William Faulkner,
Absalom, Absalom!
“Something is always missing”

In the process of telling the Sutpen saga to his son, Quentin, Mr. Compson pauses to meditate on the limitations of his narration:

It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts 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 ex-
humed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and 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 the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (100–101)

Narration, conceived by Mr. Compson as a reconstruction of past events, is frustrated by the intractability of facts. The pieces of information fail to form a complete puzzle, the fragments do not cohere: “You bring them together in the proportions called for but nothing happens.” The letters—both Bon’s literal letter to Judith and “letter” as a metaphor for “the disappearance of natural presence” (Derrida 1976, 159), both epistles and characters of the alphabet—are faded, illegible, as if written in a dead language. Moreover, they are “without salutation or signature,” facing the signs of human existence on the part of both addresser and addressee. What remains is “just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene”—the materiality of the letter, the pure textuality of the text, one might be tempted to say today. And yet Mr. Compson is not quite a present-day deconstructionist. True, he can neither make sense of reality nor reach the people who populated it, since something is always missing. Nevertheless, reality, for him, is a presence, no matter how dim the human perception of it may be: The writing is “almost indecipherable, yet meaningful”; behind the words, there was a “background of horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs” and there were “men and women who once lived and breathed.” What exasperates Mr. Compson is the inaccessibility of reality, not its absence.
Chapter 2

Compare this with the following characterization of the Quentin-Shreve collaboration, and you glimpse in a nutshell the novel's conflicting views of the relation between narration, representation, and subjectivity: "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, quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath" (303). Unlike Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve do not attempt to reconstruct reality; they create it. And instead of frustration with the evasiveness of facts, they delight in their absence, for it gives them the freedom to invent: "Let me play a while now" (280), says Shreve to Quentin. Appropriately, what they create is not shadows of "flesh and blood," but shadows of shades; not "men and women who once lived and breathed," but "people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere."

These are explicit formulations of the conflicting positions that inform the structure, the narrative strategies, and many of the thematic concerns of Absalom, Absalom! The novel is a classic case of the Chinese-box structure. Its outermost level is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator who "reproduces" a series of narrative situations in which four intradiegetic narrators try their hands at telling the elusive story. Chapter 1 is predominantly Rosa's narration, chapters 2 through 4 predominantly Mr. Compson's, and chapter 5 Rosa's again. Quentin remains the narratee in all these chapters. In the next three chapters the function of narrator alternates between Shreve and Quentin, and the function of narratee alternates accordingly. Chapter 6 is predominantly Shreve's narration, chapter 7 Quentin's, and chapter 8 Shreve's once more. The last chapter is told by the extradiegetic narrator through a predominant focalization on Quentin's consciousness.
What do the various intradiegetic narrators relate? Most of the time they narrate what was previously told to them. Rosa tells partly what she herself experienced, partly what she heard from the townspeople (“she heard just what the town heard” [78]) and, indirectly and indistinctly, behind closed doors, from her father, her aunt, and her sister Ellen (e.g., 25, 27). Like her, Mr. Compson sometimes relies on rumors spread by the inhabitants of Jefferson (“That was all that the town was to know about him for a month” [32]; “and so the tale came through the negroes” [79]), sometimes reports what Ellen said (“it was Ellen who told this, with shrieks of amusement, more than once” [71]), and sometimes defers to Rosa’s authority (“It (the wedding) was in the same Methodist church where he saw Ellen for the first time, according to Miss Rosa” [48]). But his main source of information is his father, General Compson, who in turn heard at least part of the story from Sutpen (“I have this from something your grandfather let drop one day and which he doubtless had from Sutpen himself in the same accidental fashion” [49]).

The number of intermediaries is even larger in the composite Quentin-Shreve narration, for Quentin tells Shreve partly what he heard from Rosa and partly what he heard from his father, who heard from General Compson, who heard from Sutpen. Shreve, in turn, has no other source of information than Quentin and repeats to Quentin what he has heard from him, which—we remember—is what Quentin heard from his father, Mr. Compson from his father, and General Compson from Sutpen. Signs that Shreve merely repeats to Quentin what the latter has told him abound in the text, for example: “‘How was it?’ Shreve said. ‘You told me; how was it? you and your father shooting quail, the gray day after it had rained all night and the ditch the horses couldn’t cross so you and your father got down and gave the reins to—what was his name? the nigger on the mule? Luster—Luster to lead them around the ditch’” (187). Or, acknowledging not only Quentin as source but also Quentin’s own sources, Shreve
says, “so your father said,” “didn’t your father say?” (320); “And yet this old gal, this aunt Rosa, told you that someone was hiding out there and you said it was Clytie or Jim Bond and she said No and so you went out there... and there was?” (216).  

