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WANTING IT TOLD: NARRATIVE DESIRE IN CATHER AND FAULKNER

A Thesis Presented

by

Monroe Street

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the role played by narrative desire within two modernist experimentations with novel form: Willa Cather's 1918 novel *My Ántonia* and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In it, I argue that Cather and Faulkner utilize framing narratives in order to present the main plot of each novel as a product of multiple narrators' desire for a story to emerge. In *My Ántonia*, it is the expressed wish of Jim Burden's nameless writer friend that compels him to finish writing his account of Ántonia, which constitutes the main plot of the novel. Meanwhile, in *Absalom, Absalom!* it is Quentin's perception that Rosa "wants it told" which inspires him to investigate and reconstruct her ex-fiancée Thomas Sutpen's life story with the help of two other character-narrators: his father and college roommate Shreve.

Calling on narrative theory and psychoanalysis, I argue that Cather's and Faulkner's novels depict characters' desire for both storytelling and each other to be enigmatic and intersubjective. Indeed the impulse to generate narrative on the part of the tellers in both texts—notably Jim and Quentin—is seen to arise out of a partial, but not entirely clear, sense that another wants them to do so. In other words, the narrative desire conveyed by the nameless writer and Rosa appears to have no clear object. While it is understood by Jim and Quentin that a story is desired of them, the full extent of what this story might come to be about is never fully explicated by their interlocutors.

Theoretically, the intervention this project wagers by way of Cather and Faulkner is a rethinking of two influential attempts to bring together narrative theory and psychoanalysis: Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* (1984) and Judith Roof's *Come As You Are* (1996). While the claims regarding narrative advanced by both Brooks and Roof rely primarily on Freud's work (notably his theories of the death drive and of sexual development), I attempt to demonstrate how Lacan's thinking allows us to understand narrative as issuing from a desire that is at once intersubjective and objectless—as appears to be the case in *My Ántonia* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Lacan's dynamic conceptualization of desire, I suggest, is not only essential to understanding these two works; it is also very much implicit within the interplay of desire and narrative form they establish.

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As holds true for nearly all of the large-scale critical and creative projects I have worked on over the years, there are far too many people who have supported my writing this thesis than I can make meaningful mention of here. With that in mind, I would like to express my gratitude for the encouragement and intellectual impetus bequeathed me during the past year by my friends and family, as well as my undergraduate writing students, fellow graduate students, and my professors in the UVM English Department. I am particularly indebted to UVM Professors Todd McGowan and John Waldron, whose respective provocations during this project have stirred me to continue reflecting on my handling of race and psychoanalysis therein. Lastly, the thesis which follows would perhaps never have come to fruition were it not for the support, insight, and inspiration offered me by my adviser, Professor Valerie Rohy, who has constantly encouraged my desire to produce “close readings” of literary works—readings which attempt to convey something of the enigma at the heart of our encounters with literature and art.

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INTRODUCTION

What is it that compels us to make narrative? That is, what inspires the acts of writing, reading—or, more broadly speaking, *narrativizing*—whereby we receive and pass along stories? The following project reflects an effort to think through these questions with the help of psychoanalytic and narrative theory as well as two novels by Willa Cather and William Faulkner—*My Ántonia* (1918; rev. 1926) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), respectively. In each of these modernist works we come upon sophisticatedly framed narratives which depict storytelling in ways that challenge our conventional assumptions about what the purpose of this activity entails. While we might typically expect the act of making and passing along stories to involve an intent to transmit meaning and knowledge, both novels depict narrativizing as an act compelled as much by the extradiegetic relations between a storyteller and his or her audience as by the content of the story alone. Indeed, each novel presents the transmission of a plot whose explanatory power is of secondary concern to—or almost entirely lost on—its audience. In the Introduction of Cather’s *My Ántonia*, a nameless writer requests to read Jim Burden’s narrative of the novel’s heroine, in spite of already knowing from previous conversations with Jim how this story concludes—with his desire for Ántonia going largely unrequited. Meanwhile, in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield devotes half a day to telling Quentin Compson the tale of her ex-fiancé Thomas Sutpen without ever explaining to Quentin what the story’s underlying significance is: Sutpen’s repudiated paternal relation to Charles Bon, his racially ambiguous son.

One of my central claims in this project is that these two depictions of narrativizing—of stories being written, read, spoken, and retold—call for a reconsideration of Peter Brooks’ influential psychoanalytic account of how and why we experience narrative. Calling on Freud’s work, Brooks suggests that compelling our movement through a narrative is the diegetic “promise of meaning” fulfilled by its ending—a semantic payback of sorts that roughly corresponds to what Roland Barthes

has described elsewhere as the “pleasure of the text.”¹ While I engage more thoroughly with Brooks’ understanding of Freud at the beginning of Chapter Two, suffice to say for now that an implicitly formalist logic underpins his understanding of what inspires readers to make progress through a narrative form. Compelling the act of reading is our faith in a plot’s internal hermeneutic promise—the notion that its ending will allow us to make further sense of its preceding sequences of events. For Brooks, the desire of the reader is, by and large, a *hermeneutic desire*—one which takes the explanatory powers bequeathed by narrative endings as its primary object of interest.

Complicating Brooks’ proposal, however, is the storytelling in both of the novels under discussion. Jim’s narrative in *My Ántonia* leaves its reader—the Introduction’s nameless narrator—with little in the way of new information that would allow him or her to explain *why* he and Ántonia renounce their desire for each other. And although the ending of Rosa’s narrative leaves Quentin in no position to explain either its significance or why she has told it to him, this does nothing to deter his interest in the Sutpen story; in fact, the hermeneutic opacity of Rosa’s narrative fuels his desire to investigate it further.

Both of these examples problematize Brooks’ understanding of the reader’s narrative desire as largely plot-based—that is, as piqued by the hope that narrative endings will allow us to demystify and explain a story’s numerous meanings. Modifying Brooks’ case somewhat, my contention here will be that the recipients of a narrative are compelled to read or listen to it by the possibility of making further sense not only of its diegetic content, but also of the extradiegetic desire compelling a story’s narrator or creator to tell it. For instance, although the nameless writer in *My Ántonia*’s Introduction already appears to be familiar with Jim’s plot material, s/he nonetheless takes an interest in the passion for his subject that Jim conveys during the conversation they have about Ántonia in the

¹ In “The Pleasure of the Text,” Barthes makes the important distinction between two kinds of narrative texts—the “text of pleasure,” the form of which furnishes the reader with resolved narrative meanings, and the “text of bliss,” the allusivity of which facilitates no such resolution of sense, leaving that task to the

novel's framing narrative. I would thus suggest that in reading Jim's account, the nameless writer desires not only to explain its plot content but also to learn about Jim's unrequited desire for *Ántonia* by way of that very plot content. In other words, the hermeneutic enigma compelling the reader's narrative desire isn't entirely internal to a plot, as Brooks suggests, but is at least partially external to it, residing in the relationship of a plot to its teller's desire.

Compelling the reader's desire, then, is a question about the desire of a story's creator—one which no narrative itself can possibly resolve for its recipients. But as I contend in Chapter One, the reverse is true as well: *My Ántonia*'s Introduction also demonstrates how a similarly unresolved question about the *reader's* desire also attends the storyteller's creation of the narrative a writer composes. Cather depicts Jim as both inspired to write his account of *Ántonia* by the nameless writer's desire to read it and also as equivocating as to whether the narrative he has produced will satisfy his reader's desire. In *My Ántonia*, we thus observe not only a reader attempting to gauge the enigmatic desire of a writer by way of the tale he tells, but also an author (Jim) writing in response to the enigmatic desire of his prospective reader. Another inversion of narrativizing and desiring positions takes place in *Absalom, Absalom!*: Quentin starts off as Rosa's listener but, in attempting to interpret both her tale of Sutpen and her desire to tell him it, ends up passing the story along to his roommate Shreve, who in turn attempts to analyze both the tale and Quentin's desire. Taken together, both novels show how the enigmatic desire of an extradiegetic other—be it a writer, speaker, reader, or listener—compels further acts of narrativization—be they writing, interpreting, or retelling.

It is thus my case that in *My Ántonia* and *Absalom, Absalom!* it is the ineluctably enigmatic desire of an extradiegetic other that inspires the numerous acts of narrativizing that both novels depict. In so doing, Cather's and Faulkner's work aligns closely with Lacan's insistence on the analyst's desire as the force mobilizing the patient to narrativize his or her unconscious during an analysis. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan indicates how compelling the patient's transference—the unwitting emergence of

the unconscious in his or her speech—is the enigma of the analyst’s desire, which the patient attempts to interpret:

In so far as the analyst is supposed to know, he is also supposed to set out in search of unconscious desire. This is why I say...that desire is the axis, the pivot, the handle, the hammer, by which is applied the force-element, the inertia, that lies behind what is formulated at first, in the discourse of the patient, as demand, namely the transference. The axis, the common point of this two-edged axe, is the desire of the analyst, which I designate here as an essential function. And let no one tell me that I do not name this desire, for it is precisely this point that can be articulated only in the relation of desire to desire. (SXI 235)

Lacan allusively indicates here the “essential function” of the analyst’s enigmatic desire—which the patient “supposes” to be a desire to “set out in search of unconscious desire.” Figuratively depicting this elusive desire as the “axis” around which turns the “discourse of the patient,” Lacan suggests the patient’s speech to be largely inspired by his or her own projected understanding of the “discourse” s/her believes the analyst would like to hear. So long as the analyst’s desire remains obscure, Lacan’s idea is that patients—uncertain of, and thus essentially guessing at, what the analyst desires for them to say—will unwittingly introduce their own unconscious desire into their discourse. In order to encourage transference speech of this kind, Lacan advises analysts to be mindful of the degree to which they “name...desire”—either their own, or those of their patients. For when the analyst names and/or interprets desire as such, s/he runs the risk of interfering with patients’ unwitting transference of their own desire onto the obscure and largely unstated desire of the analyst. While the thoughts regarding transference that Lacan offers here are most directly relevant to the argument I make in Chapter Two on *Absalom, Absalom!*, his more basic insight—that the enigma of the Other’s desire effectively incites storytelling—I take as central to the interpretations of both novels that I have attempted in the pages ahead.

In perusing both of the following chapters, the reader will note that in addition to my effort to offer a Lacanian conceptualization of how the enigma of the Other's desire inspires narrativity, I have also tried to comment critically—and perhaps confusedly at times—on interpretive methods such as Brooks', which I refer to as "hermeneutic." While the constraints of this project's scope and the time available to complete it have kept me from engaging as closely as I would have liked with the discourse of hermeneutics—and narrative theory, for that matter—I'd like briefly to note how I have come to view Lacan's relation to hermeneutics, in hopes of elucidating what follows. My reference to "hermeneutic" interpretation throughout the project is intended less as a specific intervention in the theoretical legacy of Habermas, Ricoeur, and so on, than as a critical commentary on an interpretive approach to narrative that not only *describes* but attempts to *resolve* its enigmas by way of theoretical and contextual explication of their possible causes. By contrast to this approach, my effort here has been to describe the diegetic effects produced within Cather and Faulkner's novels by the enigma of a diegetic storytellers' desire—rather than to explain away the meaning or etiology of this desire.

While many continue to understand psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic process of interpretation—whereby the analyst's task is to explicate for the patient the underlying cause of his or her symptoms—Lacan is unusually clear at the beginning of *Seminar XI* about the distance between psychoanalysis and the methods of hermeneutics: "Analysis is not a matter of discovering in a particular case the differential feature of the theory, and in doing so believe that one is explaining why your daughter is silent—for the point at issue is to *get her to speak*, and this effect proceeds from a type of intervention that has nothing to do with a differential feature" (SXI 11; original emphasis). Lacan indicates here how hermeneutic or etiological interpretation of symptoms is at odds with the clinical practice of acting upon them. Indeed, the implicit suggestion wagered by Lacan's example of the silent daughter here is that the hermeneutic operation of explicating symptoms for the patient effectively eliminates any need to ask her about them. That is, by taking satisfaction in the theoretical knowledge of the patient's symptom proffered by etiology, the hermeneutic analyst effectively

obstructs the possibility of his or her articulating a desire to the patient for her to explain her silence. While Lacan's example is clearly clinical, the limitations of a hermeneutic approach that it evokes are hardly irrelevant to the study of literary and other aesthetic works as well. For instance, Tim Dean has observed how a currently widespread hermeneutic approach to decoding literary works as products of their cultural context often engenders "an impulse to critically master opacity or uncertainty" which can discourage productive critical engagement with the more enigmatic aspects of aesthetic artifacts (Dean 39).²

I foreground the chapters ahead with Lacan's critique of hermeneutics because both *My Ántonia* and *Absalom, Absalom!* present narrative enigmas concerning sexuality and race that invite while frustrating hermeneutic readings. As I discuss in Chapter 1, there has been no shortage of critical effort exerted to explain Cather's abstruse representation of desire in *My Ántonia* and other works as a product of her own presumed lesbianism. Hermeneutically inclined commentators such as Judith Fetterley have thus sought to read the absence of requited love between Jim and Ántonia in the main story of the novel as the sign of a latent same-sex desire. In addition to describing how the

² In "Art as Symptom," Dean marshals the "seduction theory" of psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche in order to counter misconceptions of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic enterprise oriented towards the "demystification" of hidden meanings in both the speech of patients and works of culture. Dean explains how Laplanche, countering Habermas's theory of intersubjective communication, reminds us that language-based exchanges of meaning are founded on the transmission of "enigmatic signifiers." Laplanche proposes that, as infants, speaking subjects are initially "seduced" into interacting with a language community by way of such enigmatic words and acts whose meaning we do not initially know—or even how to know (Dean 35). In other words, far from providing the subject with a basis for demystifying the meanings of other speaking subjects, language—as Laplanche and, I would add, Lacan conceives it—is understood to be the basis of each subject's mystification by others, whose exact meanings s/he can never fully comprehend. Counterintuitively, psychoanalysis—long misconstrued as a hermeneutic project whereby the analyst demystifies the unconscious meanings of the patient's dreams and symptoms—emerges in the theories of language offered by both Laplanche and Lacan as problematizing this very project. Insofar as no subject—indeed, no interpretive system or method—is capable of determining the exact meanings that a signifier assumes for another subject, the hermeneutic analyst will inevitably fall short in his or her attempt to devise and interpret those meanings. (This is one way of reading Lacan's repeated insistence that "there is no metalanguage"—"no Other of the Other"—that would allow the hermeneutic analyst to know for certain how a signifier functions within another subject's symbolic universe. See "The Subversion of the Subject," p. 688 in *Écrits*.)

novel's Introduction presents *My Ántonia* as the discursive product of Jim and the nameless narrator's enigmatic narrative desires, I thus also attempt to show how desire in *My Ántonia* might be understood in less hermeneutically reductive terms than those proposed by Fetterley and other critics. Rather than analyze sexuality in the novel as reducible to the terms of gender and sexual identity, I propose instead that we view Jim's desire as issuing from the intersubjective geometry of his relations with the nameless writer, Ántonia and Lena Lingard. In doing so, I invoke Lacan's concept of hysteria in order to suggest how all four characters might be understood as desiring nothing more than the odd satisfaction of an unsatisfied desire.

While a Lacanian formulation of desire allows us to observe sexuality in *My Ántonia* as irreducible to gender or sexual identity, Lacan's conceptualization of transference leads me to problematize the racial identity of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s Charles Bon in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I once again attempt to demonstrate how the enigmatic narrative desire of a character-narrator—Rosa Coldfield—inspires a flurry of speculative narrativizing by the story's other tellers. Failing to comprehend the Civil War-era story Rosa tells him about her ex-fiancé Thomas Sutpen and desiring to know *why* she has wanted him to hear it, Quentin Compson immediately looks to his father for help contextualizing this tale and Rosa's desire to have it told. Of course, Mr. Compson's only recourse to helping his son is to re-interpret Rosa's story; he thus reformulates the tale for Quentin, centering it on Sutpen's son Henry's mysterious murder of Charles Bon—Sutpen's repudiated son from a past marriage. After Mr. Compson's attempted explanation of the murder falls short, Quentin goes on to consult with his Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon, who famously proffers that Bon is black and that this proves to be the deciding factor underlying the fratricide Henry commits. While Shreve's hermeneutic assessment of the Sutpen family tragedy as revolving around miscegenation is one that continues to persuade readers and commentators of the novel, I attempt to show how it is Shreve's narrative transference—his own desire for racialized drama rather than sound interpretive logic—which fuels his explanation of Bon's murder. In closing, I argue that the hermeneutic suspicion

regarding the Other's racial identity that Shreve evinces is one that repeats the structure of Sutpen's own anxiety about Bon's race. As I attempt to show, it is a desire for certainty regarding their own racial heritage—rather than Bon's veritable racial difference—which compels Shreve and Sutpen to circulate the hermeneutically suspicious narrative accounts of Sutpen's son's racial identity, accounts which ultimately prove murderous.

