"Thinking I Was I Was Not Who Was Not Was Not Who:" The Vertigo Of Faulknerian Identity

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"Thinking I Was I Was Not Who Was Not Was Not Who":  
The Vertigo of Faulknerian Identity  

Philip M. Weinstein

The title is dizzying, and I expect during the next hour to be off-balance in a number of ways: off-balance in my moves back and forth between character, text, context, reader, and writer; off-center in my attempt to decenter our notions of identity itself; off-base in my shift from the “legitimate” scrutiny of Faulkner’s work to less sanctioned considerations of ideology, psychoanalysis, and what we in this room are doing when we go to conferences like this one and listen to scholarly papers for five or six days. These are all issues of identity, I hope to show, and thinking about them, I hope also to show, can make you dizzy. I turn now to Quentin’s passage in The Sound and the Fury from which I take my title quote:

When it bloomed in the spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn’t notice it so much at other times but when it rained the smell began to come into the house at twilight . . . it always smelled strongest then until I would lie in bed thinking when will it stop when will it stop. The draft in the door smelled of water, a damp steady breath. Sometimes I could put myself to sleep saying that over and over until the honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolise night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who. (210–11)
Spurred by the overpowering smell of honeysuckle, Quentin's thoughts go on to undermine relationships he has based his sanity on: the difference between sleep and waking, night and day; the inherent connection between things done, felt, suffered, and their significance. The smell of honeysuckle, invading him and triggering his unbearable sense of his own and of Caddy's sexuality, breaks down these “stable” connections; and Quentin's attempt to talk himself into tranquility—“saying that over and over”—ends by doing the reverse: nothing remains itself, all drifts away from its habitual moorings, becoming “shad­owy paradoxical” as Quentin's very language—the script by which he knows himself—chokes on its quest for coherence, dissolving into the babble of “I was I was not who was not was not who.” An alien body, a wandering mind, a dizzying sense of disowned doings, feelings, and sufferings: these come together in this passage as something we call Quentin. He belongs to them, but in what sense do they belong to him?

Faulkner's most powerful strategy for representing this dis­unity, this incoherence that is Quentin, is, of course, the stream of consciousness technique itself. Here is Quentin early in the chapter:

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 I said Father it was I it was 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. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. If we could have just done something so dreadful and Father said That's sad too, people cannot do anything that dreadful they cannot do anything very dreadful at all they cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today and I said, You can shirk all things and he said, Ah can you. And I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand. . . . (97–98)
If things just finished themselves: Faulknerian stream of consciousness fiendishly enacts the way in which things do not finish themselves. Within this rhetoric Quentin cannot finish his thought, cannot finish his identity, cannot keep Dalton Ames and Father and Caddy and honeysuckle from penetrating his being, cannot keep from quoting his mother, Dilsey, Herbert, Mrs. Bland, and others. When his desire to be with Caddy alone is denied, his only other desire is to not be, to put an end to all this uninvited company that fills his body and mind. Since he cannot finish himself he will cancel himself.

Let us generalize the model of individual identity implicit in Faulkner’s stream of consciousness representation of Quentin. Unlike characters in the nineteenth-century novel (which are typically passed on to us by the narrator as coherent entities, summarized organisms existing over time), Quentin appears as a moment-by-moment involuntary recorder of others’ voices, a sentient receptacle wounded by the shards of their utterances: the site on which the cacophony of the larger culture registers. Quentin is a memory-box, a porous container of others’ throw-away discourse. Unable to consolidate what he has absorbed, unable to shape his own thoughts into the coherence of a temporal project, he is a figure in motley. By representing him as thus adulterate through and through, made up of what is not himself, Faulkner reveals the pathos of his fantasy of preserving Caddy’s virginity.

I have spoken only of Quentin, but in a modified form this paradigm of identity shapes the other characters of the novel as well. Benjy and Jason, Caddy, Mr. and Mrs. Compson: these figures are in different ways intolerably penetrated and controlled by formulae not of their own making. Faulkner seems drawn to them in the measure that—fissured themselves, indebted unknowingly to unworkable scripts—they seek hopelessly to impose unity upon, to preserve identity within, their own lives and the lives around them. They seek such unity and identity through speech, and indeed The Sound and the Fury is full of sound, of puny humans contradictorily asserting their own
authority. It is the loud world, we remember, that Quentin would rescue Caddy from.