What is the effect of the chain of narrators on the status of their narration? In classical Boothian terms, one could say that it creates a distance between the teller and the tale and casts a doubt on the reliability of the narrators, who often report what they do not know, sometimes also what their informants do not know. Rosa, for example, narrates with extreme vividness of concrete detail the scene of Sutpen fighting with his negroes in the presence of his own children. She even “reproduces” a dialogue between Ellen and Sutpen, thereby conferring an air of referentiality on the whole scene, and then adds, “But I was not there. I was not there to see the two Sutpen faces this time—once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her—looking down through the loft” (30). In connection with the climactic murder scene, she says, “I heard an echo, but not the shot; I saw a closed door but did not enter it” (150). Although she is often barred from direct contact with events, she insistently refuses to let “blank door[s]” (27) interfere with her “omnivorous and unrational hearing sense” (145): “Though even I could not have heard through the door at all, I could have repeated the conversation for them” (25). How reliable is a piece of information gleaned from behind closed doors by a child of four? And how trustworthy is a reverberation of an echo? Rosa’s other source of information, the townspeople, is no less problematic, since their attempts to accost Sutpen and “give him the opportunity to tell them who he was and where he came from and what he was up to” (34) invariably fail, and they too are reduced to “suspecting” (ibid.), “believing” (79), relying on “the cabin-to-cabin whispering of the negroes to spread the news” (106).

Aside from the climactic meeting with Henry, in which, as far as we can tell from the text, all that happens is a brief exchange of
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questions and answers repeating and mirroring each other, Quentin’s knowledge is always indirect, wholly derived from his father and Rosa. Even more problematic is Shreve’s narration, since he is further removed from the events, and when he tells things that Quentin has presumably never told him, we wonder where he got his information: “In fact, Quentin did not even tell Shreve what his father had said about the visit. Perhaps Quentin himself had not been listening when Mr. Compson related it that evening at home” (336).7

If Mr. Compson seems closer to the truth than the other narrators, we must remember that he too was absent from the events he narrates and that the reliability of his father’s account is often hedged with doubt, because sometimes even General Compson has to rely on fallible sources: “... not your grandfather. He knew only what the town, the county, knew” (209). And even when he relies on Sutpen, the one storyteller who is not separated from experience by screens of other narrations, firm control over the facts is undermined, this time by Sutpen’s failure of memory: “He didn’t remember if it was weeks or months or a year they travelled” (224); “he did not remember just where nor when nor how his father had got it” (ibid.); “So he knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why” (227); nor did he remember “within a year on either side just how old he was” (ibid.). He may even have been in the dark about an important aspect of the crucial scene that gave birth to his design: “He didn’t remember (or did not say) what the message was” (229). One begins to understand Shreve’s amused impatience with Sutpen as a source of information: “You [Quentin] said he didn’t remember how he got to Haiti, and then he didn’t remember how he got into the house with the niggers surrounding it. Now you are going to tell me he didn’t even remember getting married?” (225).

The possibility of unreliable knowledge on the part of the various narrators—inferrred from their nonparticipation in the events they narrate, their reliance on other sources often removed from
the experience narrated, and the failure of memory of the only source directly involved in the events—problematises the status of narration as a representation or reconstruction of reality. This is aggravated by the four narrators’ contradictions about some of the basic occurrences. The principal contradictions are between Shreve and Quentin, on the one hand, and Rosa and Mr. Compson, on the other. Whereas Mr. Compson elaborates on Henry’s puritan shock at seeing the octoroon (108–18), Shreve and Quentin believe that both she and her child “would have been to Henry only something else about Bon to be, not envied but aped if that had been possible” (336). Shreve also argues with Mr. Compson’s account of Bon’s reasons for replacing Judith’s picture with the octoroon’s: “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” (358–59). The reason Shreve invents, on the other hand, shows Bon in a rather noble light: “It will be the only way I have to say to her, I was no good; do not grieve for me” (359). Shreve contests Mr. Compson’s account even of such a simple matter as which of the two friends was injured in the war:

