's "Design"' *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 19.1 (1986), 45-56, C. Sherry, 'Being Otherwise: Nature, History, and Tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!*' *Arizona-Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 45.3 (1989), 47-76, D. Garfield, 'To Love as "Fiery Ancients" Would: Eros, Narrative and Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*' *Southern Literary Journal*, 22.1 (1989), 61-79.
- [8] Kuyk, p. 60.
- [9] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 155.
- [10] W. Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, p. 26.
- [11] They "give him the opportunity to tell them who he was and where he came from and what he was up to". (Ibid., p. 27-8).
- [12] Ibid., p. 26.
- [13] Rosa acknowledges Sutpen is not hiding from some crime. Faulkner, p. 147. Contrary to Jenny Foerst's contention, 'Rosa Coldfield, "Author and Victim Too"', *The Faulkner Journal*, 4 (1988-9), 46, that Mr Compson distorts Rosa's commentary after the event, Rosa is demonstrating the power of normative expectations within the episteme, when she expresses public opinion: "So they will have told you doubtless already how" (Faulkner, p. 110) and then conforms to it. Bernhard Radloff writes in support of this: "I do not mean to deny the differences between the narratives of Sutpen, the elder Compsons, Rosa and Quentin/Shreve, which are indeed plain to see, but to affirm that each of these narratives is one variation on the same set of semantic possibilities." (Radloff, 51.) L. Allums, 'Overpassing to Love: Dialogue and Play in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *New Orleans Review*, 14.4 (1987), 37, cautions against seeing the narrators as "troublesome, obscuring filters".
- [14] S. Ross, 'Conrad's Influence On Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 2 (1974), 201, shows the parallels between Sutpen and Jim and the fascination they inspire: "Marlow wonders why Jim fascinates him so intensely, and whether he can ever squeeze any truth at all from Jim's inconsistent behavior".
- [15] A. Kinney, 'Introduction', *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), p. 12
- [16] Heidegger writes: "interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance - in a fore-having. As the appropriation of understanding, the interpretation operates in Being towards a totality of involvements which is already understood - a Being which understands. When something is understood but is still veiled, it becomes unveiled by an act of appropriation, and this is always done under the guidance of a point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted." (M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John

Macquarie, Edward Robinson, (Harper San Francisco, 1962), p. 191) As all understanding is pre-known so everything found out is already known.

[17]Faulkner, p. 28

[18]Ibid., p. 12

[19]Ibid., p. 64

[20]Ibid., p. 65

[21]Ibid., p. 29

[22]Heidegger, p. 189

[23]Faulkner, p. 36

[24]Ibid., pp. 36-7

[25]Ibid., p. 37

[26]S. Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, (Massachusetts: MIT, 1991), p. 81

[27]Faulkner, p. 85

[28]Peter Brooks posits "the interrogation of a proairetic sequence for its revelatory meaning before we, as readers, have been allowed to see how the sequence runs." (P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 288) However he sees this as an exercise anterior to the existence of the characters, as the "logic of action is violated" and contrary to a narrative of integrity that will establish the facts. He concentrates on the lack of authority (Ibid., p. 294). Yet this concentration on perceived inaccuracies and a lack of a (transcendental) guarantee ignores the way knowledge normally forms. We can take the narrative as being all lies. In fact, it is not important whether the events occurred at all. It is their being remembered which is important.: "there are some things that just have to be whether they are or not" (Faulkner, p. 266. Also p. 268.) Brooks describes one example of the reification of a character's explanations:

It is a narrative in which we are ever passing from the postulation of how it must have been to the conviction that it really was that way: for instance, Mr Compson imagines the introduction of Henry to Bon in a series of clauses headed "perhaps," ending: "or perhaps (I like to think this) presented formally to the man reclining in a flowered, almost feminized gown, in a sunny window in his chambers", and then a page later has turned the hypothesis into solid narrative event: "And the very fact that, lounging before them in the outlandish and almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy". (Brooks, p. 295)

Parts of the story that have no explanation must be given one to fill in the gaps.

[29]Ibid., p. 83

[30]Ibid., p. 83

[31]Ibid., p. 83

[32]Ibid., p. 224

[33]S. Freud, *Therapy and Technique*, Rieff, P. (ed.), (New York: MacMillan, 1963), p. 159

[34]Faulkner, p. 217

[35]Ibid., p. 225

[36]Ibid., p. 217

[37]Ibid., p. 224

[38]Ibid., p. 224

[39]Ibid., p. 203

[40]Ibid., p. 197

[41]Ibid., p. 229

[42]Ibid., p. 229

[43]J. Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, tr. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Tavistock, 1977), p. 212

[44]Faulkner, p. 250

[45]Ibid., p. 267

[46] S. Zizek, 'The Lamella of David Lynch', R. Feldstein, B. Fink, M. Jaanus (ed.) *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 210-1.

[47] Faulkner, p. 266

[48] J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, A. Wilden (tr. and ed.), (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 23

[49]

Faulkner, p. 210

[50] [Ibid.](#), p. 277

[51] [Ibid.](#), p. 210

[52] P. Tobin, 'The Time of Myth and History in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *American Literature*, 45 (1973), 254. Tobin continues: "The ultimate failure of his narrators to integrate myth with history, linear with nonlinear time, the past with the present, is at once Faulkner's vision of man's misfortune and his justification of the esthetic form of his novel."

[53] Faulkner, p. 25

[54] [Ibid.](#), p. 231

[55] N. Blake, 'Biblical Intertextuality in *Absalom, Absalom!*', M. Gresset, N. Polk, (ed.), *Intertextuality In Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), p. 137

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