What is at stake in this desire to preserve identity, this urgent need to maintain stable boundaries between the self and the world? Why is it so difficult (and for many readers painful) to read Quentin’s section? What does it mean that we as readers insist on taking all novels—even Faulkner’s and Joyce’s novels—as “stories” about individual “characters” engaged in “plot”? Indeed, fiction is (like other forms of narrative) a privileged site for celebrating the enactment of individual identity. Fiction is one of the arenas in which the culture tells its fables of selfhood, of the successful negotiation between a self, on the one hand, and a world, on the other. And Faulkner’s masterpieces come into sharpest focus as a territory in which this negotiation is both urgent and impossible, in which the need for protected boundaries is exactly as intense as the awareness that these boundaries cannot be protected. Virginity, incest, and miscegenation; Sutpen’s Hundred, the McCaslin inheritance, and the wilderness—each of these phrases names a crucial Faulknerian space (psychic or material) in which boundaries have been hopelessly erected or traumatically overrun. What is it that makes these enclosed arenas simultaneously precious and beyond preserving?

I suggest that identity is a privileged term within a Western vocabulary of individualism. In its primary meaning—that something is always itself—and its secondary implication—that that selfhood is different from all others—identity makes some very large promises. It promises sameness over time—an unchanging essence at the core of objects (and without which it would be difficult to hypothesize about objects at all). That is, the self-sameness of objects is intrinsic (to be found within the object itself) rather than relational (to be found by way of the object’s membership within a larger group: its inscription within one or several signifying networks). The term suggests, further, with respect to human identity, that we are unique creatures, essentially different from each other. To privilege individual identity
in this way is to fantasize a kind of protected sacred place—the place of ourselves—which would be immune to the vicissitudes of time and space. It is to allay our anxiety that we may not have an unchanging core and therefore may take on our meanings from our affiliations and conditions. It is to fix, enclose, and affirm our unique difference from others, to say: "That's who I am." By thus reifying our sense of ourselves, by charting it as a separate essence and putting boundaries around it, we repress, precisely, that intolerable sense of *being-helplessly-caught-up-in-the-Other* that Faulkner represents in the plight of Quentin Compson.

This paradigm of identity as an essentialized sacred space commands not just how we want to think of ourselves but how we choose to think of art objects as well. The critical position that best enshrines it is New Criticism, the model of criticism that has been so influential in this country during our century. Most of us in this room who are over forty and under sixty were probably trained as New Critics. We learned that depth and unique difference are the hallmark of the work of art. Language is assumed, within this critical model, to be supremely manageable; and each work is to be studied in its precious difference from others, each character to be probed in his rounded wholeness, each master writer to be praised for the rich inclusiveness of his personal vision. (All along the tacit assumption was that life, in its murk and messiness, its ideological confusions, could not provide such fine-grained distinctions: but art could.)

"Close reading" was invented and became institutionalized as a classroom technique for disengaging the essence, the identity, of the aesthetic object. Through close readings the uniqueness of the writer's vision was identified, and once the individual case had been scrupulously delineated, it was seen to partake (paradoxically) of the universal as well. That is, the unique vision is simultaneously, in its wholeness, a universal or human vision. To speak of universal or human is to be in touch with essence, with that which is lodged so deeply within the individual that it escapes the accidents of condition or local affiliation and reflects
instead something common to the species. In the name of encompassing all groups, human actually disavows the power of any group to affect the essence of the unique individual.

As spectators in the presence of the human or the universal, essences freed by art for our disinterested appreciation, we are meant to praise. (How often a New Critical classroom assignment on a poem or a novel could be distilled to the following message: praise this object! tell me how finely, disinterestedly, inclusively it understands life in its inimitable weave of form and content!) The work, exquisitely beyond bias, stands self-complete before us, a microcosm of that ideal identity we would seek to posit within ourself: a sacred space. Like us, it may be embedded within other, potentially contaminating networks, but these networks are secondary. The work's aesthetic triumph, like our own fantasized identity, resides in its free-standing wholeness.