Because your old man was wrong here, too! He said it was Bon who was wounded, but it wasn’t. Because who told him? Who told Sutpen or your grandfather either, which of them it was who was hit? Sutpen didn’t know because he wasn’t there, and your grandfather wasn’t there either because that was where he was hit too, where he lost his arm. So who told them? Not Henry, because his father never saw Henry but that one time and maybe they never had time to talk about wounds . . . and not Bon because Sutpen never saw Bon at all because he was dead—it was not Bon, it was Henry. (344)

Shreve thus discredits the reliability of the others, but what is his own source of authority? Surely he was not there either, so how does he know?
Even about the central issue of the novel do the narrators disagree. According to Rosa, Judith’s marriage to Bon was forbidden “without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse” (18); according to Mr. Compson, the reason for the interdiction and later for Henry’s murder of Bon is Bon’s impending bigamy (90); but Quentin and Shreve see the obstacle first in the threat of incest (293, 295–96) and later in miscegenation (355, 356).

With Quentin and Shreve, the novel explicitly replaces a view of narration as representation by a conception of narration as creation. To use Peter Brooks’s formulation, “We have passed beyond any narrative reporting, to narrative invention . . . narrating, having failed to construct from the evidence a plot that would make sense of the story, turns to inventing it” (1984, 303). Whereas the narrators’ absence from the events they narrate is an obstacle to reliability when narration is seen as reporting or representation, it becomes an asset when narration is conceived of as invention or imaginative creation: “And he, Quentin, could see that too, though he had not been there—the ambulance with Miss Coldfield between the driver and the second man . . .” (374–75); or even stronger: “If I had been there,” Quentin thinks, “I could not have seen it this plain” (190). Indeed, when the characters are remote from the “facts,” they become less reliable in the classical sense and more creative. And, as the novel suggests, they come closer to “the might have been that is more true than truth” (143). The criterion for validity in this view is not a correspondence to facts, but a narrative or artistic plausibility: “Does that suit you?” Shreve asks Quentin at one point while embroidering the Judith-Bon relationship (322). Narration becomes a game: “Let me play a while now,” we remember Shreve saying to his roommate (280). That this view is endorsed by the extradiegetic narrator is clear from such comments as: “four of them who sat in that drawing room [of Bon’s mother] of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough” (335); or “the slight dowdy woman with untidy gray-streaked
raven hair . . . which Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough” (ibid.).

As if impelled by the uncanny logic of repetition, the readers reenact the experience of the narrators and, like them, replace reproduction by production. Faced with several different motives for the interdiction of the marriage between Judith and Bon, most critics opt for miscegenation. In order to explain how Quentin could know about this, however, they get involved in speculation. Lind, for example, suggests that Quentin’s knowledge must have come from General Compson, who must have imparted to his grandson what he had withheld from Mr. Compson (1973, 281–82). Cleanth Brooks claims that Quentin may have heard the secret from Henry in their climactic meeting (1963, 316). Both critics rely on the following conversation between Quentin and Shreve:

“He [Mr. Compson] 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. . . . The day after we—after that night when we—”

(266)

The dialogue does indeed say that General Compson did not tell his son everything, but it does not say that he told Quentin, and since there is no conversation between the two in the entire novel, one can only invent it. Similarly, the climactic conversation between Henry and Quentin, as given in the text, consists of three questions and answers repeated twice and contains no information about either the interdiction or the miscegenation. To suggest a disclosure of the secret on Henry’s part is to construct a scene the novel does not contain. Indeed, Shreve does imaginatively construct a scene when he “quotes” Sutpen saying to Henry: “He must not marry her, Henry . . . his mother was part negro” (354–
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55). And the critics follow suit, inferring, speculating, and inventing scenes, just like the fictional narrators whose limitations they analyze.

Creation, rather than re-creation, does not only ripple out from the narrators to the readers-critics of the narrative but also ripples in from the narrators to the characters who are the objects of their narration. At the metadiagnostic level, Bon is often described as a “shadow,” a “phantom,” “created” by the other characters—expressions that echo those referring to the act of storytelling on the part of the intradiagnostic narrators. Rosa, for example, never saw Bon except in “that photograph, that shadow, that picture in a young girl’s bedroom” (147), and yet she loved him, though—she says—“not as women love. . . . Because even before I saw the photograph I could have recognized, nay, described the very face. But I never saw it. I do not even know of my own knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew it: so who will dispute me when I say, Why did I not invent, create it?” (ibid.). Mr. Compson also comments on the quasi-fictional status of Bon in the Sutpen household: “Yes, shadowy: a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves; some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all” (104). Even Bon’s mother, according to Shreve, creates him in an image commensurate with her revenge plan: “until he got big enough to find out that it wasn’t him at all she was washing and feeding the candy and the fun to but it was a man that hadn’t even arrived yet, whom she had never seen yet” (306).