CHAPTER ONE

RENUNCIATORY DRAMA: NARRATIVE AND DESIRE IN *MY ÁNTONIA*

In “The Novel Demeublé,” the essay in which she advocates for the importance of the novelist’s leaving certain matters unsaid—a notion she famously refers to as the “thing not named”—Willa Cather rails against the encyclopedically detailed and hermeneutically inclined representational habits of 19th-century novelists—notably Honore de Balzac. Rather than follow the realist tradition of exhaustively inventorying and rationalizing the real, of “cataloguing of a great number of material objects...explaining mechanical processes... and in minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations,” Cather calls on the twentieth-century novelist to resist the impulse to explain away the interiors of places and people. Instead, she urges her contemporaries to consider the powerful impact had on readers by the very withholding of information: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it...that gives high quality to the novel” (OW, 42-3). To “create” then, for Cather, is to produce an ambiguous effect on readers—something “felt” but not spoken, an “overtone divined...but not heard”—by way not of what the novelist reveals to be true about the workings of the world, but by that that which s/he refuses to explain or even “name.”

The voluminous amount of criticism investigating Cather’s work in relation to her sexuality—about which she disclosed precious little—testifies ironically to the magnitude of the hermeneutic fervor to which a “thing” withheld by a writer might give rise. Indeed, many of Cather’s most influential readers to date—such as biographer Sharon O’Brien and Eve Sedgwick—have read her allusive and laconic depictions of sexuality as an elaboration on—if not an outright confirmation of—the same-sex desires that the writer kept quiet about throughout her life. In accounts such as O’Brien’s and Sedgwick’s, Cather’s “thing not named” is effectively assumed to be none other than a

same-sex desire that is never stated but which nonetheless saturates the hermeneutic coding of her work. The task of criticism thus becomes to decode the indirect manner in which Cather's fiction represents sexuality in order to expose the latent lesbian impulses which subtend it. Sedgwick, for instance, encourages us to read the male homoeroticism attending Professor Godfrey St. Peter's relationship with pupil Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* (1925) as a cross-gender displacement of female same-sex desire—one that speaks to “the brutal suppressions by which a lesbian love did not in Willa Cather's time and culture feely become visible as itself” (Sedgwick 175). While Sedgwick's sociohistorical explanation for what she sees as a kind of coded lesbianism in Cather's work is hardly inaccurate, it also advances an implicitly psychological explanation for the relational configurations that Cather has fictionally arranged. That is, Sedgwick argues it to be Cather's closeted lesbianism which explains her fictive imagination. As can be seen in O'Brien's work and elsewhere in a long tradition of hermeneutically inclined Cather criticism, lesbian sexuality effectively becomes the signified of the “thing not named” for those looking to explain the seemingly inscrutable absence of loving female relationships in Cather's text.

But might there be another way of reading the nonappearance of lesbianism in Cather's fiction than as the sign of the fictional “closet”—that is, as indicative of a commitment on Cather's part to suppressing representations of same-sex desire as the result of her own? In the reading of *My Ántonia* (1918; rev. 1926) which follows, I will forego another effort to approach the “thing not named” in Cather's depiction of sexuality as a symptomatic indication of her own presumed lesbianism. Instead, I'd like to explore how Cather presents desire in *My Ántonia* as a dynamic force operating between characters rather than as a fixed, identifiable—and, ultimately, “nameable”—psychic structure. Indeed, my ongoing claim in this chapter will be that the logic subtending desire in *My Ántonia* accords with Lacan's insistence that human “desire is the desire of the Other” (SXI 235). The meaning of Lacan's enigmatic formulation can be taken in many directions but for my present purposes, its significance lies in the suggestion that—as Todd McGowan points out—“desire finds its

motivation not in what the subject knows about the Other, but what it doesn't know" (McGowan 175). Designated by desire is thus a condition of lacking knowledge about what other people want in relation to us.

In the Introduction of *My Ántonia*, I will be suggesting that it is a similar lack of knowledge regarding the Other's desire which Cather depicts as providing the basis for the making of the novel's main narrative itself. Precipitating Jim's account of Ántonia is the desire to know more about his desirous relations with her that the Introduction's nameless narrator expresses. Running counter to Peter Brooks' understanding of narrative desire, the narrator's impulse to read Jim's story appears unmotivated by a teleological wish to know how its plot of romance resolves (for its frustrated ending is already known). Nor is this narrative wish necessarily indicative of a hermeneutic impulse to explain *why* Jim and Ántonia never requite their love; indeed, it isn't entirely clear *why* the narrator desires Jim's narrative, beyond the glimpse of his desire that it might provide. Meanwhile, Jim's account itself frustrates—and thus sustains—this desire on the part of the narrator by demonstrating his own romantic (dis-)inclinations to be entirely enmeshed in those of others within his narrative—notably Ántonia and Lena Lingard. In my reading of Jim's account I will thus attempt to show how his desire might be described in terms of the way he positions himself in relation to others rather than by way of a hermeneutic analysis of his gender or sexual identity. Instead, I propose that Jim's ongoing and dynamic efforts to frustrate and sustain desire as it circulates between him, Ántonia, and Lena—not to mention the Introduction's narrator—might more accurately be described in terms of Lacan's notion of hysteria than as hetero- or homosexual.

In the closing lines of the Introduction to *My Antonia*, protagonist Jim Burden delivers a manuscript—one which will become the novel's primary narrative—to the New York apartment of a nameless writer who he's known since childhood. As he describes for his friend the notes he's written about "*a Bohemian girl [they'd] both known long ago*" as children growing up in Black Hawk,

Nebraska, Burden effectively introduces the novel itself as such: “*Here is the thing about *Ántonia*. Do you still want to read it? I finished it last night. I didn’t take time to arrange it; I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any form. It hasn’t any title, either*” (MA 2). We might be surprised, it seems, by the way Burden disparages here a work that Cather herself thought of as her finest novel. That said, although Jim claims to have “finished it,” the story in question hardly sounds complete—or even edited. In what appears to be an effort to prepare his friend—who is a writer—for a disappointing read, Jim candidly describes his narrative as a hurried and unrevised compilation of associations, an assemblage of “all that her name recalls to me.”

How, then, are we to reconcile Jim’s rather deprecatory confessions about the shortcomings of his text with Cather’s assertion toward the end of her career that “The best thing I’ve done is *My Ántonia*” (Bennett 203)? Reframing this question in more specifically narrative terms, we might ask what the merits of the kind of narrative that Cather’s Jim imagines *My Ántonia* to be—that is, a story without any “form.” Such an inquiry might appear disingenuous, given the impossibility of imagining a narrative absolved of any form whatsoever. We might, nevertheless, attempt to take Burden somewhat at his word and entertain the possibility of a continuum between formlessness and certain conventional forms of narrative. The marriage plot represents one such conventional form that, as critics such as Judith Fetterley have noted, *My Ántonia*—and much of Cather’s oeuvre—carefully resists. Although Jim and Ántonia pursue an ongoing, lifelong intimacy with each other, their relationship is nevertheless one that goes unconsummated in Jim’s story. But not only might the form of Jim’s account be understood as formally un compelling by the rubric of narrative resolution; it is also one whose frustrating end both he and his reader know in advance. That is, in requesting and accepting Jim’s manuscript from the vantage of the urban New York existence that they have taken up as adults, the nameless writer knows at the outset that Jim and Ántonia will not end up together. And yet, for some unexplained reason this writer still desires to read Jim’s narrative, in spite of its already known—and erotically frustrated—denouement.

Illuminated by the self-described “formlessness” of Jim’s narrative is the import for sexual politics advanced by *My Ántonia*’s formal resistance to a kind of narrative ending that would privilege certain conventional, heterosexual relational configurations. In *Come As You Are* (1996), Judith Roof suggests how such formal resistances—to narrative conventions which implicitly support heterosexist assumptions about sexuality and relationality—were overwhelmed in Twentieth-century writing by narrative forms that support such assumptions. Reviewing a remarkable array of theoretical and fictional work extending from structuralist narratology to Freud’s work on sexual development to lesbian “coming out” novels, Roof identifies the workings of what she calls a “heteroideological” narrative form. For Roof, what constitutes the “heteroideology” inherent to the form assumed by these works is their teleological design, which she takes as modeled on the thematics of the marriage plot. While the narrative trajectory of texts like Freud’s *Three Essays* do not literally conclude with acts of matrimony, Roof suggests that they lead the reader towards conclusions that support heterosexual assumptions present in the work at its outset. For instance, in her unforgiving analysis of Freud, Roof anticipates Paul Morrison’s critique of “the Freudian narrative of psychosexual development, [which] construes homosexuality as a simple failure of teleology” (Morrison 58). For both theorists, what allows Freud to suggest that infant sexuality operates for a time in ways that are non-genital, erotic, and perverse is his already having in mind how the narrative of human sexual development will terminate: in genitally-centered adult heterosexuality. Somewhat more surprisingly, Roof also locates a similar teleological reduction of sexuality to foregone conclusions in the lesbian “coming out” narratives she reviews. Having been written with an already-known “narrative end”—the protagonist’s realization of her homosexual identity—“coming out” stories are implicitly structured around a conclusion that supports a “heteroideological” understanding of an adult individual’s sexuality as ultimately reducible to a fixed identity category: straight, gay, etc.

Willa Cather may well have shared Roof’s skepticism about narrative’s ideological capacity to depict sexuality as ultimately crystallizing in relational or identitarian configurations that affirm the

logic of heteronormative sexual categories. On one hand, Cather's oeuvre routinely fails to present explicitly loving relationships between women, leading Judith Butler to note how "Cather has appeared not to place herself in a legible relation to women or to lesbianism" (Butler 143). On the other, there is hardly a heterosexual romance in the Cather canon that isn't either ambivalent or tepid: one thinks not only of Jim and *Ántonia* in *My Ántonia*, but also of Thea Kronborg and Fred Ottenburg in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) as well as Sapphira Doddridge and Henry Colbert in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), among other lukewarm Cather couples.

The lack of "form" that Jim Burden speaks of in *My Ántonia*'s Introduction might then be thought of as the book's productive failure to capitulate to the conventional narrative terms of heterosexual romance on one hand, and the terms of legible and coherently "formulated" sexual identity on the other. Whereas for Judith Fetterley, the absence of matrimony between Jim and *Ántonia* is the telltale sign of the novel's latent lesbianism—an interpretation which hinges on our reading Jim as a woman in disguise—to my reading, the novel's failed marriage plot becomes most interesting when considered in light of the desire to read about this failed romance that the Introduction's nameless narrator expresses. What, we might ask, is this narrator's investment in reading Jim's account of what Fetterley refers to as the "drama of renunciation" he plays out with *Ántonia* (Fetterley 153)?

Far from tangential to the content of Jim's narrative—which forms the primary plot of *My Ántonia*—the nameless narrator's desire for his story appears to have played an instrumental role in its creation. In the framing narrative which opens the 1926 edition of *My Ántonia*, the nameless, genderless narrator describes an unexpected encounter with Jim while onboard a train traveling "across Iowa"—likely headed to either New York or Nebraska, although this is never specified (MA 1). As they sit and reminisce in the observation car, the narrator listens as Jim goes on about *Ántonia*, their childhood friend who "more than any other person we remembered...seemed to mean to us...the whole adventure of our childhood" (MA 2). Oddly, as remarkable as such statements make *Ántonia*

out to be, the narrator professes to having had little recollection of her prior to meeting Jim: “I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years and renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him. His mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her” (MA 2). While the narrator’s reference to an “old affection” alludes to the possibility of a long-forgotten childhood desire for *Ántonia*, the activation of this desire is presented here as a product of having heard about her from Jim. We are thus led to believe it to be a result of having learned from Jim of his rekindled connection with *Ántonia* that the narrator’s apparently longstanding “affection” has been revived. But while it is Jim’s speech which (re-)activates the narrator’s desire for *Ántonia*, it is the narrator’s subsequent request to read the notes he’s been making about her which compels him to assemble these fragments into the narrative we get in the main text of *My Ántonia*. Although at first Jim seems hesitant to share when the narrator tells him s/he “would like to read his account of her”—if only it “were ever finished,” he says—surely enough he arrives at the narrator’s apartment several months later with the manuscript in hand. “Do you still want to read it?” he asks, apparently not altogether certain of his writer friend’s desire for his account. Rather than relieving Jim of his uncertainty with a “yes” or a “no,” the narrator maintains provocatively silent at this moment. Responding rather like a psychoanalyst, the narrator neither confirms nor denies wanting to read Jim’s account, but instead goes on to quietly observe Jim as he hesitatingly titles his work—first “*Ántonia*,” and then, after a reflective pause, “*My Ántonia*”; noting Jim’s response to the revised title, the narrator smugly asserts: “That seemed to satisfy him” (MA 2).

By way of this brief framing narrative, Cather furnishes *My Ántonia* with a self-referential origin story of sorts: the genesis of the main text of the novel has stemmed from a suggestive and circular exchange of discursive desire between the text’s two narrators. If the Introduction indicates Jim’s narrative to have been motivated by the nameless narrator’s vocalized desire to reader his notes, that very desire itself appears to have been kindled by the narrator’s fascination with the passion for *Ántonia* evinced by Jim during their preceding conversation. Further muddling the origins of

narrative desire in *My Ántonia* is the narrator's occupational status as a writer as well as his or her position in the novel's framing narrative as the recipient and to-be reader—and possible editor—of Jim's text. Indeed, this mysterious writer's positioning as a narrative mediator—as the one who relays Jim's text to *My Ántonia*'s readers—suggests that s/he may in fact be its sole author, a possibility that prompts Judith Butler to go so far as to suggest him or her to be none other than a poorly disguised Willa Cather (Butler 148). But more than a mere display of textual self-referentiality, the exchange staged by *My Ántonia*'s Introduction effectively figures the motivation for the novel's creation and consumption as a narrative desire which, surfacing between an author and his or her reader, cannot be knowingly fixed upon either of the parties involved. In attempting to identify the individual source of desire that precipitates Jim's narrative, we encounter a circularity built into the novel's structure that both prevents us from ascertaining such knowledge and also suggests the narrators themselves to be uncertain of their own respective desires. The nameless narrator only claims an interest in Ántonia after having heard from Jim of his own, then later seems as intrigued by the apparent satisfaction Jim takes in re-titling his narrative as the narrative itself—the allure of which the narrator never explicitly comments on. Meanwhile, Jim—who himself may be the product of the nameless writer's own imagination—hesitates repeatedly before compiling and submitting his “account” of Ántonia to his writer friend, apparently unsure whether his story is something s/he really wants to read. Indeed, it is only after granting his narrative a title which warns of his own subjective influence by way of a possessive pronoun—“*My Ántonia*”—that Jim feels comfortable submitting it to the scrutiny of his reader.

The complicated dynamics of desire in *My Ántonia*'s Introduction indicate rather clearly a disjuncture between the emergence of desire within an intersubjective circuit of individuals and the capacity of either of the individuals in question to know their own wants to be distinct from those of the other involved. The opening of the novel thus effectively anticipates by forty years or so an insight about desire and knowledge that Lacan formalizes in “The Subversion of the Subject.” He

observes therein how “desire becomes bound up at that junction with the Other’s desire, but that *the desire to know* lies in this loop” (Écrits 679; my italics). That is, in attempting to distinguish one’s desire from that of the Other—by which Lacan refers both to the language we use to communicate as well our perceptions of other speaking subjects—we fail insofar as what we know of ourselves is inextricably bound to both of these external forces: the signifiers with which we make meaning and the others around us who influence the ways in which we do so. A knowable or known desire thus itself becomes an asset to be desired in itself—an “object” that we speaking subjects actively seek out in each other. Lacan can thus claim rather abstrusely that “desire is desire for desire, the Other’s desire” (Écrits 723).