I have tried to word this in such a way that you will see the connection between how we view the identity of the work of art, how we view the writer's identity, and how we view our own. This distinction between the unique and universal, on the one hand, and the group-shaped and system-sharing, on the other, not only affects Faulkner's texts: it affects conferences on those texts. For the past two years we at this conference have chosen to discuss those texts within the "group-shaped" frames of women and race, and one of the most urgent (though unspoken) questions has been: how can we still think of Faulkner as unique and universal when it becomes more and more obvious that he is also (and not just coincidentally) white and male?

For me, the most revealing moment at last year's conference occurred when a speaker eloquently reflected on potential complexities of motive in two of Faulkner's characters: the white deputy in "Pantaloon in Black" and the black man Jesus in "That Evening Sun." The speaker concluded that these characters, in their pain and bewilderment, should be thought of as neither white nor black, but instead as human. There was an immediate and audible sigh of satisfaction within a great portion of the
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audience, for this conclusion spoke to our continuous anxiety about racial difference—spoke to it by transcending all group differences and arriving at species universality, at the human. Yet what black reader of Faulkner will find it more illuminating to see that white deputy as human rather than white (white here as crucial limitation and blindness), and what woman reader will want to see Jesus (who has beaten Nancy before and may now be about to slit her throat) as human rather than male (male here as crucial limitation and blindness)? The white deputy and Jesus act deeply out of their group identity—their race and gender—and to see them as essentially human is to obscure into secondariness the massive role played by race and gender.

I should say, in closing this anecdote, that a woman came up after the talk to quarrel with the speaker’s interpretation of Jesus, and I (who had also come up) raised a question with him about “human” but defended his gender reading. In the year’s interim between then and now I have been pondering this event—it was in fact the germ of this entire paper—and the speaker and I have, since then, discussed together as well the elusive impress of ideology upon interpretation. For my part, I now see that the talk and the later disagreements were all of them instances of the legitimate shaping power of race and gender. As a white male, the speaker could see something in Jesus that a black reader might not see (he being focused on a racial context that the white reader might see beyond); likewise the woman with a quarrel had a quarrel: she as a woman was more interested in reading Jesus within a gender context that was for her primary, not secondary, though for the white male speaker the gender context might well seem secondary to an existentialist one. And I now realize that a Marxist might have come up to the podium and legitimately quarreled with us all, his focus arising from a matrix of class and economic issues that we had all scanted.

The point is that there are no universal texts, no universal readings of them. Each text, like each reading of the text, achieves its power through its omissions: seeing some things is
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predicated upon blindness to others. The text, like the reader, is caught up in a variety of unchosen networks; it is inextricably part of its time and its place. Its identity is inevitably adulterate and problematic, a function both of its angle of vision upon the world and of the reader's angle of vision upon it. Roland Barthes makes this point shrewdly in his essay on that "universal" bestseller entitled *The Family of Man*. Barthes notes that this photographic celebration of our universally shared destiny—that all over the world we are alike in being born, in growing up, in working and playing, in growing old and dying—manages systematically to repress a countertruth: that we are born into different conditions, we grow up with different possibilities, we have different work and play options (depending on what part of the world we inhabit and our class orientation), we die at different ages and of different diseases (depending on the culture we live in). This countertruth is attentive to the differential of history, whereas *The Family of Man* focuses upon the immutability of nature. Both points of view are valuable, but only one concedes that it is a point of view. *The Family of Man* passes itself off as unedited pictures of nature, of the obvious: as how things are.

The text that claims to be universal posits, then, an unchanging human truth, an essential identity uncontaminated by the accidents of time, place, and affiliation. Free of bias, it asks to be taken as a privileged portrait of how things are. Such a text was, I think, the object of study of New Criticism, and there is something in us that still seeks to read Faulkner in this way. I want now to posit another model of identity—this one drawing on the Marxist philosopher Althusser and the psychoanalytic theorist Lacan—and then to consider both *Absalom, Absalom!* and the activity of this conference from the perspective of this new model.

* * *

Althusser is interested in the paradox at the heart of the term *subject*. The subject is simultaneously the free human being
and the human being subjected to another's system of beliefs and practices. Ideology is the missing term that enables this paradox, for ideological practice and the free human subject mutually constitute each other. "The category of the subject," writes Althusser, "is the constitutive category of all ideology . . . insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects."¹¹ What this means is that we obtain our sense of uncoerced, unpredictable inwardsness through our spontaneous assent to the social scripts—the ideologies—that surround us. We assent immediately, to arrangements so self-evident as to be invisible, and indeed all well-functioning ideology is invisible in this sense. It is what goes without saying, it is our daily participation in a "natural" schema of how things are, our way of wearing our name, our clothes, our unconscious convictions about the rightness of our procedures.