The mother’s “creation” of her son as an instrument for her revenge is a manipulative exercise of power. No less manipulative is the lawyer’s financially motivated creation. On the other hand, Rosa’s invention of Bon is not so crudely manipulative, but she does need this phantom as an outlet for her repressed desire. And Henry uses Bon both as a surrogate through whom he can
make love to his own sister and as a homosexual love-object. In all these instances, the creation involves an attempt to control a situation or to dictate a scenario.

Critics have discerned an analogous power struggle at the level of intradiegetic narration. The Quentin-Shreve sections, for example, are not only a collaborative creation, but also a struggle for control over the narration: “‘Wait, I tell you!’ Quentin said, though still he did not move nor even raise his voice—that voice with its tense suffused restrained quality: ‘I am telling’” (277); and Shreve retaliates a little later: “‘No,’ Shreve says, ‘you wait. Let me play a while now’” (280). Power also informs the reader’s creative activity, to judge by such a description as Peter Brooks’s: “What can this mean if not that the narratees/listeners/readers have taken over complete responsibility for the narrative, and that the ‘voice of the reader’ has evicted all other voices from the text . . . in favour of a direct re-creation, and has set itself up, by a supreme act of usurpation, as the sole authority of narrative?” (304).

The power struggle may, I think, take on an additional dimension with the help of Judith’s loom image. Like Mr. Compson’s meditation, with which I started the chapter, Judith’s speech is triggered by a letter—in fact, the same literal letter written by Bon, but again also “letter” as a metaphor for the erasure of voice in writing, and “letter” as an alphabetical character, a mark effaced on a tombstone. Judith starts by explaining her decision to give Bon’s letter to Quentin’s grandmother: “Because you make so little impression, you see” (127). This statement modulates into a vision of human beings as marionettes, all tied by the same strings, yet each trying to move independently. And the marionette image is then conflated with that of figures working at a loom: “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” (ibid.). This image—which, like Mr. Compson’s metaphors, is also a mise en abyme of the narrative situation in Absalom,
Absalom!—obviously involves a power struggle. Each character, each narrator, wants to weave his own pattern into the same rug. But, in my opinion, the desire for power is here in the service of the desire to leave a mark (an image Judith uses a little later), to make room for an individual trace. And note that the "scratch," the "mark," does not depend on the content of the letter (the signified), not even on its being read, only on "passing from one hand to another" (ibid.), only—the Lacanian might say—on the itinerary of the signifier. It is thus not meaning or representation, but the very act of transmission, of telling, that may leave a trace, may save the individual from complete de-facement. This tentative affirmation of an individual mark coincides with Judith's only "speech" in the novel, making it a performance of its own content and linking the problem of representation with that of subjectivity.

Why is Judith granted a voice only once in the whole novel, and even then only at a metadiegetic level, quoted by Mr. Compson? Why aren't the other Sutpens used as narrators of their own story? Isn't it strange (or at least thought-provoking) that all the direct participants in the drama do not narrate, whereas those who narrate do not participate directly? Distance from the events often serves in this novel to stimulate the imaginative and creative faculties, and since narration—in one view in Absalom, Absalom!—is a production rather than a reproduction, it makes sense to assign the narrator's role to characters who did not take part in the experiences narrated. Taking this line of thinking a step further, one might suggest that absence, in addition to being a stimulus for the imagination, is also a precondition for language, since—from this perspective—language not only creates reality but replaces it. Such a view is no imposition of poststructuralist ideas on Faulkner's novel but emerges naturally from both Absalom, Absalom! and from other of Faulkner's works. In As I Lay Dying, Addie—speaking (appropriately) when she is already a corpse—sees language as a
substitute for experience, and a poor substitute at that: “[Anse] had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack” (136). It is a lack, an absence of experience, that gives rise to words: “sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words” (133). Doesn’t it follow, then, that those who did sin, love, and fear would have no need to talk about it, whereas those who did not, would?