I would suggest that in rendering the origins of desire in *My Ántonia* both intersubjective and unknowable, Cather effectively suggests the interest taken in Jim’s account by the nameless narrator to have been motivated by a desire to know what s/he cannot possibly know: the Other’s desire. If for the narrator it is Jim who comes to embody this Other, it is by way of Jim’s account of Ántonia that the narrator hopes to read signs of his desire—which may be but disguised signs of the narrator’s *own* desire with regard to Ántonia. Although it isn’t entirely clear whether the nameless writer’s interest is in reading about Ántonia, Jim, or both of them, we do know the writer to be aware that the story of their relationship turns out to be one of unrequited love. The nameless writer’s desire for Jim’s narrative might then be thought of as a desire to read the story of his frustrated desire. Frustrating this very wish, however, is Cather’s ingenious figuring of desire within Jim’s narrative as possibly not even his, but instead as emerging intersubjectively, by way of his relations with Ántonia and Lena Lingard. As I will attempt to show, in Jim’s narration, he presents himself both as working to fulfill Ántonia’s desire and also implies that desire to be indiscernible from his own. Complicating matters further is the nature of Ántonia’s wish itself, which—rather paradoxically—reflects a desire for the two of them *not to requite their desire* for each other. All the more bafflingly, this appears to be the primary—if not the only—wish that Jim works to satisfy throughout the novel.

While Jim's reticence to requite his desire with *Ántonia* has been read by critics such as Fetterley as a sign that he is a lesbian in disguise, I would suggest instead that the pursuit of an unsatisfied desire he embarks upon with *Ántonia* be understood in terms of Lacan's formulation of the hysteric's desire. Unlike conventional theories of sexual orientation, which characterize desire in terms of the gender of the people it involves, Lacan's theory describes desire in terms of a positioning that a person assumes in relation to the Other's desire. Rather than pursuing sexual relations with lovers of a particular gender identity, Lacan's hysteric pursues *scenarios* with lovers in which desire is left "unsatisfied" and is thus always felt to be present in some way (SXI 12). Such a strategy is hardly pathological for Lacan, given that his formulations of what might be called "normal" desire—for instance, "desire is desire for desire" as well as his stringent definition of *desiring* as corresponding to the subject's perennial sense of *lacking something* within his or her general awareness of the world—imply that, for most of us, desire is oriented towards an object that hasn't yet been obtained (which Lacan refers to as *objet petit a*). If Lacan is correct in proposing that we desire unattainable objects, he implicitly suggests that we unwittingly wish for our desire to remain unsatisfied in part—that is, to mobilize desire by way of the sense of dissatisfaction that causes it. In arguing that the desire circulating between subjects in Jim's narrative is hysterical, I am thus arguing this desire to be neither abnormal nor pathological. Instead, I propose that describing desire in *My Ántonia* by way of Lacan's formulation of hysteria provides an alternative to a hermeneutic mode of analysis that makes sense of the novel's dynamics of desire as a heterosexualized coding of lesbian sexuality.

My primary claim in the pages ahead is thus that Cather's representation of the desirous exchanges had by the nameless narrator, Jim, Lena, and *Ántonia* is one that presents sexuality as a product of intersubjective scenarios rather than a force magnetized by gender identities. Desire in the novel might then be thought of not only as inherently unsatisfied but also, to borrow Tim Dean's phrase, as "queerly indecipherable"—that is, as reducible to neither any one of the individuals it

implicates nor their genders.³ Indeed, in the revisions she made to *My Ántonia* between its original publication in 1918 and its subsequent release in 1926, Cather herself conveyed an explicit commitment to figuring desire in the novel in terms that are gender ambiguous. A quick comparison of the novel's first and second editions reveals that in the years between 1918 and 1926, the Introduction's narrator has transitioned from an explicitly feminine identity to an entirely genderless one. While Cather's revisions have been read by critics like Fetterley and Butler as an attempt to obscure the traces of her own autobiographical presence in the character of this nameless writer figure, I would highlight the importance of attending to the representational effects that Cather was perhaps attempting to induce by excising any and all references to the nameless narrator's gender. For in doing so, Cather provocatively crafts an unresolvable textual enigma—one which raises questions concerning not only the nameless writer's identity but also the nature of his or her desire as it concerns Jim and Ántonia. Is this a male writer who takes an implicitly homoerotic interest in uncovering Jim's desire by way of his narrative? Or, following Butler's suggestion, is the nameless narrator a figure for Cather herself—a woman whose object of interest in Jim's account is Ántonia, rather than its author's desire? Or is this nameless writer a straight man seeking the voyeuristic thrill that Jim's descriptions of Ántonia might provide? While I'm not particularly interested in confirming any of these gendered readings, I would suggest that in sustaining all of them as possibilities, the ambiguity of Cather's 1926 Introduction also demonstrates the degree to which desire in the novel doesn't depend upon gender. That is, regardless of whether the narrator is female, male, or transgendered, we still observe Jim engaging his or her interest in his story as well the way in which his or her desire manages to engage Jim's own desire to finish writing it. As I have attempted to establish, the operative force in this exchange is not the gender of either writer, but a lack of certainty that each harbors with respect to the

³ See Tim Dean, "Queer Desire, Psychoanalytic Hermeneutics, and Love Lyric" in *The Concise Guide to Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Culture* (2014), edited by Laura Marcus and Ankhi Mukherjee, pp. 151-166.

Other's desire. That said, by presenting the nameless narrator as *possibly male and possibly female*—and thus as harboring a *possible same-sex desire* for both Jim and *Ántonia*—the 1926 Introduction problematizes a view of romantic relations in the novel as solely heterosexual. Furthermore, insofar as Jim's narration of his romances with *Ántonia* and Lena are in fact embedded within the nameless narrator's framing narrative, we might never be absolutely certain that Jim isn't an imaginary construct onto whom this mysterious, genderless narrator has projected his or her own—possibly lesbian, possibly gay, possibly straight—desires. It is perhaps this ongoing uncertainty with regard to the nature of desire that the framed structure of *My Ántonia* sets up which constitutes its most radically “queer” intervention.

Having established the way in which the Introduction problematizes both gender and desire, I'd like to turn now to a close reading of Jim's account in order to explicate how its central “drama of renunciation” does so as well. As I'll attempt to show, Jim's narrative presents desire as intersubjectively produced and as manifesting hysterically—that is, by way of attempts to renounce desire itself. By structuring desire as such, Cather effectively frustrates the hermeneutic reader's wish to understand sexuality as reducible to the psychology or genders of individual characters within the novel.

To my reading, *My Ántonia*'s intersubjective “drama of renunciation” most clearly begins toward the end of Book 2, when *Ántonia* staves off the most explicit advance Jim makes towards her. Toward the end of his high school years, Jim begins frequenting the Blackhawk community dances held at “Firemen's Hall,” an institution also regularly attended by *Ántonia*, her boyfriend Larry Donovan, as well as Lena Lingard and other friends. One evening during the spring of his senior year while Larry is out of town, Jim walks *Ántonia* home and attempts to kiss her “good night”—apparently a bit too passionately for her liking. She quickly draws her face away from his, whispering “indignantly, ‘Why, Jim! You know you ain't right to kiss me like that’” (MA 143). When Jim

responds that Lena Lingard lets him kiss her, adding that he's "not half as fond of *her*," the latter expresses her disapproval in the form of a threat: "If [Lena's] up to any of her nonsense with you, I'll scratch her eyes out!" (ibid; my italics). *Ántonia* then offers Jim himself some counsel which, almost maternal in tone, amounts to a prophecy of sorts, given how closely Jim will attempt to adhere to it for the remainder of his narrative:

Now, don't you go and be a fool like some of these town boys. You're not going to sit around here and whittle store-boxes and tell stories all your life. You are going away to school and make something of yourself. ... You can like me all you want to, but if I see you hanging round with Lena much, I'll go to your grandmother, as sure as your name's Jim Burden! (MA 143)

The admonishment with which *Ántonia* responds to Jim's advance can, of course, be read as an attempt to protect her burgeoning relationship with Larry Donovan. Conversely, it is perhaps only as a result of the desirability that Donovan confers unto *Ántonia* that Jim pursues her as aggressively as he does here. Further compelling Jim's advance is his relation with Lena, who apparently makes her embraces all too available to Jim for him to find them all that enticing; unlike Lena, *Ántonia* withholds such "nonsense," effectively allowing Jim to go on desiring it. Indeed, Jim's apparent willingness to abide by the counsel *Ántonia* offers in this scene might itself be taken as a sign of his commitment to winning her over that her renunciation sustains. In the chapter following this scene, Jim immediately stops attending the dances at Firemen's Hall and studiously retreats to his desk, determining to do "college requirement work" in preparation for university. In a way then, the desire *Ántonia* expresses—for Jim to go "away to school and make something of [himself]"—effectively prophecies the narrative of Jim's life as a bachelor which follows.

The complicated relational dynamics that inform the scene just described—which involve not only Jim and *Ántonia*, but Larry and Lena as well—exemplify how it isn't exactly Jim's desire, but a potential plurality of desires, which influence the course his narrative takes. At the very least, Jim

appears to have been profoundly seduced by not only the desire for an embrace that *Ántonia* withholds but also the wish for him to pursue “school” which she expresses. In leaving behind Black Hawk in order to attend university in Lincoln, Jim rather obediently follows through on both *Ántonia*’s wish and the renunciation of their attraction that it entails. That is, in departing for college, Jim not only attempts to *satisfy* *Ántonia*’s wish, but also *assumes* her renunciatory desire as his own by renegeing upon their relationship.

Further indexing the degree to which Jim establishes an allegiance between his desire and *Ántonia*’s is the ambivalence he evinces towards his pursuits in Lincoln—both his studies with professor Gaston Cleric and the relationship he takes up with Lena while there. At the beginning of Book 3, Jim plainly admits that “Although I admired scholarship so much in Cleric, I was not deceived about myself; I knew that I should never be a scholar. I could never lose myself for long among impersonal things. Mental excitement was apt to send me with a rush back to my own naked land” (MA 168). The mystery of why Jim elects to stay in school in spite of the ambivalence he evinces in moments such as this one is rendered all the more puzzling by the fact that Jim commits himself not only to completing his studies, but to following Cleric to Harvard when his instructor subsequently accepts a professorship there. Indeed, in light of Jim’s ambivalence about academics, one notes how the ease with which he relocates to Massachusetts in order to continue his studies betrays a rather odd ulterior motive, that of once again extricating himself from a budding romance. Indeed, if Jim’s dalliance with Lena—who has conveniently relocated to Lincoln in order to open a dressmaking shop—is the closest the novel comes to requiting a conventional heterosexual romance, Jim’s abrupt decision to leave Lincoln after his second year there effectively preempts the possibility of their affair solidifying into a committed relationship (MA 170). Just as an alleged commitment to academics allows Jim to fulfill *Ántonia*’s wish that he study hard and renounce his desire for her, so too does Jim’s decision to transfer to Harvard allows him to abide by *Ántonia*’s wish while also enacting its guiding principle: the renunciation of satisfied desire.

But perhaps more surprising than the ambivalent desire for Lena that Jim evinces in his swift termination of their relation, is the way in which Lena seems to mirror a similar ambivalence of her own. During the closing pages of Book 3, Lena betrays a striking degree of indifference about how things might turn out between her and Jim: “Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers,” Lingard observes, adding that she prefers “to be foolish when I feel like it, and accountable to nobody” (MA 186). Indeed, even when Jim breaks the news of his imminent departure, Lena hardly seems beset by the break-up it entails: “I guess I’ve always been a little foolish about you,” she sighs, “I don’t know what first put it into my head, unless it was *Ántonia*, always telling me I mustn’t be up to any of my nonsense with you” (MA 187). Taken together, the above lines show us a Lena whose matrimonial distaste aligns with her claim that, far from serious, the relationship with Jim has been lighthearted, lukewarm—“foolish,” even. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is Lena’s proposal that it is *Ántonia* who has “first put it into [her] head” to pursue a fling with Jim. Suggested here is the notion that Lena’s desire for Jim is hardly her own; instead, it is *Ántonia*’s very prohibition of her “nonsense” with Jim that has inspired her wish for it. Recalling Lacan’s notion of hysteria as structured around the pursuit of frustrated or unsatisfied desire, we might describe Lena’s desire for Jim as informed by an hysterical wish to frustrate the desire which subtends *Ántonia*’s prohibition—which is itself a wish for Jim’s and Lena’s desire to go unsatisfied.

Further compounding Lena’s suggestion that her desire for Jim has actually stemmed from her interactions with *Ántonia*, however, is the fact that her statement itself has been transcribed—and possibly even fictionalized—by Jim. Indeed, the reappearance of *Ántonia*’s rhetoric of “nonsense” within Lena’s indirect discourse signals how their respective statements have been mediated by Jim’s own narrative voice. It is conceivable, then, that Jim himself has constructed the cascading series of unsatisfied desires that proceeds from Lena’s speech. That is, Jim first narrativizes a scenario in which Lena’s desire for “nonsense” functions as a desire to frustrate *Ántonia*’s wish for their desire to

go unsatisfied. But in subsequently reneging upon Lena, Jim effectively frustrates her desire—which may also be his own, insofar as he authors it—to frustrate *Ántonia*'s initial desire. By this logic, Jim would appear to be working to satisfy *Ántonia*'s hysterical desire by staging his departure from Lincoln as frustrating Lena's desire to frustrate *Ántonia*'s desire to frustrate his and Lena's desire.

And yet, the very hysteria which attends *Ántonia*'s admonishment of Jim's "nonsense" might also—like Lena's desire—be taken as a product of Jim's own discursive creation. In other words, the complicated intersubjective dynamics just described might ultimately amount to little more than a plot whereby Jim aspires to elaborate *his own wish for an unsatisfied desire*—a wish he projects onto both *Ántonia* and Lena by way of his narrative. Nowhere is this prospect more clearly advanced than in the dreams Jim describes in Book Two, shortly after *Ántonia* rebuffs him:

Toward morning I used to have pleasant dreams: sometimes Tony and I were out in the country, sliding down straw-stacks as we used to do; climbing up the yellow mountains over and over, and slipping down the smooth sides into soft piles of chaff.

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, 'Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like.'

I used to wish I could have this flattering dream about *Ántonia*, but I never did.

(MA 144)

We might first take Jim's two dreams as compromise formations that look to fulfill *Ántonia*'s hysterical wish that Jim's desire for her and Lena to remain unsatisfied. Each dream adopts a distinctive representational strategy for both fulfilling and transgressing this mandate. On the surface, the dream involving *Ántonia* features little more than the naïve, desexualized act of "climbing up" and

“sliding down straw-stacks.” And although Jim’s dream of Lena involves a much more explicitly sexualized encounter, it nonetheless resists realizing their embrace; rather than enacting the “kiss” she appears to desire, Lena merely speaks of it instead. On the other hand, each dream can also be seen as transgressing *Ántonia*’s renunciatory wish. While the second dream utilizes Lena’s spoken language as an indirect means of satisfying Jim’s wish to be kissed, the visual syntax of the first dream metonymically puns on the act of “rolling in the hay” with *Ántonia*.

While each of Jim’s two dreams registers the ambivalence of his desire independently, his decision to juxtapose them in his narrative itself seems designed to heighten the frustration that the oneiric scenario involving *Ántonia* appears to induce in him. When measuring his first dream against the overtly sexualized *mise-en-scene* of the second—which includes not only a field full of erect corn “shocks” and a portentous “reaping-hook” but also a visibly aroused and scandalously dressed Lena Lingard—Jim observes how his otherwise “pleasant” dream about *Ántonia* now appears far from as erotically charged as it could be. Taken together, Jim’s dreams thus effectively frustrate his desire for “a flattering dream about *Ántonia*”—one that would presumably satisfy his wish for *Ántonia*, rather than Lena, to articulate her desire for him. *Ántonia* never offers this in Jim’s dreams, just as she never requites his desire in his waking life. Jim’s comparative juxtaposition of his two dreams can thus be seen as contributing to his broader narrative project of frustrating his own desire by way of the oneiric and fictionalized exchanges he constructs with *Ántonia* and Lena. Just as Jim can be understood as authoring *Ántonia*’s renunciation of “nonsense” and Lena’s later reprisal of it (insofar as each of these statements appear within his own narrative), the narrative sequence he crafts out of his two recurring dreams make a similar suggestion. Although he is perhaps unconscious of doing so, Jim now appears to be the one who wishes for desire—both his own and that of the Other—to remain unsatisfied.