But we do not generate name, clothes, and convictions out of ourselves. They may be the material of our identity, but they come to us from outside, as always already established and awaiting our spontaneous participation. We join in by accepting the models thus proposed. As men or women we accept some socially proposed gender image, if we are Christians we accept Christ, if we are Americans we accept some version of the founding fathers, if we are teachers we pursue some compelling image of teaching. In each case we become ourselves by subjecting ourselves to a commanding image: we achieve our freedom by internalizing an external model. Althusser calls this model ideology, a script whose acceptance ushers us into a particular version of social reality, a version that we enact insofar as we remain faithful to the gestures, practices, and beliefs sanctioned by the script. The key to this model is noncoercion: "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection 'all by himself.'"¹²

Identity on this model is decentered. We spontaneously (indeed unconsciously) subscribe to social scripts that thus empower us. They do empower us, yet they are not quite the same
thing as us. Is it too much to say that Faulknerian tragedy is generated precisely by the civil war between these internalized social scripts and a something within the self more primordial than social scripts? I turn now to Jacques Lacan for a discussion of this something more primordial.

According to Lacan we come into our identity only through a series of alienations, and the earliest ones are decisive.\(^{13}\) The infant, speechless (*infans* means speechless), absorbs from its first days bits and pieces of language into itself, and it absorbs as well the gaze of others. What it knows in addition is the sensation of disconnected body parts; it has as yet no totalizing image of itself. This momentous step occurs during what Lacan calls the mirror stage: that moment (Lacan sees it beginning roughly at the sixth month and continuing for another year) when the infant begins to “recognize” itself as reflected either through the eyes of its mother or in an actual mirror. The resultant external image is perceived as a totality—a completed self—and it contrasts richly, in its wholeness and mobility, with the infant’s own interior sense of physical uncoordination and turbulent body parts. In other words, the infant recognizes itself only in an alien image of wholeness. Lacan writes: “the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only . . . in an exteriority.”\(^{14}\) Or, as he puts it more simply, “the first synthesis of the *ego* is essentially *alter ego*; it is alienated.”\(^{15}\)

This first moment of coherent self-knowing is thus a “mirage,” and it prefigures the process of unconscious identificatory merging with outer objects that will, for the rest of our lives, affect our identity as subjects. Lacan calls this dimension of identity *Imaginary*. As one of Lacan’s commentators writes, “The ego is developed in a primordial discordance between natural being and identification with the forms of the outer world. In other words, *alien* images—i.e., not innate—first constitute the ego as an *object* of its own identificatory mergers.”\(^{16}\) The self is thus “constituted through anticipating what it will become,”\(^{17}\) built upon fictions.
The second stage of identity-formation begins at about eighteen months: the time at which the child simultaneously begins to acquire language skills and to recognize the invisible presence of the father as a barrier to its desire for merger with the mother. Reconceiving Freud's Oedipal drama, Lacan sees the child's entry into language as itself a substitute satisfaction for the lost object—the mother—that the infant shall never again possess. Language appears in this argument as an alien network made up of empty differences, of signs that mean only in relation to each other; it is a system outside the self. Henceforth caught up in this system (which Lacan calls the Symbolic—the paternal field of Culture's rules and regulations, of linguistic transactions, of the Law), the child is doomed to seek in the register of language and its concepts a wholeness that language by definition cannot provide. Language keeps sending us to other language. Thus we spend our lives trying to say what we want, chasing in the channel of language for an object that never existed in that currency in the first place.