Opposed to Addie’s view of language as a mere frame for absences is her praise of “voiceless words,” i.e., direct, nonverbal contact. Similarly, in Absalom, Absalom! when Clytie touches Rosa, the physical contact is so overwhelming that it cuts through all social and linguistic conventions: “Because there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both—touch and touch of that which is the citadel of the central I-Am’s private own: not spirit, soul” (139). Rosa here relates touch to the notion of an essential self, “the central I Am’s private own.” Without a belief in essences or in selves, Bon also acknowledges the overwhelming power of nonverbal communication. He is therefore dismayed that the meeting with his father produces “no shock, no hot communicated flesh that speech would have been too slow even to impede” (320; see also 348). And between Judith and Sutpen there is an intimate understanding that dispenses with words: “They did not need to talk. They were too much alike. They were as two people become now and then, who seem to know one another so well or are so much alike that the power, the need, to communicate by speech atrophies from disuse and, comprehending without need of the medium of ear or intellect, they no longer understand one another’s actual words” (122).¹⁵

Language becomes superfluous in the presence of physical re-
ality, language replaces reality, language creates reality—these related varieties of a nonrepresentational view of language can all explain the split between doing and telling that informs the choice of narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* Explanations of a different order emerge from a psychological, rather than a philosophical, orientation. Judith’s “loom speech” is an example of this orientation. If narration is one way of making a mark, then the denial of the narrator’s role to the Sutpens may be an indication of their marionette-like status, of the hopelessness of attempting to disentangle the strings attached to one individual from those fastened to the others.

If “trying to tell” implies some faith in the possibility of communication, the Sutpens’ exclusion from the narrator’s position may reflect their distrust of interpersonal discourse. McPherson relates such distrust to Thomas Sutpen’s childhood trauma, the trauma of not being allowed to deliver a message to the plantation owner. This scene is repeatedly referred to as Sutpen’s loss of innocence and as the origin of his design. What Sutpen learned in this episode, McPherson argues, is “that a teller is inevitably limited by the other’s desire or willingness to listen” (1987, 439), and since the other was not willing to listen, Sutpen’s belief in communication was shattered. “Disappointed innocence led to an extreme distrust of exchange, a cynicism that must inevitably deform the narrative tradition” (ibid., 440). Sutpen then turns to the world of action, attempting to make a mark through his deeds, his design. As we know, this design causes the exclusion—the silencing—of Bon, but also, according to McPherson, the verbal incapacitation of his whole family: “Thus, Thomas Sutpen, concerned above all with building and leaving a legacy, guaranteed the verbal sterility of his children” (ibid.). His children can speak only without speaking: Clytie’s face, Henry’s absence, Jim Bond’s howling.

In the foregoing hypotheses non-narration is seen as crippling, but a different perspective reveals that silence, like narration, can
become a tool in a power struggle. Sutpen is again the most prominent example. In fact, the success of his design depends on people's being in the dark about his origins, his past, his actions: "So they would catch him, run him to earth in the lounge between the supper table and his locked door to give him the opportunity to tell them who he was and where he came from and what he was up to, whereupon he would move gradually and steadily until his back came in contact with something—a post or a wall—and then stand there and tell them nothing whatever as pleasantly and courteously as a hotel clerk" (34).

The exception to Sutpen's reticence is his one narration—significantly reported at a meta-metadiegetic level—to General Compson. But just as his silence was motivated by a desire to gain the upper hand, so his narration serves the need to control, to restore his power by discovering the mistake that undermined his design.

Sutpen's habitual silence provokes the narrative faculties of the other characters, giving rise to many stories about him. The Sutpen myth, and to a large extent even Sutpen's subjectivity, is a collection of stories others tell about him. Even when telling his own story to General Compson, Sutpen talks as if he were another, almost as if he were inventing a narrative: "Since he was not talking about himself. He was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still have been the same story if the man had no name at all, if it had been told about any man or no man over whiskey at night" (247).

The dissociation between narrating subject and narrated object takes two complementary forms in *Absalom, Absalom!* On the one hand, the subjectivity of the non-narrating characters becomes a construction by others. You are what others say about you. On the other hand, the narrators' access to their own subjectivity is achieved through their narration about others. You are
what you say about others. This is so because talking about others in this novel is normally not a constative reproduction but a performative production, a transference-like repetition that is itself a performative act in the present. Whatever degree of subjectivity Quentin and Shreve accede to, they do by “living,” enacting, the objects of their narration, whom they create in their own image and according to their own needs.