Indeed, the possibility that Jim has assumed as his own the hysterical wish that *Ántonia* first expresses to him is all but confirmed in Book Four when he returns to Black Hawk after finishing at Harvard. Upon arriving in town, Jim learns how *Ántonia*’s failed marriage to Larry Donovan has left

her the sole caretaker of a child she conceives with her fiancé shortly before he dissolves their relationship. In a narrative more inclined to satisfy matrimonial wishes, this might seem the perfect opportunity for Jim and *Ántonia* to at last requite their love for each other. And yet it seems to be precisely this possibility—the opportunity to gratify his desire for *Ántonia* that her “pitiable” circumstances present—which accounts for Jim’s severely unsympathetic response to these circumstances: “I was bitterly disappointed in her,” he laments. “I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity” (MA 192). In a rather astonishing act of victim-blaming, Jim writes here as though *Ántonia*’s having been betrayed by another man amounts to a violation of his own trust. Without condoning either the selfishness or callousness conveyed by Jim’s statement, we might nonetheless understand it as stemming from and protecting against his anxiety that *Ántonia* might at last be in a position to gratify his desire for her by acting on a desire for him.

Jim’s anxiety regarding the possibility of his desire being requited by a matrimonially ready *Ántonia* is further developed in Book Four by his initial resistance even to seeing her and their eventual encounter on the fields of her family’s farm. For several weeks Jim carefully avoids the Shimerda’s property, and it isn’t until he notices an image of *Ántonia*’s child on display in the local photographer’s studio that he experiences a change of heart: “I went away feeling that I must see *Ántonia* again. Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer’s, in a great gilt frame. How like her! I could forgive her, I told myself...” (MA 196). Jim appears to realize here how, far from having positioned herself as an “object of pity,” *Ántonia* is proud of her single motherhood, having insisted on publicly displaying her child’s image for all to see. But *Ántonia*’s public display of her infant signifies more to Jim than simply the pride that *Ántonia* takes in her child. As Widow Steavens later remarks to Jim, *Ántonia* loves her child “as dearly as if she’d had a ring on her finger” (MA 204). In learning of *Ántonia*’s love of her child, Jim also registers the degree of commitment she’s made to another individual—a kind of commitment that is rather blatantly likened to marriage in this later passage. At

once relieved and motivated by his renewed sense that *Ántonia*'s desire is preoccupied largely with someone other than himself, Jim promptly makes his way across the fields to meet her. Indeed, in the exchange that follows, when *Ántonia* subsequently tells him of her commitment to her daughter—"I'm going to take care of that girl, Jim," she says—Jim responds as though she has just apprised him of a vow she has made to a new fiancé, one that dissolves their own romantic prospects. "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister," he wistfully notes, "anything that a woman can be to a man" (MA 206). Here Jim not only covers for his explicitly desirous wish for *Ántonia* to be his "sweetheart" by likening it to a platonic interest in her being "anything...a woman can be to a man"; he also rather awkwardly describes this wish as though it were no longer possible to realize in light of *Ántonia*'s maternal commitments. Stiltedly calling on the conditional perfect, Jim presents his romantic aspirations as having never been requited by a relationship which—no longer operational in the present—has passed into the realm of unrealized history.

While the way Jim speaks to *Ántonia* in the above exchange demonstrates his discursive commitment to constructing his desire as an unsatisfied desire, his subsequent departure from Black Hawk and his refusal to visit *Ántonia* for nearly two decades positions him as the agent who *enacts* that desire within his narrative. Indeed, it isn't until many years later—when Jim hears from Lena that *Ántonia* has re-married and is the happy mother of a "ten or eleven" children—that he allows himself to visit her (MA 212). In other words, it is only upon learning that *Ántonia* is no longer in a position to requite his desire that Jim once again deigns to see her.

In arguing so far that Jim plays an active, authorial role in staging the perpetually unsatisfied desire that emerges between him, *Ántonia*, and Lena, I haven't meant to suggest that he is the sole creator of the web of intersubjective relations whereby this desire circulates. Indeed, although the tale Jim tells is as much his own creation as his dreams are, the presence of others within his narrative inventions is by no means negligible; it is perhaps only by projecting an hysterical wish for an unsatisfied desire onto the discourse of *Ántonia* and Lena that Jim is able to signal his own. As Lacan

notes in *Seminar I*, “The perpetual reversion of desire to form and of form to desire...desire in so far as it is a part of the loved object, in which the subject literally loses himself, and with which he is identified, is the fundamental mechanism around which everything relating to the *ego* turns” (SI 171). Central to the possibility of the subject’s discovering his or her own desire, Lacan suggests, is the mediating role played by the Other—the apparently external “form” onto which desire is first projected unwittingly by the ego. Thus what a subject—Jim, in this case—first understands to be the “desire...of the loved object”—Ántonia’s hysterical prohibition—is only subsequently revealed to have been the subject’s own desire.

I would suggest, then, that Ántonia and Lena play an integral part in Jim’s projection of his hysterical desire into a narrative “form” in which it becomes capable of being recognized. Of course, whether Jim himself ever recognizes his desire as such remains a question. Lacan’s description of hysterical discourse, however, suggests such a question to be largely irrelevant to the satisfying effects of that discourse. Lacan observes that “it is in the very movement of speaking that the hysteric constitutes her desire... ..in order to cure the hysteric of all her symptoms, the best way is to satisfy her hysteric’s desire—which is for her to posit her desire in relation to us as an unsatisfied desire” (SXI 12).⁴ Lacan proposes here that in simply speaking of—or “positing”—his or her “unsatisfied desire,” the hysteric paradoxically satisfies it. That is, regardless of whether s/he consciously recognizes it as such, the object of the hysteric’s desire as Lacan theorizes it here isn’t merely to bring about an unsatisfied desire in his or her relation to the Other but rather *to speak of an unsatisfied desire*. A wish to narrativize his unsatisfiable desire may well constitute Jim’s motivations for writing of his frustrated relations with Ántonia and Lena. While it is by no means clear that Jim ever becomes aware of the hysterical desire he projects onto either of these others as his own, it might

⁴ Lacan’s use of the feminine pronoun reflects an arguably sexist convention of analytic discourse. Given that a majority of hysterics identify as women, Lacan generalizes in referring to “the hysteric” as a “her.” Jim’s narrative, of course, testifies to the existence of male hysterics as well—a possibility for which Lacan’s structural definition of hysteria (as a distinct positioning with regard to the Other’s desire) allows.

indeed be satisfying enough for him simply to express his unsatisfied desire by way of the narrative “form”—and the cast of characters—onto which he has projected it.

Still of concern in *My Ántonia*, however, is the desire of the reader—that is, the one “in relation” to whom Jim “posits[s]...[his] desire.” If, as I have claimed, it isn’t entirely clear why the nameless narrator desires to read Jim’s “account” of Ántonia, we might think of his narrative as nonetheless guarding against his reader’s possible aspiration to pin down his desire within it—that is, to reduce his desire to a psychological or characterological cause. Insofar as Jim depicts his desire as necessarily depending on the others onto whom he projects it, such categories of analysis—modeled as they are on the notion of a coherently, autonomous self—seem woefully inadequate for explaining the interpersonal dynamics in which Jim’s desire appears to have been entangled. Similarly, because Jim presents himself as desiring neither another person nor a concrete object so much as an intersubjective scenario in which both he and an Other find their desire unsatisfied, he frustrates interpretive attempts to classify his desire by recourse to conventional sexual identity categories, based as they are in the gender of the subject’s “love object.” Although Ántonia and Lena are both identifiably feminine and Jim is identifiably masculine, what Jim nonetheless appears most to want isn’t either of these women but rather the impossibility of ever fully satisfying his and their desire. In a way then, it’s possible that to think of Jim’s narrative as a performative attempt to stymie any hermeneutic impulse to know his desire that the nameless narrator of the Introduction may possess.

Extending the possibility that Jim works to frustrate the nameless narrator’s desire are the multiple ways in which his narrative can be seen to withhold the one discursive object the narrator literally requests: an account of *Ántonia*. One might first note how Jim’s narrative is primarily an account of his unrequited relations with Ántonia, rather than Ántonia herself. Furthermore, it becomes apparent throughout the novel that what Jim has written much more closely resembles a story of his own coming-of-age in Nebraska than a committed tribute to Ántonia. While Jim’s narrative consists of numerous episodes recounting his adventures and encounters with Ántonia and never goes on too

long without making mention of her, there are considerable portions of the book—Book Three, for instance, centered as it is on Lena Lingard and Gaston Cleric—in which she is conspicuously absent from the plot. We might thus note how the hysterical desire that Jim manifests *within* his narrative also attends his extradiegetic relations with the nameless narrator. By delivering this narrator a plot in which desire is largely evanescent and *Ántonia*'s presence is often marginal, Jim works to ensure that the narrative desire of his reader will remain only partially satisfied at best.

As I have attempted to show, not only does *My Ántonia*'s framed narrative structure present desire as the origin-less product of Jim's intersubjective relations with *Ántonia* and Lena as well as the nameless narrator; the novel also structures desire in the profoundly self-negating terms of hysteria—that is, as directed towards preserving the sense of dissatisfaction which mobilizes desire itself. As such, Jim's desire appears to me to be largely incompatible with the hermeneutic interpretations attempted by past commentators such as Butler and Fetterley. In attributing to Jim's desire an interpretive etiology rooted in Cather's apparent lesbianism, such accounts look past the possibility that Jim's desire arises out of the novel's own complicated web of diegetic relationships—within which its consistent function is to frustrate and sustain itself rather than to metaphorically code a prohibited same-sex lust (Butler 148; Fetterley 154). As queer theorist Valerie Rohy observes, the possibility of a desire without a clear etiology—such as we get in *My Ántonia*—continues to prove a prospect too daunting to fathom for those who persist in conceiving sexuality as reducible to identity categories—straight, gay, lesbian, etc. Indeed, even within argumentation as sophisticated as Butler's—where we find that “in Cather's text...lesbian sexuality...is produced as a perpetual challenge to legibility”—sexual identity categories continue to implicitly establish the etiological basis for literary interpretation (Butler 145). That is, by the hermeneutic logic of Butler's claim, “challenge[s] to legibility” in Cather's work—amongst which we might tally desire in *My Ántonia*—are effectively reduced to signs of “lesbian sexuality.” The category of lesbianism itself thus provides

an implicit etiological explanation of moments in Cather's text that might otherwise present an affront to intelligibility.

In *My Ántonia*, there might indeed be no proper name and certainly no satisfying explanation for either Jim's desire or that of the nameless narrator who compels him to write. In fact, as I have argued, there doesn't even appear to be a way of confirming that the novel's two narrators are distinct individuals with distinct desires. As Lacan's commentary on the "reversion of desire to form" reminds us, however, it matters little whether the individual characters involved in *My Ántonia*'s two narratives are provably distinct from the one within whose narration they appear. For although it may be none other than Jim's own hysterical desire that Ántonia and Lena voice within his narrative, Lacan reminds us how these others provide the imaginary occasion for the writing of Jim's text; indeed, their very appearance in his account allows Jim the possibility of externalizing and narrativizing his unsatisfied desire. The unexpected value of this activity is not to be underestimated, Lacan suggests, indicating that an oddly therapeutic satisfaction may insist in the mere act of narrativizing an unsatisfied wish. Such an insight, it seems, might well be transposed from the psychoanalytic realm of speaking and listening onto not only the literary act of writing, but reading as well. Indeed, in her decision to cast Jim's primary reader as a nameless writer, Cather herself seems to encourage us to understand reading as itself a viable form of narrativizing. Of course, Jim's narrative effectively challenges us—and, more immediately, the nameless narrator—to find in it material that would further a hermeneutic or etiological explanation of the unsatisfied desire circulating between Jim, Ántonia, and Lena—that is, the kind of explanation which Brooks' narrative theory suggests we read in hopes of finding. And yet, if Lacan is at all right about desire, it would appear possible if not likely that appreciators of Cather's novel—as well as the nameless writer within it—might nonetheless take an odd form of satisfaction in reading and re-reading Jim's narrative only to find our hermeneutic desire left unsatisfied.

CHAPTER TWO

WANTING IT TOLD: NARRATIVE DESIRE AND RACIAL ANXIETY IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

In one of the most influential efforts to develop a psychoanalytic theory of narrative, Peter Brooks adapts Freud's theory of the death drive in order to describe the dynamic experience of reading that narrative form elicits. In Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), Brooks indicates that we come upon a "dynamic-energetic model of narrative plot"—that is, a theory which allows us to understand the dynamics of sense-making involved in a reader's progression through a text (Brooks 108). If, at the outset of a plot, we are relatively clueless as to what it might mean, Brooks suggests that motivating our movement through it is an impulse to discover the full extent of a narrative's "proairetic" and "hermeneutic" codes—that is, to make sense of what ultimately "happens" in a plot and to demystify any textual enigmas and mysteries raised along the way. Thus, for Brooks, the narrative desire of the reader "shows itself ultimately to be a desire for the end." As he continues,

between [a narrative's] beginning and end stands a middle that we feel to be necessary (plots, Aristotle tells us, must be of 'a certain length') but whose processes, of transformation and working-through, remain obscure. Here it is that Freud's most ambitious investigation of ends in relation to beginnings may be of help, and may contribute to a properly dynamic model of plot. (Brooks 96)

Oddly, the onerous narrative "middle" described here—"whose processes, of transformation and working-through" render it a "necessary" if implicitly frustrating part of the reader's quest to make total sense of a narrative world—is, as Brooks admits several pages later, none other than the plot itself: "The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour... which is the *plot* of narrative" (Brooks 104; my italics).

If a narrative's "middle" is thus identical to the plot itself, we might wonder how Brooks manages even to conceive its beginning and end. One of the central problems Freud faces in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"—the primary source from which Brooks draws his "dynamic" theory of narrative—is, similarly, a question of beginnings and endings. In the beginning, Freud suggests that the "attributes of life were at some time awoken in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception"; likewise, the "inanimate" state to which Freud argues we are compelled to return by way of the death drive is one of which—insofar as it is entirely peripheral to conscious life—we *can have no conception* (SE 24, 38). Both narrative plots and narrative lives thus lead towards ends that both Brooks and Freud implicitly hold to be non-existent in conscious life. So although Brooks isn't incorrect to note that by Freud's theory of the death drive the subject repeats traumatic experiences in an attempt to "master" them, Freud's assumption that this so-called "mastery" takes place unconsciously is apparently lost on him.⁵ As Freud makes quite clear in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through" (1914)—an essay to which I will return towards the end of this chapter—the subject repeats experiences that consciousness hasn't fully grasped *in lieu of narrativizing them consciously*. Such experiences are, as Lacan insists in *Seminar XI*, "perennially missed" by consciousness and thus represent events in a subject's life which—like the missed encounters of waking from and returning to "inanimate matter"—cannot ever be adequately formulated by the subject in terms of speech or narrative. The "death" of Freud's death drive is thus a figure for that unconscious dimension of the subject's experience which s/he cannot render conscious by way of narrative, but which is repeatedly "acted out" instead.

Although Brooks' pseudo-psychoanalytic account of plot dynamics continues to assert a considerable influence—his work shows up repeatedly in numerous critical reckonings with Faulkner,

⁵ Here I draw, in part, on Cathy Caruth's work on Freud and trauma. See Caruth, "Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival."

for instance—his application of Freud’s work in the context of narrative theory overlooks the extent to which repetition compulsion functions therein as the sign of the unconscious, a dimension of experience with no beginning, middle, or end. Eliding this rather crucial theoretical nuance, Brooks assumes that repetition—which he links to narrative “middles,” or “plots”—simply “is mastery, movement from the passive to the active...an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to” (Brooks 98). By this sequential logic, the act of reading a plot inevitably entails the reader’s progress towards his or her intellectual “mastery” over the narrative in question. Indeed, the possibility that repeat reading—the kind that Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* so frequently seems to encourage—might be seen as the sign of a reader’s *fixation* upon a textual enigma s/he has yet to comprehend is at best a tangential concern for Brooks. Instead, Brooks opts to see all reading as entailing the reader’s “*movement* from passive to active” interpretive positioning with regard to the text. Likewise, if the “role of fictional plots” is “to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading,” this is only to further develop our sense of control over the plot in question; the rereading to which Brooks refers thus ostensibly amounts to a kind of conscious “choice” on the reader’s part, a “choice...of imposed ends” (Brooks 109, 98). But if reading and re-reading thus involve our actively choosing “imposed ends”—and thus “asserting” our “control over what man must in fact submit to”—one nonetheless wonders why we would continue to re-read certain texts after having achieved such a sense of control over their endings. That is, re-reading would appear to be unnecessary were we ever to achieve a total hermeneutic mastery over a text—that is a capacity to explain not only its plot but also why its plot ends as it does. While repeated reading might indeed signal an *attempt to master* the various enigmas evinced by a plot—including its ending—such re-reading also suggests that something of these enigmas persists, unresolved.