These two stages of self-formation posit an inevitable self-fissuring. The human subject is a being precariously poised between Imaginary mergers and Symbolic distinctions; he does not master either arena. Identity is therefore decentered and from the beginning adulterate; there is no native self. As Lacan writes, "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think." Or, "clarifying" himself, he writes: "I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think." Or, "clarifying" Lacan, we might say: "Thinking I was I was not who was not was not who." In each formulation we remain, it seems, the last ones to know exactly what we are up to, though Faulkner's wording has an urgency and a sense of the cost of such vertigo absent from Lacan's complacent phrasing. In any event, the social world—its language, its gestures, its images—penetrates us from the moment of our birth on: we have never been virginal. Drawing on Althusser and Lacan as formulators of a human subject inextricably
and irrationally permeated by social networks—a human subject who lives his identity both through participating in ideology and through primordial Imaginary mergers with the others that surround him—I turn now to *Absalom, Absalom!*

* * *

Faulkner almost surely knew nothing of either Althusser or Lacan, yet *Absalom, Absalom!* uncannily responds to their enterprises. The ways in which individuals are born into alien systems of thinking, feeling, and doing—into ideology—and at the same time find themselves caught up in a primordial fusion with others in whom they see themselves mirrored: these concerns seem to lie near the heart of the book. As John Irwin has argued, individual identity in this novel is a matter not of enclosed essences but of specular relationships.20

The process of vicarious identification is rampant. Rosa and her identification with Judith and Charles’s courtship, Henry and his shifting triangular identifications with Judith and with Bon, Sutpen’s identification with the planter in the big house, Wash Jones’s identification with Sutpen, Quentin and Shreve’s identifications with Henry and Charles: in each of these crossings an involuntary psychic merger takes place—across “the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering” (139), the boundaries set up by Culture that tell whom we are like and whom unlike, whom we can or cannot touch, where, and when. The novel’s primary image for this desire for merger is touch itself, just as the novel’s primary image for the cultural prohibition against touch is the closed door.

Individual identity here remains poignantly incomplete. Even Charles Bon, in Quentin and Shreve’s final version of him, finds himself moving past the cool stability of “breathing, pleasure, darkness” (300) and into the helpless state of yearning. Needing his father’s recognition and not getting it he thinks, “My God, I am young, young, and I didn’t even know it; they didn’t even tell me, that I was young” (321). *Absalom, Absalom!* insists on the
same kind of fluid incompleteness in its very form. Revising each finished version of its characters’ identity with another version, the novel melts down whatever it has consolidated, infusing youthful instability and passion into materials gone rigid or dead. “Get on, now . . . But go on . . . Go on” (260–61)—these instigating phrases run like a leitmotif throughout the narrative, fanning the glow of its stalemated materials into the bonfire of an overpass to love, heating up painful but finished events into unbearably unfinished ones. Charles Bon enters this novel dead, is brought back to life, is shot, is resurrected, is shot again, is resurrected again, is shot again. Each time he dies it hurts a bit more, hurts Quentin and Shreve who have lent him something of themselves, hurts the reader who has lent Quentin and Shreve (and therefore Charles) something of the reader’s self. The narrative keeps revisiting its most intransigent materials, rejuvenating and replaying them as a living might-be, then as a meditative might-have-been, then as a tragic was.

In this creative move to revise its own inheritance, this tormented overview of its own wasted terrain, Absalom goes past an Althusserian vision of ideological consent. It does so through the resurrectory energy of desire itself, the energy that psychoanalysis respects as transference and that moves through the incompleteness of individual identity—that of the doers, the tellers, the readers—and merges with the other.21 Rather than accept the limitations of a narrative in which everything has already happened—the conventional historical novel—or accept the illusion of a narrative in which everything is yet to happen—the conventional novel of today, Faulkner combines these two frames into a narrative of tragic desire. Events come to us in the double perspective of having already happened, and yet—such is the desire of the teller—they are rekindled, still happening, being reimagined, reframed, compelling yet hopeless. This is the narrative of desire entrapped—can’t matter—and desire released—must matter, of “they mought have kilt us but they aint whupped us yit” (184).
Such involuntary mergers recall the Lacanian field of the Imaginary—the movement of “the immortal brief recent intransient blood” (295)—in defiance of the boundaries put forth by the Symbolic order. Those boundaries, though, are beyond dismantling, and not because the authorities dispense enough police to protect them. They are beyond dismantling because internalized, bred into the very fabric of the individual’s unconscious feeling and thinking. Henry Sutpen polices himself. His West Virginia father may touch blacks with impunity but, born and bred in the South, Henry cannot. He screams and vomits when his father does it, he murders at the intolerable prospect of his sister doing it. As Althusser claims, ideology is inseparable from subjection itself, and Faulkner tirelessly shows us—in Quentin Compson, in Joe Christmas, in Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon—the dissolution of the subject that follows upon the clash within of incompatible ideological scripts.