A disruption of the expected correlation between utterances and speakers causes further problematization of the relation between narration and subjectivity. Although I made a preliminary identification of the various narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* earlier, the novel abounds in features of discourse that make it often difficult, if not impossible, to attribute utterances to speakers. Analysis of one particularly perplexing segment (181–216) may shed light on other problematic instances. The segment occurs at the beginning of the Quentin-Shreve narration, just after Shreve’s ironic summary of the Sutpen saga and Quentin’s laconic reply, “Yes” (181). The assent is followed by an internal comment, “He sounds just like father,” a comment that bridges the transition into Quentin’s consciousness, further marked by “thought” and “thinking” as well as by the change to italics (ibid.). We seem to remain inside Quentin’s consciousness for three and a half pages, though we are sometimes bewildered by the tone, which is more like Shreve’s than Quentin’s, and by expressions that are specifically Shreve’s (e.g., “the Creditor”). At the end of this long stretch, Quentin suddenly speaks aloud, confirming the foregoing account: “‘Yes,’ Quentin said” (185). Since it is unlikely—though not impossible—that Quentin would now audibly confirm his own silent thinking, the reader tentatively attributes the italicized pages to Shreve, an attribution that coheres with the tone and idiom of the problematic sections but clashes with the earlier markers of transition into Quentin’s thoughts.

Confused by conflicting clues, the reader may try to reconcile them by hypothesizing that the italicized segment renders
Quentin’s memories of Shreve’s narration, preserving the salient characteristics of Shreve’s style.\(^{19}\) Quentin’s assent to his own memories still feels strange, but it does mark the sequel (185–87) as Shreve’s, though this marking becomes indeterminate when on page 187 a segment not in italics opens with “How was it?” Shreve said. “You told me; how was it.” Shreve’s parenthetical voice then gives way to what seems like the extradiegetic narrator telling about Quentin’s visit to the graveyard with his father (188). But where has Shreve gone? And how does one account for comments like, “It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them: the ragged and starving troops without shoes” (189). One way of accounting for such consciousness markers is to see the whole segment from page 188 to page 216 as the narrator’s verbalization of Quentin’s thoughts. (In this view, the voice is the narrator’s; Quentin is the focalizer.) But one is brought up short by sentences bearing Mr. Compson’s stylistic stamp as well as by such statements as “though your grandfather of course did not know this” (191), “And your grandfather never knew if it was Clytie who watched” (195), “Your grandfather didn’t know” (200, 201, 202). Now the speaking voice seems to be Mr. Compson’s. Or are these memories Quentin has of his father’s narration when he is looking at his father’s letter? This possibility seems to be supported by the return to Shreve—and the present—on page 207, through Quentin’s italicized thoughts: “Yes. I have heard too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long thinking “Yes, Shreve sounds almost exactly like father: that letter.” The passage continues with Quentin’s thoughts, but page 208 seems to return to Mr. Compson’s voice (or Quentin’s memory of it), and page 210 comes back to Quentin’s consciousness with “Yes,” he thought, “too much too long.” Page 211 repeats the same idea, adding “because he sounds just like father,” which seems to lead either into Shreve’s speech (without changing the italics, however) or into Quentin’s memories of Shreve’s narration. Expressions like “your father” (213) and “Shreve said” sug-
gest that Shreve is actually speaking, as does Quentin’s rejoinder “Yes,” on page 215. Shreve then continues telling Quentin what Quentin had previously told him, though now without italics, up to the end of chapter 6.

The effect of complexity is increased when we realize that even utterances by an unambiguously specified speaker are colored by what Bakhtin calls “the language of the other.” Examine, for example, the early internal dialogue between “two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of not-people, in notlanguage, like this”:

It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson). Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (9)

It is easy to see how Quentin’s thoughts are infiltrated by Rosa’s language. This is one of many instances of the superimposition of voices in *Absalom, Absalom!*

A further complication of the traditionally assumed tie between narration and an originating self results from the overall uniformity of the style, in spite of the specific tone, expressions, and linguistic idiosyncrasies that characterize each narrator. Peter Brooks describes this phenomenon: “Narration here as elsewhere in Faulkner seems to call upon both the individual’s voice and that transindividual voice that speaks through all of
Faulkner’s characters” (1984, 294). Such uniformity is problematic for the view of narration as representation, since “the Mimetic Language Game” (to use Moshe Ron’s felicitous expression [1981, 17–39]) assumes that each narrator (and each character) has a characteristic way of speaking, and that one can therefore attribute all utterances to particular speakers.20

Disturbed by the disruption of traditional assumptions, some critics attempt a redistribution of utterances to preserve plausibility. Toker, for example, argues that “what the reader hears is not the voices of these speakers but the voice of the omniscient narrator carrying their narrative acts in their stead” (1993, 160).21 Waggoner (1966) and Irwin (1975), on the other hand, suggest that the first five chapters are Quentin’s memories when he is alone in his Harvard room, roused by his father’s announcement of Rosa’s death to recall conversations with him as well as with the old maid. In chapter 6 Shreve enters and together they go over the story once more (Waggoner 1966, 177).22