If this re-reading of Brooks finds it suggested in his text that narrative endings might not always hold the promise of hermeneutic mastery which he first indicates that they do, how else are we to make sense of our desire to read and re-read? That is, what motivates us to repeatedly rehearse the

“imposed end” of a narrative if not a foreknowledge that doing so will inevitably disclose to us the meanings and secrets of the plot we’re reading? As we observed in *My Ántonia*, the impulse to make narrative can be understood as stemming from both the reader and writer’s sense of and curiosity regarding the other’s desire, rather than an exclusive interest in the diegetic content of the narrative in question. Inspiring Jim to complete his narrative of Ántonia is the desire expressed by the nameless narrator of Cather’s Introduction—a writer who appears to desire Jim’s narrative as much for what it might evidence about his own desire as for the events that transpire within it. In this way, the Introduction can be thought of as presenting the narrator’s interest in Jim’s narrative as issuing from a desire that is tangential to its plot. As a writer who desires to read about Jim’s desire, the nameless narrator might be thought of as functioning figuratively within *My Ántonia* as a stand-in for what Lacan designates as the “Other with a capital O”—that is, the external “locus of speech’s deployment” (Écrits 525). But if Jim’s desire to write is impelled by what Lacan repeatedly refers to as “the desire of the Other,” the particulars of this Other’s narrative desire constitute something of an enigma to which he responds. Beyond the narrator’s professed wish to read Jim’s “account” of Ántonia, it isn’t entirely clear what the narrator wants Jim to write about nor is it certain whether the narrator’s object of interest is Ántonia herself or Jim’s desire for her.

The implicit narrative theory presented in Cather’s novel—and also, as I will now be claiming, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—proposes that the enigma of an extradiegetic Other’s desire compels and subtends the acts of writing and reading narrative. In their respective acts of narrativizing, neither Jim nor the nameless narrator seem particularly interested in cultivating a well-told story, one with a compelling plot and a revealing denouement. Instead, their acts—of writing and reading, respectively—appear to have been mobilized by both their respective mystifications induced by the Other’s desire. Writing, speaking, reading, listening: as I have attempted to establish in the previous two chapters, Lacan’s work suggests each these discursive acts to be motivated by an enigmatic wish that emerges between a storyteller and his or her audience. In

writing, one's motivations rarely—arguably never—go uninfluenced by the desires one imputes to future readers, while in reading we are in part motivated by a desire to discover the desire latent in the text—that is, the what its writer may have wanted to convey therein. Of course, given that the relation between a tale's teller and its recipients is mediated by the language of its narrative—which, made of signifiers to which each subject adopts a different relation, renders both its meanings and the desire of its author equivocal—Lacan's work attests to our incapacity to know with certainty what the discursive Other (the author's reader, the reader's author) really wants.

As Lacan notes in “The Subversion of the Subject” and elsewhere, it is our very lack of knowledge regarding the Other's desire which stirs us to discursive action. In order to compel patients to speak, he advises against providing “oracular” interpretations, instead suggesting that the importance of leading each analysand to consider the enigmatic desire of the analyst—a consideration that assumes the form of a question: “*Chè vuoi?*” or “What does he want from me?” (Écrits 690). As I've sought to explicate in the Introduction, it is the patient's engagement with this question which Lacan suggests as compelling the patient's transference—that is, the unwitting projection of his or her own desire into the discourse s/he shares with the analyst. Perhaps more remarkably, however, Lacan also suggests the analyst's desire to be more than just a construct of the analytic relation designed to promote the patient's transference. “It is no less the case,” he writes, “that we are also in ignorance, in as much as we are ignorant of the symbolic constellation dwelling in the subject's unconscious” (SI 65). In other words, the analyst's desire is fueled by a real lack of knowledge regarding the patient—specifically, the way in which signifiers function within the analysand's deployment of language. Although psychoanalytic technique consists of a kind of “know-how” whereby the analyst engages the patient's desire to speak freely, Lacan insists that at the outset the analyst, like the patient, should expect to be mystified by the Other—and, by extension, the Other's desire. Hence his insistence in *Seminar XI* that “It is not only a question of what the analyst wants to do with his patient... It is also a question of what his patient wants to do with him” (SXI 158-9). It is thus this “question” of the

Other's desire that motivates the desire of both the analyst and patient alike to know the desire of the Other.

My central claim here has been that a desire running in parallel to that of the analyst motivates us to read and listen to stories. Lending further support to this claim is Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is as much a story about storytelling as it is a tale about Thomas Sutpen's tragic quest for a white son. Like Cather's *My Ántonia*, Faulkner's 1936 novel opens with an exchange that takes place between two character-narrators: in September 1909, Rosa Coldfield—a Jefferson, Mississippi townswoman—mysteriously invites soon-to-be Harvard student Quentin Compson to hear her speak for hours about Sutpen. Although Rosa's passion for—and “outrage” at—the past she recounts soon becomes evident to Quentin, her opaque manner of narration leaves him unable to make much sense of either her tale itself or her apparent desire to tell it to him. Deeply embedded in Rosa's nonlinear storytelling are most of the key events from the historical plot that the novel will center on: Sutpen's marriage to Rosa's sister Ellen and the birth of their two children, Judith and Henry; Henry's befriending Charles Bon at college and Bon's subsequent engagement to Judith; Sutpen's prohibition of their marriage and Henry's eventual murder of Bon at the gates of the Sutpen plantation. While these events outline the historical murder mystery that Quentin goes on to reconstruct in conversations with his father, Mr. Compson, and Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon, they are all but buried in Rosa's feverishly nonlinear narration. Quentin thus comes away from his initial encounter with Rosa pondering some variation on the Lacanian analyst's “*Chè vuoi?*”—that is, wondering both what the significance of her narrative might be as well as she could possibly want him to do with it.

In the pages ahead I will suggest that Rosa's opaque, nonlinear manner of narrating effectively instigates and sustains for Quentin the enigma of her narrative desire. In other words, although it is evident that Rosa wants Quentin to do something with her story, it isn't clear what that might be, given the degree to which the form of her narrative challenges Quentin to make sense of its plot and her purpose in telling it to him. The first of my claims will thus be that, by rendering obscure

the narrative significance and purpose of her story about Sutpen, Rosa effectively engages Quentin's desire to specify what exactly it might be in this account that she "wants told." Rosa's obscure narrative desire can thus be thought of as mobilizing the series of narrative speculations through which Quentin, Mr. Compson, and Shreve reconstruct Rosa's account as a more conventionally compelling narrative: a murder mystery revolving around fathers and sons that *Absalom*'s male narrators attempt to solve. But, as I will also claim, in their hermeneutic efforts to explain why Henry Sutpen kills Charles Bon—who, it turns out, is in all likelihood Henry's half-brother—*Absalom*'s three male narrators also evince their own subjective desires, or what in other psychoanalytic terms might be called their narrative "transference" or "projections."

In the end, Rosa's enigmatic account of Sutpen's life impels the story's other narrators not so much to furnish this murder mystery with a final, resolved narrative resolution—for they lack the historical evidence necessary to do so—but instead to act out in their own narratives some of the masculine desires and anxieties which subtend the patrilineal drama at the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* In other words, over the course of their hermeneutic speculation about the motivations and desires of Henry, Bon, and Sutpen, the three male narrators betray their own. This becomes most powerfully apparent in Quentin and Shreve's suggestion that it is Sutpen's anxious desire for certainty about his own racial heritage which accounts for the "story" that he himself tells about Bon's black blood. But, as I shall claim, it is not only Sutpen who appears to be guilty of using narrative to project blackness onto the Other in order to disavow the possibility of his own mixed race; significantly, a similar logic emerges in Shreve's own hermeneutic analysis at the end of the novel.

Far from a well-told story with a clear beginning, middle, and end, the account of Sutpen's life that Rosa gives in Chapters One and Five of *Absalom* is one that ultimately engages Quentin's desire to listen by means other than its own plot's "progress towards meaning." In the beginning, it isn't her story's narrative or semantic "promise" which holds Quentin's attention rapt, but the desire

she allusively and performatively expresses for him to listen. Initially, she makes but several brief, suggestive remarks about what Quentin “might” do with her account. Acknowledging her awareness that he is “going away...to Harvard,” Rosa speculates that one day he “might enter the literary profession...and maybe some day...remember this and write about it” (AA 5). Note, however, that by speculating uncertainly about what Quentin might *possibly* do with the Sutpen story, Rosa by no means makes clear exactly what she wants from him in regards to it. Furthermore, in specifying what *he* may do, Rosa abstains from saying what *she* desires of Quentin. Indeed, the hypothetical nature of Rosa’s propositions leads Quentin to speculate skeptically about whether she really desires for him to “write about” the tale she tells him: “*It’s because she wants it told he thought so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War*” (AA 6). Here Quentin betrays both his confusion and doubts regarding Rosa’s modest suggestion that he might one day “submit” her account “to the magazines.” The explanatory force of Rosa’s story, he suggests—its capacity to inform “people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear” of “why God let us lose the War”—makes it the stuff not of magazines, but of legends “told” by way of speaking and listening. And yet, it is here that Quentin betrays how perplexed he is by Rosa’s desire: although he begins by indicating that she wants the story “told,” he goes on to suggest that people will “read” it, apparently reverting to Rosa’s initial suggestion. Quentin’s confusion about whether Rosa wants her narrative told or read is further developed in the very next sentence, where it emerges that Rosa herself is Jefferson County’s “poetess laureate.” Likely influenced by his knowledge that Rosa is a writer and her own hypothetical proposal that he submit her story to the “magazines,” Quentin wavers here between his initial suggestion that Rosa wants the Sutpen story “told,” and his subsequent indication that its recipients will “read” rather than hear it.

If Quentin cannot seem to figure out just what Rosa wants him to do with her account, this is understandable, given the highly allusive and nonlinear manner in which she speaks and narrates to

him. Of *Absalom*'s four narrators, Rosa is doubtless the one through whom Faulkner takes his abstruse experiments with narration the furthest. Exemplified in Rosa's telling is what critic Greg Forter has described as *Absalom*'s "traumatic" formal strategies: "the endlessly deferred periods; the interruption of sentences that resume one hundred or more pages later; the enigmatically precocious references to Rosa's 'insult,' Bon's murder, Sutpen's 'design'; and the withholding of *any* answer..." (Forter 279). Called to light by Forter's inventory is the way in which the non-linearity of Rosa's narration has it that events and details in her story of Sutpen are frequently introduced in a "precocious" manner—that is, prior to her listener's (and readers') being able to comprehend their significance. In this respect, Forter suggests that the overall narrative form of *Absalom*—and, we might add, Rosa's narration, in particular—leads audiences into an experience of deferred comprehension which resembles that of traumatic experience. As Forter indicates, the meaning—of both traumatic experience and of Faulknerian narration as exemplified by Rosa's account—can only be retroactively constituted, rather than immediately registered.

Both Forter's insights on *Absalom*'s traumatic forms of narration and numerous descriptions in the text of Quentin's bewilderment at Rosa's narration effectively belie the confidence with which he asserts that what Rosa wants to come of the Sutpen story's telling is for people to "know at last why God let [the South] lose the War." Indeed, further suggesting this assessment of Rosa's desire to be overhasty is the omniscient narrator's depiction of Quentin's "dream"-like experience of listening to Rosa:

It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity—horror or pleasure or amazement—depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of

elapsed and yet elapsing time as music or a printed tale. “Yes. I was born too late. I was a child who was to remember those three faces...” (AA 15)

Both described and enacted by the above passage is one of the primary facets of Rosa’s speech that makes her narrative exceedingly hard for Quentin to follow: the length of and complicated embedding within her sentences. Rosa narrates in an all but continuous stream of speech, transcribed in Faulkner’s text by way of sentences that are not only long in themselves, but whose chronological reference spans decades of time. Meanwhile, frequently embedded within multiple registers of parenthetical subordination are disjunctive chronological references to events that routinely fail to align with the linear sequence traced by a given sentence. It is this simultaneous condensation and scattering of historical duration within Rosa’s sentences that frequently impedes one’s capacity to make meaningful sense of the events to which they refer, thus prompting the allusion in the passage above to the paradoxical experience of time involved in dreams. As Quentin observes, the “verisimilitude” or “credulity” of both dreams and Rosa’s narration “depends...upon a formal recognition...of elapsing time”—that is, upon an acknowledgement of a formal relation between the duration of an event and the duration of the narrative unit—in this case the clause, the sentence, the paragraph, and so on—by which it is represented. Our difficulty establishing narrative order and meaning in Rosa’s account—that is, in getting its story straight—stems precisely from the way her longwinded narration defies our capacity to parse out distinct segments of represented duration in her story. By contrast to conventional narration—in which events are rendered discrete by virtue of their having relatively clear beginnings and endings—the ongoing interruption of chronologically narrated events by Rosa’s associative rather than linear logic routinely challenges her audience to register episodes within her narrative as having ended. The series of fragmented chronological sequences Rosa prompts Quentin to imagine might be thought of, then, as a series of dreams which seem as though they haven’t yet ended—dreams from which he hasn’t yet fully woken and thus whose represented events he cannot yet cogently decode.

The numerous descriptions in *Absalom*'s first chapter to Quentin's experience of listening to Rosa—that is, to his encounters with the “logic- and reason-flouting quality” of her narration—seem devised to emphasize the highly unreliable process whereby he attempts to come to terms with the meaning and significance of what she tells him. Notice, for instance, how Rosa's speech picks up immediately after narrator's description of Quentin's reflection leaves off in the previously cited passage. The absence of a conventional paragraph break here signals how, indifferent to the wandering of Quentin's mind, *Rosa has simply continued her monologue*, leaving it up to readers to hypothesize about the information we and Quentin may have missed while attending to his own mind's meanderings. In light of such missed encounters with Rosa's narration as well as its complicated manipulations of the Sutpen plot's chronology, it becomes increasingly hard to remain credulous that Quentin has really understood all that much of Rosa's account prior to proposing that it allows readers “to know at last why the South lost the War.” Although Quentin's analysis here may indeed be true on some level, its grandiosity and genericity perhaps ought to be read as signs not of interpretive shrewdness but of his initial inability to comprehend many of the particular events and details of the Sutpen family drama to which Rosa alludes.

Indeed, it is as though in his premature interpretation of Rosa's narrative, Quentin is attempting rather desperately to formulate the kind of redemptive meaning—that is, the semantic “payoff”—towards which Brooks suggests such narratives are supposed to lead, but which Rosa's account seems to lack. But in doing so, Quentin also complicates Brooks' own analysis that Rosa's “largely nonhermeneutic narrative” offers “no apparent structure of meaning for [its] sequence of events, indeed no clue as to how and even why one should look for meaning in it” (Brooks 290). For in spite of this, here Quentin is already hypothesizing a hidden meaning—“why [the South] lost”—to which Rosa's narrative apparently provides the clues. True, the nonlinear plot “structure” of Rosa's account makes it challenging (although by no means impossible) to extract coherent narrative “meanings” from it. But one also gets the sense that in Brooks' preoccupation with the semantically

challenging nature of this “structure,” he misses the insight that *Absalom*’s framing narrative—in which Quentin’s interactions with Rosa are depicted—makes available. That is, in her extradiegetic act of inviting Quentin over and speaking to him—indeed, in the very act of *telling* him the Sutpen story—Rosa performatively hints at her desire for him to “look for meaning in it.” In other words, the “clue” as to “why” Quentin should do so is implicit, latent, in Rosa’s enactment of the “structure” where Brooks would prefer it to be made manifest. Thus while Phil Weinstein might be right that Rosa’s *utterance* “courts hysteria because it is so inattentive to its audience as a participant, so unaware of its status as *narrative*,” Rosa nonetheless evinces at the level of her *enunciative act* a desire for Quentin to listen which, in turn, engages his desire to look for meaning in her narration (Weinstein 92).

