Faulkner and the Sepulcher of Romance: The Voices of Absalom, Absalom!

But still her love clings to her
And grows on suffering; she
cannot sleep,
She frets and pines, becomes all gaunt and haggard,
Her body dries and shrivels till voice only
And bones remain, and then she is voice only
For the bones are turned to stone. She hides in woods
And no one sees her now along the mountains,
But all may hear her, for her voice is living.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Faulkner's conception of fiction, like those of Hawthorne, Melville and James, is linked to the acts of writing and reading. For him as for his American precursors the writer is at first a reader. Asked what is the best training for writing he replies, "Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just as a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read. You'll absorb it. Then write." However, Faulkner's reading does not seem to generate the anxiety of influence that troubles earlier American writers. Nor does it appear to make him more sensitive to his own relationship to a reader. He happily acknowledges the fact that "any writer is a thief and robber" who will "steal from any source," and maintains that a writer's only obligation is "to get the work done the best he can do it," a responsibility that is so demanding that "he has no time to think of the reader." Because the writer is a "creature driven by demons," the act of writing is his only concern and the product of primary importance. "The artist is of no importance," he asserts. "Only what he creates is important...." Hence Faulkner prefers to speak of books rather than authors. "I have no favorite authors. I have favorite books," he insists. And he insists too on maintaining an absolute distinction between his personal existence and the world of his novels. Unlike Hawthorne and Melville he denies that there is any significant relation between his biographical and literary selves and ignores the question of his personal identity and the form of its manifestation to the world. "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed book," he writes to Malcolm Cowley. As David Minter suggests, this attitude is consistent with Faulkner's sense that the creative act is one "in which the hackneyed accidents which make up his world—love and life and death and sex and sorrow—brought together by chance in perfect proportions, take on a kind of splendid and timeless beauty." Faulkner, then, will write no familiar or critical prefaces exploring the origin and status of his fiction in the manner
of Hawthorne and James. About the process of creation and the nature of the relation between the fictive and real he prefers to remain silent. And yet as Minter acutely observes, these personal and aesthetic issues are explored indirectly in his work and nowhere more clearly than in *Absalom, Absalom!* where the situations of the writer and reader and the question of the nature of the fictive world are inscribed within the novel in the situations of the characters. With its “marks” we may begin an investigation of Faulknerian romance.

Read it if you like or don’t read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you don’t know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they don’t know why either except that the strings are all in one another’s way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it can’t matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it’s all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they don’t even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn’t matter. And so maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something—a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something that might make a mark on something that was once for the reason that it can
die someday, while the block of stone can't be is because it can never become was because it can't ever die or perish. (AA, 127-28)

Like Pierre and The Marble Faun, Absalom, Absalom! is a text that tangles together issues of generation, representation, and interpretation. The above passage, like the novel, knots together life lines, family lines, and narrative lines into a labyrinthine entanglement of language that both characters and readers seek to unravel or untie by tracing a thread of logic through its bewildering complexity and by reading anonymous "scratches on stone" and letters without "salutation or signature" (129). We seek the design hidden by the surface tangles, the denouement that will solve, dissolve, resolve.9 This is a process that Faulkner seems to have in mind when he describes the story and its climax: "The story is an anecdote which occurred during and right after the civil war; the climax is another anecdote which happened about 1910 and which explains the story. . . . Quentin Compson of the Sound and Fury tells it, or ties it together; he is the protagonist so that it is not complete apocrypha."10 One anecdote it appears is the resolution or the denouement of the other in the sense that it explains by untying or unraveling as the mystery of the life and death of the Sutpen family is solved by the revelation of the identity of the mysterious figure "living hidden in that house" (172) at Sutpen's Hundred. This seemingly definitive ending, however, leaves behind the confused figure of Quentin, who, as Faulkner says, ties it all together, but certainly not in the sense of a neat fold or clear design. Indeed, once we see that Quentin himself is deeply and personally involved in the story its lines are rewoven, the fabric of narrative like the rug of life tangled by the impress of self. "Everytime any character gets into a book," Faulkner has said, "he's actually telling his biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself."11 In other words, Quentin attempts to weave his own pattern into the rug by telling and interpreting the drama of Thomas Sutpen and in the process tangles his own
story with those of Sutpen, Rosa Coldfield, and Shreve. And these tangles are further ensnarled by the fact that Quentin himself belongs to the “old ghost-times” that he describes; “too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all of that” (9), not only in the figurative sense of living in the past but in a literal one as well since his suicide is recorded in *The Sound and the Fury* written seven years before *Absalom, Absalom!* The fact of death, the desire to say “No” to it by leaving a “record”¹²: these generate the tangles of life and narrative and make the acts of reading and writing examples of man’s attempts “endlessly to express himself and to make contact with other human beings.”¹³