While Toker, Waggoner, and Irwin use narrative strategies to rehabilitate a representational reading of Absalom, Absalom! others reject representation—and claim that Faulkner does the same. Krause (1984, 230), for example, sees Absalom, Absalom! as advocating the “ceaseless play of signification” (238) rather than “the reductions” of referentiality, representation, and closure. The disconnection between language and individual voice is, according to him, an aspect of the same predilection: “Consequently, the reader faces the radical situation described by Barthes in S/Z: ‘The more indeterminate the origin of the statement, the more plural the text. In modern texts, the voices are so treated that any reference is impossible: the discourse, or better, the language, speaks: nothing more’” (Krause 1984, 235).

Representation, however, returns if one sees the confusion of voices not only as a sign of the novel’s textuality but as a rendering of the merging or the interchangeability of characters. The similarity between Shreve’s and Quentin’s narration, for example, is analogous to the interchangeability of their roles and
William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

selves: "They stared—glared—at one another. It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turn of phrases and usage of words), 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" (303). From this perspective, identification of the voice is immaterial, because it is only the vocal realization of thoughts shared by the two narrators. And the thoughts are common to both for two reasons. First, Quentin and Shreve have come to represent a universal quality beyond their personal existence: "the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth" (294). Second, listening is no less creative than telling; the narratee thus becomes another narrator: "That was why it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (316).

As narrators, Quentin and Shreve are not only interchangeable with each other but also with Henry and Bon, the objects of their narration. This is emphasized by a series of analogies and metalepses between narrative levels. Just as Quentin and Shreve interrupt each other with a recurrent "wait, wait," so they attribute the same expression to the people they discuss: "And then it was Bon that said, 'Wait' . . . and Henry said 'Wait. Wait. I must have time to get used to it'" (340). The boundaries between levels blur when Shreve’s description of Henry as "panting and looking, glaring at the sky" is followed by the extradiegetic narrator’s comment that, in telling this, Shreve is "(glaring at Quentin, panting himself, as if he had had to supply his shade not only with a cue but also with breath to obey it in)" (344). It is as if Shreve and Henry are at the same narrative level, and Shreve can supply Henry with breath through his own panting.

The fusion between narrators and objects of narration is not
only implicitly suggested by analogies and metalepses. It is also explicitly formulated on many occasions: "in the cold room where there was now not two of them but four" (294); "not two of them there and then either but four of them riding the two horses through the iron darkness" (295); "four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (334).24

The network of identifications is further expanded by the inclusion of Mr. Compson. Reacting to Shreve's narration, Quentin thinks: "He sounds just like father. . . . Just exactly like father if father had known as much about it the night before I went out there as he did the night after I came back" (181). And Shreve detects the same affinity between Quentin and his father: "Don't say it's just me that sounds like your old man' Shreve said" (261). The fusion of voices belonging to different generations may be interpreted as a sign of the helplessness of the individual in the grip of temporal repetition. This, Irwin argues, "is the form that the fate or doom of a family takes in Faulkner" (1975, 61). Such, indeed, is Quentin's understanding of the resemblance: "Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. . . . 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" (261–62). This inescapability makes even the first narration a repetition of things already known instinctively: "But you were not listening, because you knew it all already, had learned, absorbed it 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" (213).

From this angle, what Brooks described as "that transindividual voice that speaks through all of Faulkner's characters," and what Toker labeled the voice of the omniscient narrator, is the voice of the South, of all the ghosts in the air of the region and
in the blood of its inhabitants. Such an engulfment of the personal voice by the collective undermines the very notion of self as a unique being: "His [Quentin's] childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterwards, from the fever which had cured the disease" (12). It is against this loss of voice that the characters engage in narration, perhaps the only way of refusing "at last to be a ghost" (362). Although full-fledged, autonomous selves (in the traditional sense) have become impossible in this novel, the character-narrators do at least "make a mark" (127), a mark that invites other characters (as well as generations of critics) to try to decipher, or invent, "what the scratches were trying to tell" (ibid.), and in the process gain some access to subjectivity.