All great novels involve the clash of ideological scripts, but most do not represent that clash as beyond individual resolution. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, fiction is a privileged terrain for the successful negotiation of self and society, for the persuasive imagining of individual identity working its way through conflicts both Imaginary and ideological. I would hazard that every best-seller, one way or another, affirms a dominant ideology even as it points to its rupture or blind spots. Let us consider, for example, the ways in which two masterpieces written in 1936—Absalom, Absalom! and Gone with the Wind—play out this issue of ideological rupture and containment in terms of individual identity.22

Narrative voice is the novel’s most potent instrument for containment—for conveying the sense of an individual speaker in control of the conflicts that arise—and Gone with the Wind comes to us in an uninterrupted and exquisitely satisfying narrative voice, a voice everywhere equal to its task, a voice that knows. Absalom, Absalom! comes to us, by contrast, in a variety of voices, and the fact that they all sound alike doesn’t help us
out. Each of these voices either knowingly or unknowingly calls into question its own authority. This is a case in which more is less.

If we move to the handling of time and theme, we find a comparable stability in the best-seller, instability in the experimental novel. All of *Gone with the Wind* is written as though the past history it is unfolding took place just a few days ago: the novel never acknowledges its own seventy-five-year vantage point on the events it records—the pastness of the past. (It doesn’t acknowledge it but it everywhere exploits it in the unified vision afforded by retrospect.) Mitchell renders the defeat of the South as tragic, deserved, and—more to the point—secondary. She does this by focusing the reader less upon the issues of the war itself than upon two larger-than-life figures (Rhett and Scarlet) who stand neither simply for nor against the lost cause. The trauma of the war, the ways in which it called into question (still calls into question) our nation’s deepest communal identity, is thus contained within Scarlet and Rhett’s “immortal” love story, ending on the note of the unvanquished human will, the staying power of individual identity. (A comparison of the place of Tara and of Sutpen’s Hundred within the economy of each novel’s ending makes the same point.)

*Absalom, Absalom!* by contrast, lives uneasily on both sides of Mitchell’s satisfying time frame. In *Absalom* the pastness of the past—at its unrecoverability—is foregrounded. Yet the past has refused, precisely, to pass: it is still present, still unfinished, still beyond managing. 1808, 1833, 1859, 1865, 1909–10: the narrative moves bewilderingly back and forth among these times, suggesting that the racial issues over which the war was fought retain their power to haunt and confuse: who is black in *Absalom*? how much black blood does it take to be black? In place of *Gone with the Wind*’s easy separation between black blacks and white whites, *Absalom* finds black and white to be inextricable parts of each other’s identity.

*Gone with the Wind* “masters” the trauma of the Civil War; then, by containing it within a love story of two strong individu-
als, narrated by a coherent and capable narrative voice, one which keeps intact key distinctions between white and black, self and system, past and present, energy and weakness: distinctions upon which twentieth-century American culture's most confident images of itself are founded. In Absalom all these distinctions have become problematic. No narrator can deliver this material because none has mastered it. None can speak from a later cultural vantage point of superior hindsight and sort it all out. And this means literally that the culture since 1865 has been unable to provide the narrators with a perspective—a consoling ideology—that will make that cataclysmic war go down. It sticks in the craw, and in so doing it shatters the conventional fictional contract between self and society. Absalom is an experimental novel, precisely, in its refusal of these blandishments, these conventions of retrospective mastery. Its frustrations are passed on to us as our own; we do not feel wise reading it, we do not feel sure of ourselves—of who we are—while reading it.

In fact, Faulkner's novel (as opposed to Mitchell's) seems designed to frustrate our answer to the simple question that inaugurates all queries about identity: who is——? who is Thomas Sutpen? who is Charles Bon? who is Quentin Compson? It is not that the question cannot be answered but that the novel keeps on answering it in different ways. Thomas Sutpen is a demon, a tragic hero, a successful planter; he is also a psychically arrested child, a mountain man, white trash. Who he is depends on when and where you look at him, and who is doing the looking. He looks one way to a woman, another to a man, another to a disowned son, another to a disillusioned classicist, another to his quietly desperate son, another to a Canadian. These competing views of Sutpen's identity do not embarrass the novel; they enable it. Character in Absalom lives openly in someone else's talk; there is no illusion here of unmediated identity, of identity as enclosed essence. A different narrator, a different issue (miscegenation, say, rather than incest) produces a different identity.