My suggestion here is that what seems to some critics a kind of antisocial flaw in Rosa’s narration—that is, her apparent disinterest in communicating a clear and compelling plot to her “audience”—has the perhaps unexpected and socially engaging effect of inciting Quentin’s desire to find meaning in her story of Sutpen. Several other critics have offered insights that fall along similar lines. John Matthews, for instance, claims “we underestimate *Absalom*’s richness...if we fail to appreciate the truths of Rosa’s and Mr. Compson’s narratives. ...the contortions of Rosa’s language....the tale she tells Quentin...her love for the *words* Charles Bon and Thomas Sutpen—all these uses of language are weddings of speaking and hearing” (Matthews 576). Insisting that for Rosa, love “depends...on the absence of its object,” Matthews goes on to propose that Rosa’s reticence “to explain [the] puzzle” of Sutpen’s life can be understood as an attempt to share with Quentin an awareness of Sutpen’s absence by evoking an absence of narrative coherence in his place. Meanwhile, Laurel Bollinger notes in an essay on Rosa’s narrative connections with Sutpen’s daughters Judith and Clytie how stories in *Absalom* “are not objects to be mastered, but phatic: the tale exists both as the result of and as a prerequisite for the intersubjective connection between tellers” (Bollinger 218). Although not as specifically focused on the dynamics of meaning and desire as I am

here, both Matthews and Bollinger illuminate—contra Brooks and Weinstein—how the “connection between tellers” in *Absalom* is one that is sustained in spite of (and even encouraged by) semantic absences.

Rather than evincing an antisocial impulse and an active hostility to meaning, Rosa’s narration, I would suggest, should be read as inciting Quentin, Mr. Compson, and Shreve to discourse—that is, to make their own sense of the Sutpen story which Rosa introduces. In other words, the enigmatic narrative desire that Rosa conveys to Quentin by selecting him to hear her tale is one that sets off the series of dialogues he takes up with his father and Shreve in an attempt to make sense of what Rosa has passed along to him and why. Apparently unsatisfied with the explanatory power of his initial speculation—that Rosa’s wishes for him to transmit her tale because it contains secret evidence of “why [the South] lost”—Quentin returns to his parents’ house after Rosa finishes telling him about Sutpen and immediately conveys his exasperation with what he has just heard to his father: “why tell me about it?” he wonders aloud to Mr. Compson, “What is it to me that the land or the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned and destroyed him?” (AA 7). Quentin’s questions here do more than simply admit of his own difficulty fathoming the significance of Rosa’s tale and what she might want to come of his knowing about it. They also ensnare Mr. Compson in Quentin’s attempt to make sense of Rosa’s act. Unable to resist the lure of the questions Rosa has effectively prepared his son to ask, Mr. Compson goes on to explain to Quentin how he is in a unique position to understand Sutpen’s personal past, given that Grandfather Compson was Sutpen’s only confidante in Jefferson; finding his own interest in the Sutpen story piqued, Compson then proceeds to offer Quentin his own version of the tale.

Thus although Rosa’s narrative might in itself appear hostile to the social act of *communicating meaning*, the chain of storytelling events it sets off—whereby Mr. Compson re-tells the Sutpen story to Quentin, who subsequently takes it up with Shreve—demonstrate how the opacity of Rosa’s narration effectively inspires the social process of *making meaning* in which *Absalom*’s

subsequent narrators participate. Indeed, in attempting to dramatize the significance of the Sutpen story for his son, Mr. Compson reframes the tale Rosa has told Quentin around the enigma of Charles Bon's murder, amplifying its hermeneutic register. Although Rosa refers to Henry's killing of Bon in passing, she never attempts to reckon with the possible causes and meanings of this enigmatic event. By contrast, speculation regarding the events leading up to the murder becomes one of the primary narrative features—if not *the* primary cause—of the accounts offered by Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve, which constitute most of the novel.

Indeed, the three male narrators' "investigation" of the Sutpen murder has inspired critics such as Forter to note similarities between *Absalom*'s narrative form and the bipartite narrative structure of classical detective fiction as it's been described by Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov explains how detective fiction conventionally involves two distinct narrative structures: the story of an already committed crime and the plot of the investigation. In a sense, the latter amounts to a retroactive narration of the story of the crime, insofar as the plot of the detective-protagonist's sleuthing typically reveals the back-story that has led to the criminal act. Something similar yet different takes place in the investigation of the Sutpen murder undertaken by the male narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!* Observing how the guilty party—Henry Sutpen—is already known at the outset, Greg Forter notes how the novel's "plot of investigation" involves "a displacement of emphasis from the question 'whodunit?' to the question 'why?'"—an inquiry concerning the "psychic motivations" and "social motives" that precipitate Bon's murder (Forter 385). Unlike classical detective fiction—in which the private investigator attempts to deduce and apprehend the guilty suspect—*Absalom*'s "plot of investigation" instead centers on an hermeneutic effort to explain *why* Henry acts as he does in light of the social and familial pressures he may have experienced. In other words, what appears to be at stake in Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve's hermeneutic investigation isn't a question of identifying a murderous subject; it is a question of interpreting the desires that have made a murderer of that subject.

Forster's suggestion that Bon's murder appears to have resulted from a plurality of motivations signals how in their attempts to establish the cause of the killing, *Absalom's* investigators speculatively indict not only Henry's murderous desire but his father's as well. While, as I will show, each of the male narrators pursues a distinct explication of Sutpen's involvement in the murder, all agree that it is his prohibition of Bon's marriage to Judith as well as Bon's reluctance to accept that prohibition which eventually compel Henry to act murderously. Of course, the plurality of desires precipitating this event expands even more dramatically when one takes the motivations of the investigators—whereby the event is reconstructed in narrative terms—into consideration.

Absalom presents the extradiegetic desire and motivations of the Sutpen story's narrators as playing an integral role in the narrative form it assumes. That is, the hermeneutic interest that Mr. Compson takes in the murder is to be seen as motivated not only by a commitment to setting the historical record straight but also by the questions—"why tell me?" and "what's it to me?"—that Rosa's account compels his son Quentin to ask. Mr. Compson's account thus functions as an implicit attempt to demonstrate for Quentin "why" the story that Rosa has told him about Sutpen might matter. In other words, Quentin's expressed desire to comprehend why Rosa desires to tell the Sutpen tale leads Compson to draw out and reckon with the apparently lacking hermeneutic dimension of Rosa's version of this tale. Thus if the questions Quentin poses signal a desire to interpret Rosa's narrative desire, so too does Mr. Compson's account, insofar as it implicitly proposes a revised version of the narrative Mr. Compson believes Rosa may have sought to convey to Quentin.

The dynamics of desire between Rosa, Quentin, and Mr. Compson rather neatly align with the formulation regarding desire and interpretation that Lacan offers in *Seminar XI*. As he observes, "Interpretation concerns the factor of a special temporal structure that I have tried to define in the term metonymy. ...interpretation is directed towards desire, with which it is identical. Desire, in fact, is interpretation itself" (SXI 176). Lacan suggests here that, initially, the psychoanalytic subject's interpretive attempts are projected outwards, towards the desire of the Other: in the narrative dynamics

of *Absalom*, this can be seen in Quentin's efforts to make sense of Rosa's narrative desire. But subtending the act of interpretation itself—such as those undertaken by Quentin and Mr. Compson—is the subject's own desire to know the desire of the Other. That is, latent within the interpretation itself is the desire which compels it. Thus the subject's interpretation of the Other's desire functions as the metonymy of his or her own desire. The "special temporal structure" attending this metonymy might then be thought of as consisting in the psychoanalytic subject's belated realization of the extent to which his or her own desire has informed what in the first place s/he thought to be an interpretation of the Other's desire.⁶ Lacan's formulation thus allows us to see how Mr. Compson's account of Sutpen's life—which features not only a hermeneutically charged murder mystery but also the compelling story of two college friends, Henry and Bon—can be thought of as an attempt to interpret and appeal to the desire of his son (who, as we know, is about to go off to college and befriend Shreve). But in addition to shaping the Sutpen story into a form that he thinks will appeal to his son's narrative interests, Compson's account also registers a wish for paternal innocence that appears to be inspired by his own extradiegetic position as a father narrating to his son. Rather than fault Sutpen—the Father of whom he narrates—for Bon's murder (as will Quentin and Shreve), Mr. Compson instead suggests that Bon brings the murder on himself by pursuing a bigamous marriage with Sutpen's daughter Judith. Embedded in Mr. Compson's narrative are thus four metonymically entwined "interpretations": his latent intuition of his audience's (Quentin's) wish for a particular kind of thematic content, his projected sense of the plot Rosa has wanted to embed in her account, his plot's manifest hypotheses about Henry's and Sutpen's desires which lead to Bon's murder, and lastly, his own wish for paternal innocence which informs those hypotheses.

⁶ For a more sustained discussion of the temporality involved in the subject's apprehension of desire, refer to "The See-Saw of Desire," pp. 163-175 in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester.

My contention, then, is that contributing to the murder mystery at the heart of *Absalom*'s "story of the crime" are not only the desires of those within that story (Sutpen, Henry, and Bon) but also the many that inform this story's reconstruction by its principal "investigators: Quentin, Mr. Compson, and Shreve. One notes how the three male narrators are not only preoccupied with the hermeneutics of Bon's murder to a degree that Rosa decidedly is not. In making this enigmatic event the center of the historically speculative accounts whereby they attempt to explain it, Quentin, Mr. Compson, and Shreve also make a narrative priority out of the patrilineal relationships between Sutpen, Henry, and Bon—a concern that is tangential at best to Rosa's narrative. In refusing to speculate about the cause of Bon's murder and in thus steering clear of the patrilineal explanations adduced to it by *Absalom*'s male narrators, Rosa's "largely nonhermeneutic" account of the Sutpen family effectively exposes the desire to theorize father-son relations that the narratives of Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve evince. If, as Brooks notes, *Absalom* is a "novel which pre-eminently concerns fathers, sons...and lines of descent," Rosa's relative disinterest in such matters allows us to see that the novel's patrilineal obsessions are owing in large part to the fact that well over three quarters of the storytelling in the book takes place between a father (Mr. Compson), his son (Quentin), and his son's male friend (Shreve) (Brooks 307).

My suggestion here—that the male narrators' "transference" informs the narrative content they emphasize in their respective versions of the Sutpen plot—is hardly new. Matthews, for instance, has observed how "the narrators of Sutpen's story do not merely 'discuss' the 'shades' of the tale, they 'exist' in them" (Matthews 586) while Faulkner himself noted that "every time any character gets into a book...he's actually telling his biography...talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself" (FU 275). Meanwhile, in *Doubling and Incest* (1975) John Irwin proposes an intertextual reading of Quentin's own oedipal aggressions—notably the protectiveness he displays for his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)—as projected onto *Absalom*'s Henry, who guards against his own sister's marriage to Bon. More recently, Doreen Fowler has suggested that a privileged color-

blindness on the part *Absalom*'s narrators attends their misrepresentations of racial difference in the Sutpen family, while critics such as Martin Kreiswirth and Michael Bibler have argued that Quentin and Shreve project the homoerotic dimension of their relationship onto their narration of Henry and Bon's friendship (Fowler 134; Kreiswirth 117-20; Bibler 64). Supporting such critical efforts regarding transference in *Absalom* are numerous textual depictions of the narrators projecting themselves into the historical past of which they speak. For instance, as Quentin and Shreve take turns narrating the story of Henry and Bon's companionship, they are often rather humorously figured as two additional characters within this story: "now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve: four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (AA 267).

In light of how exhaustively the topic has been addressed by past critics, my aim in the latter part of this chapter won't be to inventory *Absalom*'s numerous depictions and descriptions of narrative transference such as the one just mentioned. Instead, I would like to draw out the different hermeneutic logics that Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve each use in order to explicate Bon's murder—and in doing so, manifest their own respective transferences. The differing hermeneutic strategies of *Absalom*'s three male narrators, I will suggest, expose crucial differences among them—differences which expose their own contrasting desires and anxieties. To date, these distinctions—between Shreve and Quentin, in particular—have gone largely unremarked in the extant literature on the novel. Indeed, even in recent critical accounts of the novel such as Bibler's, my sense is that commentators have been all too willing to read passages such as the one I've excerpted above as evidence of a "happy marriage of speaking and listening" between Quentin and Shreve rather than as, say, a sign of their differential investments in Henry and Bon, respectively (Matthews 575). Although Quentin and Shreve are depicted as carrying out similar acts of projecting themselves into the historical past, the omniscient narrator of the above passage—in suggesting the figurative trans-historical pairings of "Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry"—by no means suggests an unequivocal

alliance between the historical re-imaginings that each of the two Harvard roommates produces. Indeed, foretold in the above figuration is already the crucial difference between Quentin and Shreve's respective attachments to Henry and Bon that I would like to draw out. For although Quentin alludes in his narration to Sutpen's suspicions about Bon's possible blackness, he is by no means as eager to affirm this speculative facet of Bon's character as is Shreve—who definitively asserts Bon's race to have functioned as a primary cause of his murder.

While all three of *Absalom*'s "investigators" concur that it is Bon's insistence on marrying Judith in spite of Henry's and Sutpen's objections that leads to his murder, the motivating logic that each imputes to Henry differs considerably. In attempting to make sense of the murder, the three narrators propose two pivotal meetings Henry has with his father—one in 1860, the next in 1865—in which Sutpen shares information with Henry which, if true, would render Bon's engagement to Judith unlawful. The first of these meetings takes place on Christmas Eve of 1860, six months after Henry introduces Bon to his family following their first year at college together. During this interim, it turns out that Sutpen, suspicious of Bon's hasty wedding engagement to his daughter, has followed the fiancée to his hometown of New Orleans. When Bon again visits the plantation over the holidays, Sutpen arranges to meet privately with Henry in the family library and apprises him of what he now knows about Bon.

It is here, in their respective propositions of what exactly Sutpen reveals about Bon during this first conference, that the interpretative speculations of Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve begin to diverge. Indeed, our own thoroughgoing investigation of these differing interpretations allows us to understand Shreve's claim—that Sutpen's eventual revelation of Bon's race precipitates the murder—to be a product of his own subjective desire rather than sound hermeneutic logic. In reviewing the narrators' respective accounts of the 1860 meeting, we observe Mr. Compson's speculation that Sutpen apprises Henry that Bon has another wife and a child back in New Orleans; Shreve, meanwhile, avers that Sutpen immediately informs Henry that "They cannot marry because [Bon] is

your brother” (AA 235). By Mr. Compson’s account, then, the moral and legal question raised by Bon’s engagement to Judith concerns the potential bigamy it entails; by contrast, Shreve’s maintains that the threat Sutpen makes apparent to Henry at their 1860 talk is one of incest. Quentin, meanwhile, remains agnostic regarding both speculative possibilities. “So it seems [Sutpen] sent for Henry that Christmas eve,” he equivocates, “and told Henry” (AA 216). “Told Henry”—period, end of sentence; Quentin refuses to specify whether Sutpen speaks of bigamy or incest at this juncture. Instead, he proposes that it isn’t clear from the available evidence what exactly Sutpen learns about Bon during his trip to Louisiana. According to Quentin, “nobody knows” the true extent of the knowledge Sutpen takes away from his investigation—that is, whether he learns of Bon’s other marriage, is able to identify Bon as the son of his ex-wife Eulalia (who also lives in New Orleans), or if Sutpen in fact uncovers both of these findings (*ibid.*).

Sutpen’s next conference with his son takes place in early 1865, when he crosses paths with Henry and Bon’s regiment as they retreat southward into the Carolinas. While Shreve dramatizes this wartime encounter as the exchange in which Sutpen plays his hermeneutic “trump card” in revealing Bon’s black identity to Henry, Quentin again describes this exchange much more cautiously (AA 283). Referring to the story passed along by his grandfather, Quentin once again conveys an agnosticism about what transpires between Henry and Sutpen during this exchange: “he (Grandfather) didn’t know what had happened... He just learned one morning that Sutpen had ridden up to Grandfather’s old regiment’s headquarters and asked and received permission to speak to Henry and did speak to him and then rode away again before midnight” (AA 222). A kind of irony emerges here in the differences between Shreve’s speculative and Quentin’s agnostic historiography. While Shreve declares much more certainly that Sutpen discusses Bon’s blackness with Henry during their second meeting, it is Quentin who appears to be the much more responsible historian, attempting to ground

his reporting in the closest thing to an eyewitness account available: Grandfather's.⁷ Although he remains committed to the available historical evidence, Quentin is by no means opposed to speculating about the past. Recall that it is he who first proposes Bon to be Sutpen's son "by another marriage"—arguably the most revelatory historical claim registered in the novel and one that none of the preceding narrators venture to hypothesize (AA 218). In light of this, Quentin's well-grounded agnosticism about the information Sutpen shares with Henry at their meeting in 1865 should prompt us to think twice before allowing ourselves to be persuaded by Shreve's assertion that it is Bon's blackness of which Sutpen speaks during this encounter.⁸ Indeed, although Quentin never explicitly advances his own theory of the two meetings of the Sutpen father and son, his insistence that Sutpen is Bon's father and his refusal to corroborate Shreve's account of either of the two conferences quietly encourages an alternative interpretation of these two events that is both simpler and more logical than the one advanced by Shreve.