This chapter has analyzed conflicting views of representation and subjectivity in *Absalom, Absalom!* by concentrating on the intricacies of narration. As should be clear by now, narration is central not only in this novel but also in my attempt to offer a new approach to representation and subjectivity. However, at the end of the chapter, it may be interesting to shift the focus somewhat and relate these concerns to the specific story *Absalom, Absalom!* tells. I realize, of course, that this is a tricky undertaking, given the proliferation of narrators and the problems of reliability/creation, which make it difficult to abstract any story with any degree of certainty. Nevertheless, in spite of its problematic status and many inherent contradictions, the Sutpen saga obsesses all the narrators and therefore seems to qualify as the novel's hypothetical story. It is both as the novel's "story" and as the story of history that the saga deserves our attention here.

One can draw two analogies between Sutpen's adventures and the adventures of narrating (and reading) them. The first relates
inaccessibilities and exclusions in Sutpen’s life to gaps as obstacles to the representational endeavor. The second compares Sutpen’s attempt to fashion a self and a world with the view of narration as creation.

Sutpen’s life abounds in exclusions, absences, and obscurities. Just such an experience, a barred door and no permission to deliver a message to the plantation owner, puts an end to his proverbial innocence. To ensure that he never again becomes a victim of exclusion, Sutpen develops a design that itself involves a brutal exclusion of any possible obstacle, notably his partly black wife and their son, Charles Bon. Putting the past behind him, Sutpen starts anew in a place where he is very careful to keep his origins in total darkness. Here he goes about founding a dynasty, casting aside nonwinners like Milly Jones, who bears him a daughter when his plan required a son.

The exclusions, secrets, and absences characterizing Sutpen’s life are uncannily similar to the gaps that thwart the narrators’ reconstructive efforts. And like the narrators, who initially tried to figure out letters and events, readers—especially those with Compson-like expectations—find themselves barred from knowledge. The reading process, like narration, becomes a performative repetition of the thing it is trying to decipher. Readers take the position of Sutpen’s victims, although only to an extent, for, as we remember, Sutpen himself was initially a victim of obstruction. By making the readers relive, “perform,” both Sutpen’s trauma and the traumas he inflicts on others, the novel promotes complexity of moral and psychological response.

The second analogy—arguably the obverse of the first—hinges on the role of creation in Sutpen’s life, as well as in the Quentin-Shreve collaboration. Sutpen’s design, not unlike that of the Quentin-Shreve narration, is an attempt to turn an imaginative conception into a reality, to create the world in the shape of his desires. It is also an attempt to create himself, a process of self-fashioning. But Sutpen’s creation crumbles, and it crumbles pre-
cisely because of the return of the repressed, the coming back of the excluded Bon. The ensuing Bon-Henry-Judith triangle and its tragic consequences end Sutpen's hopes for a dynasty and destroy his creation from within. The Quentin-Shreve creation, on the other hand, thrives and survives as "the might have been that is more true than truth." Perhaps the dialogic character of the Quentin-Shreve creation, as opposed to Sutpen's dependence on an exclusion of others in fashioning himself, explains their success and his failure. Access to subjectivity, this would suggest, necessitates an inclusion of the other.

The analogies discussed so far concern the personal aspect of Sutpen's life. But the personal story is intertwined with the history of the Civil War and the tragedy of the South. In this respect, too, *Absalom, Absalom!* is under the sign of conflict. The novel presents history as the origin of all the other predicaments it dramatizes. By implication, an understanding of history could provide the ultimate explanation, the ultimate something that is otherwise always missing. But the reconstruction of history is no less fraught with difficulties than the reproduction of the story. It too is haunted by absences, has to content itself with hypotheses instead of facts, and is inhabited by creation and fictionality. The chain of narrators and the multiplicity of narrative levels in *Absalom, Absalom!* both interrogate traditional views of history and emphasize its narrativity, even fictionality, in a way that anticipates current approaches.

*Absalom, Absalom!* thus effects a rapprochement between history and story and an analogy between their destabilization and the vicissitudes of narration. Whereas the relation between self and other, central to the analogy between Sutpen's self-creation and the Quentin-Shreve narration, links *Absalom, Absalom!* with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the complex concern with history has an affinity with a later text in this study, namely *Beloved*. Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Beloved* multiplies narrative levels, but—in spite of the integration of destabilization—it does so in
order to re-engage with representation and subjectivity and to re­
trieve history via fiction. The similarities and differences between
these two texts will become apparent in a later chapter. In the
meantime, I wish to suggest once again that, in the tension it
stages between the epistemological yearning for reliability and
verifiability and the ontological game of world-making,
Absalom, Absalom! is a transitional text between modernism and
postmodernism. Beloved, on the other hand, is a partial reaction
against postmodernism from within. But this is a further glance
beyond doubt, and a subject for a separate discussion.