What indeed is Absalom, Absalom! "itself"? Is it the material
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378 pages within the Modern Library covers that most of us know? John Irwin has shown its astonishing intertextually shared life with *The Sound and the Fury*. Less spectacularly, Noel Polk's new edition of *The Sound and the Fury* indicates the difficulty of containing any text within its material bounds. Consider the history of *The Sound and the Fury*'s Appendix. To do so, we should first go forward to *Absalom, Absalom!*, for in concluding that novel in the mid-1930s Faulkner composed a chronology, a genealogy, and a map. Charmed, perhaps, by the illusion of containment that such instruments convey, Faulkner went on to write—some ten years later—an Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, liking it so much that he argued for its appearance at the beginning of the novel. (Probably half of you in this room first encountered the novel, as I did, in this format, joined with *As I Lay Dying*.) For sixteen years this text held sway; then, at the time of Faulkner's death, a new edition appeared with the Appendix placed more discreetly at the end of the novel proper. Some twenty-two years later, in 1984, under the supervision of Noel Polk, the most recent edition of *The Sound and the Fury* appeared, this time altogether without the Appendix. Which is *The Sound and the Fury*? If I have told the story properly, you will find the question sounding now a bit naive. The amount of critical exigesis dependent upon the originally absent and now discarded Appendix is weighty indeed, and it is not limited to undergraduates who don't know better. There are, I conclude, several *Sound and Furys* afloat (not that they are all of equal value), and whichever we prefer changes in yet other ways when we try to calculate its interaction with *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Character and text not only exhibit changing identities; literary history is founded upon such changes. We all know relevant examples: the Romantics' Milton (of the Devil's party without knowing it) is not the Milton of the seventeenth century; T. S. Eliot's inauguration of John Donne as a major poet removes him
from his Elizabethan context and places him in Eliot's ongoing battle with Wordsworth and Tennyson; *Jane Eyre* as reconceived by contemporary feminists is a text of the 1970s as much as of the 1840s; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* goes from best-sellerdom in the 1850s to obscurity for a hundred years and back into acclaim once again, now being enlisted in the contemporary battle against Modernist canons of race, gender, form, and theme; D. H. Lawrence, once one of the four or five twentieth-century darlings of survey courses of English literature, is at present disappearing silently from our syllabi.

These are not capricious changes. They testify to the fact that we do not so much receive literary masterpieces, intact, as produce them, adulterate. The identity of texts is not essential but contextual; their value is inescapably conditioned by current canons of assessment. No writer comes to us "as he is," not even Faulkner. How can we see him except through the interpretive eyes of Sartre and Malraux, or Olga Vickery, or Cleanth Brooks, or John Irwin, or John Matthews—which is to say through the concomitant lenses of Sartre and Malraux's existentialism, Vickery's New Criticism, Brooks's sympathy with Southern culture, Irwin's Nietzsche and Freud, Matthews's Derrida? I have in this sentence immersed Faulkner within a fog of names, yet this is, whether we are conscious of it or not, the only access we have to him. "Faulkner" is misleading shorthand for a complex and many-voiced enterprise that operates under the cover of his name.

Individual identity is likewise misleading shorthand for a complex and many-voiced enterprise that operates under the cover of that phrase. So long as we are physically separate from each other, demonstrably lodged in separate bodies, we shall probably never concede the degree to which we depend upon the other and upon system in order to constitute the self. Equally, so long as we look solid, we shall deny the terrifying extent of our liquidity. Yet it is, so to speak, the liquid in us—what Faulkner calls the blood—that engages incessantly in acts of transference, of identificatory merger. Because our identity is perpetually
unfinished, because we are never coincident with ourselves, we read books, teach students, and attend Faulkner conferences.

I have been using the pronoun “we” with abandon, but the “we” in this room is no common entity. Our orientations are here as well, invisibly differentiating us from some and joining us to others. Indeed, many of us are wearing a badge conspicuously placed upon our person, and this badge tells an interesting story. It says that we are here in our discrete bodies but not only here; we are also there, lodged in our former affiliations (and if the badge says Berkeley it suggests something different from Buffalo, something different again from Swarthmore or Ole Miss). We speak out of those affiliations, and are heard in terms of them, as we speak out of and are heard in terms of our race and gender.