My contention is that, taken together, the three male narrators' divergent accounts of Sutpen's two meetings with Henry allow us to see how Shreve's racially charged interpretation is ultimately unneeded in order to explain Henry's motivations for killing Bon; indeed, it is hermeneutically superfluous. Between Mr. Compson's speculation regarding Bon's bigamy and Quentin's suggestion that Bon is Sutpen's other son, we have essentially all the information necessary to account both for what transpires in Henry's two exchanges with Sutpen and for the murder itself. Pairing Mr. Compson's account with Quentin's, we become capable of hypothesizing that in 1860 Sutpen reveals to Henry that Bon is a bigamist while in 1865, Sutpen informs his son that the fiancée of his sister is in

⁷ Unlike the accounts of Shreve and Mr. Compson—who doesn't mention the 1865 rendezvous—Quentin's narrative is suffused with repeated citations of Grandfather's encounters with Sutpen—both during the War and during the private conversations they have in Jefferson in the early 1830s and late 1860s.

⁸ Here I concur wholeheartedly with John Matthews' observation that "For too long, critics of *Absalom* have let Shreve McCannon do their reading" (Matthews 577). Far too many critical accounts of *Absalom* have adopted Shreve's unproblematized view of Bon as unequivocally black.

fact their half-brother. Meanwhile, Bon, looking to extort from Sutpen a verbal confirmation of their kinship, refuses to call off the engagement with Judith. Henry, torn between a fraternal love for Bon and a sense of moral obligation to prevent a union which he knows will entail incest, waits until he and Bon reach the gates of the Sutpen plantation in 1865 to shoot his half-brother dead. Contrasting this amalgamation of the Compsons' analysis is Shreve's suggestion that during the first encounter, Sutpen confesses to being Bon's father and then four years later reveals Bon to be part black. While hypothetically plausible, such an account introduces several logical problems into the sequence of events that lead to Bon's murder. One observes how in proposing Bon's racial identity to be the "trump card" that Sutpen plays as a last resort, Shreve's account renders all but irrelevant whatever it is he tells Henry at their first encounter. Although Shreve understands Sutpen to confess his paternal relation to Bon at this juncture, we might note that, in light of the racial "trump card" that Shreve claims will come next, it makes little difference whether Sutpen in fact makes this confession or instead accuses Bon of bigamy. Given this equivalence—and Sutpen's historical attempts to repudiate his relation to Bon—one wonders what basis Shreve has for speculating that Sutpen would willingly confess his paternity to Henry in his first attempt to rid the family of Bon.

My suggestion here is that the logical tension between Shreve's respective analyses of the two meetings effectively masks over a troubling but much more likely sequence that his primary hypothesis—regarding Sutpen's revelation of Bon's race—leads towards: in 1860, Sutpen indicts Bon of bigamy before going on to apprise Henry of his racial status in 1865. The problem with this hypothetical sequence—which is the plausible consequence of Shreve's insistence on Sutpen's revealing Bon's race at the second meeting—is not only the implicit support it lends Sutpen's own repudiation of his paternal relation to Bon. It also introduces an unnecessary complication into the one plot event that all of *Absalom's* narrators agree to have taken place: Henry's decision to kill Bon at the gates of the Sutpen plantation, rather than while the two are still away at war. Operating on the assumption facilitated by Shreve's proposed sequence—that Sutpen never gives Henry grounds for

believing Bon to be his brother—we are faced with the problem of explaining Henry’s decision to delay in killing Bon, following his second meeting with Sutpen. For in deferring the murder of Bon until they are back within earshot of Jefferson, Henry implicitly indicates a wish that Bon’s death be properly recognized and memorialized by both the Jefferson community and the Sutpen family.⁹

While it is possible to comprehend why Henry might want such rites extended to a brother, it becomes much more challenging to account for why Henry would want such rites extended to the lying, bigamous suitor of his sister that Bon might likely be for him as a result of Shreve’s speculation.

In his hermeneutic commitment to explicating the decisive role played by race in the two meetings between Sutpen and Henry, Shreve thus neglects Henry’s desire (by overlooking the significance of his deferring the murder) and completely misreads Sutpen’s (by suggesting that he immediately reveals to Henry the paternal relation to Bon that, of all things, he wishes to conceal). But if Shreve stumbles in his attempt to interpret the desire of the Sutpens, in doing so he effectively reveals his own desire to imagine the racially charged social landscape of the American South. From the novel’s numerous descriptions of Quentin and Shreve interacting as they tell and speculate about Sutpen and his sons, we purchase a clear sense not only of their cultural differences, but also of Shreve’s particularly intense interest in Southern race relations. Hailing from a wealthy Canadian family, Shreve—like many others at Harvard—takes repeated interest in learning from Quentin what the South is like (AA 142). Shreve’s fascination with the South routinely leads him to betray a sense of wonder at what life might be “like there” as well as his own sense of distance from those territories below the Mason-Dixon (ibid). A particularly revealing moment transpires at the beginning of the novel’s final chapter, when, noticing Quentin shivering in the frigid clime of the January night, Shreve

⁹ Given that Henry is referred to by the narrator of Chapter 6 as an “academic Hamlet” and in light of how important Hamlet’s delayed killing of Claudius is to the structure of Shakespeare’s play, we might do well to consider the significance of the Henry’s decision to defer the murderous action he takes against Bon.

offers his roommate some of his “overcoats.” When Quentin declines, Shreve’s response is as follows:

All right. But let me know if you want the coats. Jesus, if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate, I would sure hate to have come from the South. Maybe I wouldn’t come from the South anyway, even if I could stay there. Wait. Listen. I’m not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I dont know how to say it better. Because it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? (AA 289)

Shreve’s rather haughty remarks about the South here convey both an implicit dismissal of it as a place worth living in as well as an ambivalent fascination with aspects of Southern life that Shreve presumes aren’t available to northerners. By the comically biased Northerner’s logic Shreve exhibits, the frosty temperatures characteristic of winter in Massachusetts shouldn’t conjure Quentin’s contempt for the North, but instead a sense of remorse for his having “come from the South.” An uncomfortable facet of life in the North is thus expressed in terms that almost seem to fault the more moderate clime of the South—a place where Shreve deems himself to be incapable of residing. And yet, the appeal of life as a perpetual tourist in the South is far from lost on Shreve. Among other things, he appears smitten with the South’s inglorious history—its status as a kind of living museum (with iconic “bullets in the dining room,” no less). Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is Shreve’s rather simplistic view that in its “defeated grandfathers and freed slaves” the South possesses

something that the North wholly lacks: the immediate sign of racial difference and historical racial conflict. While Shreve grossly reduces matters here—as if there weren't plenty of “defeated grandfathers and freed slaves” living in the North—his remarks candidly betray his own subjective sense of racial difference as both synonymous with the South and as something to be desired by Northerners like himself.

I'd thus suggest it to be Shreve's subjective desire to bear witness to racial drama that finds its way into his account of the Sutpen murder plot—an account which, referring back to Lacan, we might understand as offering more of an “interpretation” of his own desire than that of, say, Henry's or Sutpen's. But although Shreve's projection of his own desire into his narrative leads him to a logically problematic interpretation of Henry's two meetings with Sutpen, his account also alerts us to the importance of race elsewhere in the Sutpen story. Further, by positioning himself as an outside observer of—and wholly separate from—the problem of racial difference in the Sutpen plot he narrates, Shreve unwittingly repeats Sutpen's own attempt within that very plot to position himself as external to the racial Otherness he imputes to his son, Bon. While there might be no logical grounds for assuming—as Shreve does—that Bon's race enters into Sutpen's conversations with Henry, this by no means suggests race to be irrelevant for Sutpen. Far from it; Shreve's analysis, motivated as it is by his own projected fantasy regarding the South, allows us to understand Sutpen's tragic disavowal of Bon on grounds that he is black to have been motivated by Sutpen's own anxiety about his personal implication in racial difference.

In referring to the particular way that Shreve—and, as I will also show, Sutpen—positions himself as external to matters of racial difference, I'm referring primarily to his insistence that he is a foreigner to matters concerning racial otherness. As the above-cited passage makes clear, Shreve apparently understands the South to be unfathomably different from the North, particularly when it comes to race relations. But Shreve's bivalent sense—of being fascinated on one hand but wholly unimplicated in the phenomenon of racial difference on the other—is perhaps most clearly expressed

in the novel's closing lines. Discussing the imminent proliferation of "nigger Sutpens" in light of the many people of color who Sutpen has fathered (including the legacy of sons left behind by Bon), Shreve jokingly suggests that "in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (AA 303). What, we might ask, makes Shreve so certain that he himself hasn't *already* "sprung from the loins of African kings"? Ironic or not, the logic conveyed here by Shreve's deployment of the future perfect tense—that is, a logic which categorically distinguishes between his own white blood and that "sprung from" black ancestry—has already been anticipated by another smug observation he makes a moment prior. In an almost humorously vulgar hermeneutic reduction of the Sutpen tragedy, Shreve notes that "it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom...and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, dont it?" (ibid). Of the numerous charges one might make against Shreve's racially insensitive analysis, I would highlight the way in which he delineates a clear opposition between "nigger" and "Sutpen," as though these terms were definitively separable. The logic that subtends both of Shreve's closing remarks on race is one that lends support not only to a binary manner of thinking about racial otherness, but also an implicit sense that those who are ostensibly white—in this case, the "Sutpens" and himself—have come under siege by a group of racial others from whom they would, by Shreve's logic, remain clearly distinguishable.

In positioning himself and Sutpen as categorically distinct from those assumed to be racially "other"—notably, the African kings and the Bons—Shreve unwittingly repeats Sutpen's desire to disavow his implication in Bon's racial difference. Further, Shreve's incapacity to observe how his own fascination with—and anxiety about—blackness has contributed to his misguided interpretation of the Sutpen family drama is a narrativizing operation that parallels Sutpen's resistance to seeing how his own blood may have contributed to the apparent racial otherness of his son. I thus turn now to some of the suggestive evidence in *Absalom, Absalom!* that points towards the possibility that Sutpen himself—whose flesh has "the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever

either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay”—harbors concerns about his own racial origins (AA 24). My case will be that it is this racial anxiety—and the unconscious wish for certainty regarding his racial heritage to which it corresponds—which Sutpen projects onto the story of Bon’s blackness that he tells Quentin’s grandfather. In other words, rather than sustain the enigma of Bon’s racial heritage—to which the question of his own origins is intricately bound—Sutpen elaborates a narrative explanation of Bon’s mystifyingly “olive” complexion: that is, the boy’s maternal family has black blood. Indeed, it appears to be Sutpen’s attachment to this hermeneutically reductive account of his son’s visual appearance which leads him to repudiate Bon and to seek Henry’s fatal assistance in ridding the family of him. We might note then that if Rosa’s “largely non-hermeneutic” narrative leads to the proliferation of speculative storytelling about Sutpen’s familial relations on the part of *Absalom*’s narrators, it is Sutpen’s hermeneutically reductive account of his son’s race which leads to the suppression of discourse on the subject. Sutpen’s paternal relation to Bon is thus one that he and Henry would have taken with them to the grave were it not for Rosa’s enigmatic narrative intervention.

Like Bon, Sutpen himself is repeatedly figured throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* as racially ambiguous. While a note in the “Chronology” at the back of the novel indicates that Sutpen to have been born to “Poor whites of Scottish-English stock,” the entry goes on to render this assertion somewhat equivocal in the very next sentence: “Large family” (AA 305). Suggested thereby is the prospect that the history of Sutpen’s “white” heritage presented in the back of the book might be limited in what it can definitively assert about the private dynamics of a family—particularly a “large” one like Sutpen’s. Not only the Chronology is limited in that respect; indeed, in the novel itself very little is said of Sutpen’s so-called “large family” as it exists beyond his father and two sisters, who themselves aren’t even referred to by name. But *Absalom*’s appendices go even further in highlighting their own unreliability. As a footnote in the back of the book indicates, “The chronology

and genealogy have been corrected in several instances to agree with the dates and facts of the novel” (ibid). Like the plot of Sutpen’s life itself, both the Chronology and Genealogy thus appear to be works in progress. Indeed, while the Genealogy declares Sutpen to have been born 1807 in West Virginia, this information apparently has yet to be cross-referenced with Shreve’s insistence that, “if [Sutpen] was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn’t any West Virginia in 1808” (AA 179). If *Absalom*’s “Chronology” can be called into question with regard to such elementary “facts” about Sutpen’s life as these, how are we to trust its account of Sutpen’s racial heritage—that is, the origins of a man who has claimed that he “didn’t know just where his father had come from” (AA 181)?

I would suggest that it is precisely this patrilineal uncertainty which precipitates Sutpen’s anxiety regarding his own possible racial otherness—an anxiety which leads him, like Shreve, to displace blackness onto the side of the Other of whom he narrates. This narrative projection of blackness becomes most apparent in the story of Bon’s birth that he tells Grandfather Compson, which Quentin relays to Shreve midway through the novel. After telling Grandfather how he came to be married to Eulalia Bon, the daughter of a French sugar plantation owner in Haiti, Sutpen explains that life in the Caribbean appeared to be going just fine until his son came along:

I had the wife, accepted her in good faith...and I expected as much from them. I did not even demand [to know of Eulalia’s lineage], mind, as one of my obscure origin might have been expected... I accepted them at their own valuation while insisting on my own part upon explaining fully about myself and my progenitors: yet they deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter...a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born. (AA 212)

Even within this much of the tale Sutpen tells Grandfather, one immediately notes the tension between Sutpen’s insistence that he has “explain[ed] fully about...[his] progenitors” to Eulalia’s French

parents and his prior admission of his own “obscure origin.” We might question, then, what lends Sutpen his brazen confidence regarding his lineage, given his acknowledgement of its opacity. Indeed, rather than inspiring Sutpen to consider how he himself might be what James Snead dubs a “carrier of...origin-less blackness,” Bon’s birth compels him to claim that it is Eulalia’s parents who have “directly withheld” the “fact” of *her* black blood (Snead 86). In the act of projection that the version of Sutpen’s “story” he tells Grandfather makes visible here, he unwittingly transforms an uncertainty regarding *his own* racial heritage into to a certainty—indeed, a definitive indictment—regarding *his spouse’s*.

In suggesting that it is Sutpen’s anxiety regarding his own racial heritage that leads to his suspicion about the race of his Haitian in-laws and his repudiation of Bon, my purpose isn’t to claim with certainty that the black blood in question is in fact his own. Instead, my claim holds Sutpen to be aware—if not fully conscious—that this question of origins applies not only to the Other (in this case, Eulalia and her family) but also, perhaps most fundamentally, to his own lineage. My proposition is thus that Sutpen’s incapacity to be certain that his blood *isn’t* mixed leads him to claim with certainty that the blood of Eulalia and Bon *is*.