Yet we do come together under a common umbrella that is appropriately named “Faulkner.” It is the site less of our individual than of our transpersonal professional activity. Many of us are rewarded—either figuratively or literally—for coming to these conferences and attending thus to our place in the Symbolic field of reputations and responsibilities. Prestige and power, in however small a degree, are at stake. In addition, and more agreeably, “Faulkner” serves as a sort of absent father who enables fleeting sibling relations among erstwhile strangers spending a week together in each other’s company. Not kin, we do, because of him, for moments feel like kin. I’ll close by suggesting, however, that this conference is the site as well, and perhaps more profoundly, of our common acts of imaginary transference, the locus of our hopeless desire to merge our incompleteness with Faulkner’s beckoning authority. Dead, he lives. Continually re-invented, he speaks to us. “Freed . . . of time and flesh,”27 like old Colonel Sartoris or Colonel Sutpen, he broods over us all in the form of our impassioned and incompatible inventions of him.
NOTES

1. I cite from the 1962 Vintage edition of *The Sound and the Fury* and from the 1951 Modern Library edition of *Absalom, Absalom!*


3. Bleikasten is acute on Jason's enclosure within the social stereotypes of his region: "His ideas are all second-hand, and . . . they all come from the threadbare ideology of his cultural environment" (164).


8. Barthes writes: "Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins (but why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what they think of The Great Family of Man?), one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature" (101).

9. Survey courses of English literature find it difficult to avoid the same idealist perspective. The "pageantry" of masterpieces from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf emerges as a sequence of works that resemble nothing so much as each other in their fine-grained and unbiased universality. The differential history that occasions the production and reception of all these works is marginalized in such courses, if not repressed.


11. Althusser, 171.

12. Ibid., 182.


19. Ibid.
23. Not enough critical attention is generally paid to the sense of readerly empowerment or incapacity wrought by a given text’s "narrative contract." Insofar as a narrative invokes (in its forms even more than its themes) the comforts of the already-known, it consolidates the ideological bonding between reader and culture: it makes one feel rich in common wisdom. Virginia Woolf’s commentary in *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957) on this aspect of reading is unsurpassable:

> But the effect [of an unconventional text that the narrator is reading] was somehow baffling; one could not see a wave heaping itself, a crisis coming round the next corner. Therefore I could not plume myself either upon the depths of my feelings and my profound knowledge of the human heart. For whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death, the annoying creature twitched me away, as if the important thing were just a little further on. And thus she made it impossible for me to roll out my sonorous phrases about “elemental feelings,” “the common stuff of humanity,” “depths of the human heart,” and all those other phrases which support us in our belief that, however clever we may be on top, we are very serious, very profound and very humane underneath. She made me feel, on the contrary, that instead of being serious and profound and humane, one might be—and the thought was far less seductive—merely lazy minded and conventional into the bargain. (95)

25. Noel Polk discusses these issues at length in his *Editorial Handbook on The Sound and the Fury*. In a telephone discussion of 3 July 1987 Noel Polk spoke to me of some of Faulkner’s reasons in the mid-forties for wanting to give a privileged position to the Appendix, yet without “pandering” to those who would refuse to struggle with the body of the text itself.
26. To Marx’s question, “Where does the eternal charm of Greek art come from?” Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey respond as follows:

> There is no good answer to this question, quite simply because there is no eternal charm in Greek art: for the *Iliad*, a fragment of universal literature, used in this instance as a vehicle for memory, is not the *Iliad* produced by the material life of the Greeks, which was not a ‘book’ nor even a ‘myth’ in our sense of the word, which we would like to apply retrospectively. Homer’s *Iliad*, the ‘work’ of an ‘author’ exists only for us, and in relation to new material
conditions into which it has been reinscribed and reinvested with a new significance. . . . To
go further: it is as if we ourselves had written it (or at least composed it anew). Works of art are
processes and not objects, for they are never produced once and for all, but are continually
susceptible to 'reproduction': in fact, they only find an identity and a content in this continual
process of transformation. There is no eternal art, there are no fixed and immutable works.
(Quoted in Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism*, 68)