Perhaps the most remarkable revelation of Sutpen’s anxiety regarding his racial heritage surfaces earlier in in the autobiographical tale he tells Grandfather, where we get an implicit genealogy of his nervousness about his racial “origins.” Following his mother’s mysterious death, Sutpen’s “old man” relocates the family from the mountains of Virginia to the coastal lowlands where he finds work on the Tidewater plantation. A couple of years after arriving at the plantation, in one of the novel’s most well-known and exhaustively discussed scenes, 13-year-old Sutpen is dispatched to the plantation headquarters one day to deliver a message from his father to the superintendent. Arriving at the front door of the “big house,” Sutpen is immediately advised by the black butler that he is never to use the front door but to go around to the rear of the house and enter there instead (AA 185-6). For many critics, this event functions as the “primal scene” in which Sutpen is rendered

traumatically aware of his family's low social status on the plantation. Indeed, commentators such as Joseph Allen Boone have observed how "Sutpen's entire design springs from humiliations undergone as an adolescent, turned away from the front door of *his* master's plantation as poor white trash... Sutpen's paternal plot thus turns out to be in large part a compensatory narrative, one that tries...to explain *away* his origins by means of his more successful ends" (Boone 216). Boone thus rightfully urges readers to consider Sutpen's rather despicably patriarchal "design"—that is, his desire to become the master of his own plantation—as compensating for his traumatic childhood realization of his status as "poor white trash." For Gwen Bergner, too, it is primarily his family's "class difference" that Sutpen encounters by way of the Tidewater butler; Sutpen "associates his 'lack' in terms of class (and masculinity) with contamination by blackness"—a blackness embodied here by the Tidewater butler (Bergner 93-4). While such analyses are undoubtedly sound, they nonetheless elide in part how the plantation house scene can also be read as broaching for Sutpen the question of his own race as well as his class. One observes, for instance, how Sutpen is described during this scene as "no more conscious of his appearance in them [the clothes] or of the possibility that anyone else could be than he was of his *skin*" (AA 185; my emphasis). Although ambiguous, the passage suggests that the encounter with the Tidewater butler transforms Sutpen's "innocence" regarding not only his family's socioeconomic status but their racial "origins" as well. Preparing Sutpen to be turned away from the front door of Tidewater is not only his impoverished clothing, but also his bodily envelope.

Overlooked in large part by *Absalom* commentators is the uncanny way in which the "primal scene" under discussion not only anticipates Sutpen's compensatory patriarchal plot but also resembles two prior moments in his life's story—moments which develop further the genealogy of Sutpen's anxiety about origins. In these episodes—which are mentioned only in passing, as Quentin rehearses what Sutpen has told Grandfather—Sutpen witnesses his own father being denied access from several drinking establishments along the family's route to the Tidewater. During the first, Sutpen's father is wrenched from a bout of heavy drinking at a tavern by "a huge bull of a nigger, the

first black man, slave, they had ever seen, who emerged with the old man over his shoulder like a sack of meal” (AA 182). Also remarkable for its resonance with the Tidewater scene is the subsequent reference to Sutpen’s witness of “taverns where the old man [his father] was not even allowed to come in by the front door” (AA 183). Noteworthy in each of these passages is an element that bears an uncanny resemblance to the two most important signifying structures of Sutpen’s own experience at the front door of the plantation house two years later. In the first scene, Sutpen observes a black indentured servant expelling his father from a white establishment; meanwhile, his father’s lack of “front door” access in the later passage similarly parallels the optics of Sutpen’s own experience at Tidewater, whereby he is denied this basic social privilege on the basis of his appearance alone.

Curiously, although critics such as Greg Forter have observed the intriguing way in which Sutpen’s disturbing experience at the Tidewater front door “retrodetermines” his past encounters with social difference by imbuing them with new socioeconomic and racial charge, Sutpen apparently fails to extend such retrospection to the two events just mentioned (Forter 275). Indeed, as he is turned away by the Tidewater butler and “a part” of his mind is described as “rushing back through [the previous] two years and seeing a dozen things that had happened and he hadn’t even seen them before,” Sutpen conspicuously fails to recall the two previous moments in his life that most closely resemble the experience he has just had (AA 186). While he is apparently capable of belatedly imagining *how the Tidewater master has viewed his family*—“as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity”—Sutpen remains consciously incapable of recollecting how *he himself has viewed his father* being socially spurned (AA 190). What is most peculiar about Sutpen’s experience of retrospection following his exchange with the Tidewater butler isn’t so much the belated significance that the scene allows him to impute to the past by imagining it from the perspective of an Other but rather his own resistance to recollecting the enigmatic meanings he has doubtless absorbed while witnessing his father’s social interactions at the taverns.

We might make further sense of Sutpen's peculiar reticence to recollect these two memories of his father by recourse to the distinction between remembering and "repeating" that Freud famously advances in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through" (1914). As he observes, "the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (SE 151). Freud effectively offers two models of accessing the past here. Contrasting the unconsciously repeated act—which often assumes the form of a behavioral symptom that the patient finds both inscrutable and insufferable—are the conscious processes of recollecting and speaking of it. For Freud, one of the aims of analysis thus becomes to transform the unconscious material being repeatedly "acted out" by the patient into memories that can be consciously recollected and spoken of.

While Sutpen appears incapable recollecting the tavern scenes in relation to his own experience at Tidewater, it is clear from the fact that he's recounted these earlier episodes to Grandfather, that he mustn't have *forgotten* them. Instead, Quentin's narration of Sutpen's mind as "rushing back through" memories that explicitly *do not involve* the tavern scenes suggests that it is what Freud characterizes as unconscious "resistance" which prevents Sutpen from establishing a meaningful connection between the Tidewater encounter and his observations of his father earlier on. As Freud continues, "We have learnt that the patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance; and, furthermore, "the greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (SE 151). In other words, it is unconscious resistance to the material being acted out that both prevents it from becoming consciously understood by the patient in the form of a recollection and ensures its ongoing repetition. I'd suggest then, that we understand Sutpen's own denial at the front door of Tidewater as falling under the rubric of repetition as Freud formulates it here. Unable to acknowledge his father's lack of front door access, Sutpen goes on to repeatedly stage throughout his life several distinct variations on the scenes in which it first emerged. Assuming an active rather than passive role in this scenario, he himself denies

Bon figurative front door access to the symbolic-familial Sutpen “house” while also prohibiting his plantation hand Wash Jones from using the main door to the literal Sutpen plantation house.

While Freud allows us to understand Sutpen as repeating instead of remembering his father’s lack of front-door access, a closer examination of his response to the tavern scenes suggests that it is the question they raise about his father’s origins in particular which he resists recollecting. Quentin describes Sutpen’s response to these earlier scenes as follows:

That’s the way he got it. He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes... That is, he had begun to discern that without being aware of it yet. He still thought that that was just a matter of where you were spawned. (AA 183)

At first, this passage might appear to do little more than corroborate Forter’s insight—that in the years leading up to the encounter with the Tidewater butler, Sutpen registers the significance of race and class unconsciously only to realize belatedly how he has done so. If here Sutpen begins “to discern without being aware of it” the differences between both whites and blacks and whites and whites, the memories through which his mind “rushes” two years later retroactively constitute his awareness of the meanings entailed by racial and socioeconomic difference. Yet Sutpen’s subsequent “recollection” of such meanings would seem to suggest—at least by Freud’s logic—that he should have little cause to resist or repeat the scenarios he witnesses at the tavern to the extent that he does. It would thus suggest that Sutpen’s belated acquisition of conscious knowledge regarding racial and socioeconomic difference itself functions to further his resistance to recollecting the initial meaning he derives from the tavern scenes as it is described in the above passage. As Quentin’s description indicates, Sutpen first makes sense of the discrimination he witnesses his father incurring by hypothesizing that certain social privileges correspond to “where you were spawned.” In other words, what Sutpen appears to have repressed—what he resists recalling in relation to the tavern scenes—is

the naïve, but powerful, notion that these scenes evoke for him—the idea that social differences are to be explained by recourse to a person’s place of biological origin. However faulty this early theory of Sutpen’s may seem in certain respects, it provides an implicit basis for understanding his repetition of the “front door” scene. Perpetually incapable of fathoming his father’s, mother’s, or his own point of biological entry into the world—and yet unconsciously convinced that this point of entry explains the different social privileges available to each—Sutpen goes on repeating the scenario in which the question of his father’s origins has first been raised.

The genealogy of Sutpen’s racial anxiety provided in Quentin’s account thus allows us to comprehend Sutpen’s tragic determination to father a white son—and, by extension, his narrativized repudiation of Bon—as owing to his own psychic fixation on the question of his own origins rather than the real blood of Bon’s maternal family. If it is his incapacity to be certain about where and how his father has been “spawned” which compels this fixation, it is Sutpen’s unconscious resistance to recollecting this uncertainty which allows him to unwittingly project blackness onto the Other. In *Seminar I*, Lacan describes a similar process whereby the subject projects his or her own unconscious desire onto the images of others, prior to recognizing it as such: “everything which is then within [the subject] in a pure state of desire, unconstituted and confused...he *will* learn to recognize it through its inversion in the other. He *will* learn, because he *has not yet* learned, in as much as we have not brought communication into play” (SI 170; my emphasis). Indeed, this imaginary act of projection, which surfaces in the narrative that Sutpen tells Grandfather, can be seen as both alluding to and satisfying Sutpen’s desire for certainty about his own racial heritage. The story Sutpen authors about Bon and Eulalia allows him to fabricate an imaginary sense of certainty about the superiority of his own origins by degrading those of the Bons while also masking the uncertainty which motivates the tale’s very telling. In a way then, the central tragedy of *Absalom, Absalom!* can be traced not only to Sutpen’s refusal to confer paternal recognition unto Charles Bon but further still—to his unconscious

resistance to comprehending how the story he tells about the Bons' blackness has been contaminated by his own desire for racial certainty.

Like Shreve, then—only to much more drastic ends—Sutpen deploys narrative as masterful in order to disavow his own implication in the racial difference that he obsesses over, attempting instead to fix the problem of racial difference on the Other rather than himself. In moving towards a conclusion it seems we might also note how both Shreve's and Sutpen's hermeneutic suspicion regarding racial difference can be thought of as part of an anxious critical effort to dissolve the enigma of the Other's desire. For Sutpen's anxiety concerning his unclear racial origins is also an anxiety about the desire of his forebears that has given him life. While *Absalom* renders Sutpen's father's race an enigma of sorts, we also never learn all that much about his mother, who is almost completely elided from the narrative he tells Grandfather Compson. Contributing to Sutpen's anxiety about race is thus his incapacity to know not only the mixture of blood he shares with his father but also that of the nameless woman with whom his father has manifested his desire. Meanwhile, it might be argued that Shreve's discursive preoccupation with the racial tensions of the South reflects not only an anxiety about his own obscure relation to "African kings" but also an attempt to appeal to the desire of his Southern interlocutor, Quentin. Indeed, at times it seems as though Shreve's contributions to his dialogue with Quentin about Sutpen and the South are designed to do little more than provoke Quentin's desire to speak of his own affective attachments to his cultural heritage. Such is one way of reading the novel's final lines, in which Shreve rather pointedly asks Quentin why he still "hates" the South—to which Quentin "immediately" responds, "*I dont hate it..I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (AA 303). Here it is as though Shreve, aware both of how loaded his question is and of the fact that Quentin has been attempting to fall asleep for some time now, insists on inciting Quentin to discourse rather than allowing his roommate to slip away into the silence of the night. In light of the homoerotic dimension of Shreve's dialogue with Quentin that Bibler and others have noted, such provocations as these might be read as part of a larger effort to initiate a kind of discursive intimacy—

that is, to engage Quentin's desire to tell stories of the South, tales that might support Shreve's racialized fantasy of a place he can only imagine.

In a way then, both Sutpen and Shreve's narrative discourse can be seen as responding not only to the enigmatic question of their own racial heritage but to the enigmatic desires of others who appear to have evoked this very question for them: for Sutpen, his father and mother; in Shreve's case, Quentin. But if an anxiousness to resolve these respective enigmas compels Sutpen and Shreve's hermeneutically suspicious discourse regarding the Charles Bon's race, that very discourse also allows us to discern the presence of their own desires. By formulating their racial anxieties into stories, Shreve and Sutpen effectively offer up to the analysis of their listeners not only their own misguided constructions of racially "othered" places and people, but also the subjective anxiety—that is, the desire for certainty—whereby these places and people have been narratively "spawned." In one of *Absalom*'s most exhaustively read passages, Quentin evokes the notion that in the act of telling a story, one is not only passing along a narrative but also the subjectivities of those who have either told or contributed to it. Speaking rather cryptically, he remarks how in telling the Sutpen story he and Shreve "*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*" (AA 210). Registered here is more than the idea that the subjective colorings of past tellers such as Father and Sutpen inform the stories that their listeners—here, Quentin and Shreve—pass along. In Quentin's ambiguously punctuated proposal—that it has taken "Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen"—one gleans the suggestion that the subjectivities latent in the story being told—Father's and Sutpen's—might in fact depend upon the presence of the tale's future listeners and tellers in order to be discerned and, in a sense, "realized." If, as I've claimed, tellers like Sutpen and Shreve unwittingly project their own subjective desires onto the stories they create, Quentin's insight here suggests that such desires might only become legible after the fact, in the story's retelling by others. It appears to be a similar notion that Lacan himself echoes when he praises the capacity of

others to render the subject aware of the unconscious desire subtending his or her first impressions—or, we might even say, narrativizations—of the world: “thank God, the subject inhabits the world of...others who speak. That is why his desire is susceptible to the mediation of recognition. Without which every human function would simply exhaust itself in the unspecified wish for the destruction of the other as such” (SI 171).

If Sutpen’s hermeneutically suspicious narrative regarding the race of the Bons ultimately allows its hearers and readers to recognize in it his own desire for racial certainty—as well as, perhaps, a murderous impulse to do away with his son—we might also recall that it is Rosa’s largely nonhermeneutic account which precipitates the narrative investigation whereby Quentin ultimately exposes Sutpen’s desire as such. One notes, however, that Rosa’s name is conspicuously absent from the above-cited passage, in which Quentin describes the retroactive constitution of past narrators by their future audiences. While this may be but one more patriarchal omission in the story of “fathers and sons” that Sutpen’s life becomes by way of Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve, Quentin’s elision of Rosa also suggests that her enigmatic desire may yet to have become fully legible in the account of Sutpen’s life that she contributes.

As I’ve attempted to show, it is perhaps Rosa’s refusal to grant her narration of Sutpen’s life the hermeneutic explanation that the Compsons seem to think it should have which effectively preserves the enigma of her narrative desire. Although at the level of its form and style Rosa’s account couldn’t be further from the one given by the nameless writer in *My Ántonia*’s Introduction, the enigmatic desire for a story to be told that attends their respective acts of narrativizing is one which appears to be oriented towards something other than the explanatory power of stories. Rosa appears largely unconcerned with establishing *why* Henry Sutpen kills Charles Bon, yet wants to pass the Sutpen tale along to Quentin regardless; Cather’s nameless writer’s rather vague wish for Jim to complete his narrative seems as motivated by an interest in Jim’s unrequited desire for Ántonia as an hermeneutic impulse to explain this hysterical passion. One also observes how these preliminary

exchanges between character-narrators achieve an analogous narrative function within *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and *My Ántonia*, compelling the acts of storytelling that proceed from Rosa's and the nameless narrator's enigmatic desire.

But while Rosa's account effectively seduces *Absalom*'s male narrators into pursuing hermeneutic accounts of Bon's murder whereby their own desires become visible, Cather's embedding of Jim's story within the nameless narrator's framing narrative prevents us from explaining the hysterical desire evinced in his account as stemming from one clear origin, cause, or individual. In this respect, it seems that *My Ántonia*'s depiction of intersubjective desire might be read as itself betraying a suspicion of hermeneutic suspicions—that is, theories of desire which would account for sexuality by way of biological (rather than social) forces on one hand or notions of an individual's gender and/or sexual identity on the other. Indeed, in light of the tragic consequences precipitated in *Absalom, Absalom!* by the reduction of an enigma—Bon's complexion—to the falsifying coherence of an identity—Bon's blackness—it seems Cather's novel may be justified in its attempt to resist such hermeneutic manners of interpreting. Yet in demonstrating how the hermeneutic accounts of Sutpen offered by Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve allow their listeners and readers to register the three male narrators' own anxieties and desires, *Absalom* perhaps also underscores the importance of narrativizing one's hermeneutic suspicions in the presence of another who desires to hear them. In doing so, it seems we might observe—if only belatedly—how the explanatory theories we've imagined ourselves to be formulating about an Other have already come to resemble signs—or, for Lacan, “interpretations”—of our own desire.

ABBREVIATIONS

- MA: Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988)
- OW: Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Knopf, 1949)
- AA: William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986)
- FU: Frederick Gwynn (ed.), *Faulkner at the University* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995)
- SE: Sigmund Freud (trans. Strachey), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 14. 1914-16.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957)
- SI: Jacques Lacan (trans. Tomaselli), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954.* (New York: Norton, 1988)
- SXI: Jacques Lacan (trans. Sheridan), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book Xi: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964-1965.* (New York: Norton, 1981)
- Écrits: Jacques Lacan (trans. Fink), *Écrits : The First Complete Edition in English.* (New York: Norton, 2006)

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