In *Absalom, Absalom!* as in *Pierre* the problem of genealogy is primary. Sutpen’s story is that of a “man who wanted a son through pride; and got too many of them and they destroyed him,”¹⁴ and the mystery at its center is a mystery of relatedness. Sutpen’s design is born when he and his family “fall” by “sheer altitude, elevation and gravity” (222) from a world characterized by animal desires that are easily and immediately satisfied—“everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey” (221)—into one of “Tidewater splendor” (222), where desires are mediated and personal worth and value are determined by the recognition of others. When Sutpen is turned from the front door of the plantation house by the Negro butler and made to realize that he has no significance for the man—“there ain’t any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him”—his human identity is born in the form of a “bright glare that vanished and left nothing, no ashes nor refuse” (238). And with this sense of self-consciousness comes an awareness of the importance of his freedom, his history, and his historicity. He abandons his family with its sliding, skating movement, “such as inanimate objects sometimes show” (223), its houses with no back doors but only windows, and its entropic drifting, “a kind of accelerating and sloven and
inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam on a flooded river” (223).

So he knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why. He was just there, surrounded by the faces, almost all the faces which he had ever known (though the number of them was decreasing, thinning out, despite the efforts of the unmarried sister who pretty soon, so he told Grandfather, and still without any wedding had another baby, decreasing because of the climate, the warmth, the dampness) living in a cabin that was almost a replica of the mountain one . . . where his sisters and brothers seemed to take sick after supper and die before the next meal. (227)

It is this uncertainty, this drifting, this lack of direction and meaning that Sutpen hopes to conquer through his design. He will map the destiny of his family by establishing a heritage. By making himself the point of reference and imposing his will, he will give the history of his descent the weight and dignity of necessity. “All of a sudden he discovered . . . what he just had to do . . . because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only of the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead” (220).

Sutpen’s design is grounded on an image of himself as founding father who not only will breed successive and genealogically related offspring whose lives take the form of a natural, logical sequence of events but will also become his own origin recreating the past as he establishes the direction of the future. His life and that of the family he founds will be a sequence of intelligible developments, a sequence of personal achievements connected by a dynamic of their own.
now he would take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that that boy, that whatever nameless stranger, could shut that door himself forever behind him on all that he had ever known, and look ahead along the still undivulged light rays in which his descendants who might not even ever hear his (the boy’s) name, waited to be born without even having to know that they had once been riven free from brutehood just as his own (Sutpen’s) children were— (261)

So it is that he appears in Jefferson, builds a “house the size of a courthouse” and calls it “Sutpen’s Hundred as if it had been a king’s grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather—a home a position” (16).

Needless to say, the simplicity, permanence, and stability implied by Sutpen’s design, his sense of a family dynasty, does not adequately reflect the discontinuities of human life, which cannot be described fully by a model that implies a natural sequence of events. As Sutpen’s experience in the West Indies suggests, one’s own design is subject to the desires and expectations of others, desires that complicate and tangle ordinary lines of relations. Moreover once lines of relation have been formed, they are not so easily undone. Sutpen finds it impossible to incorporate his first wife and child into his design because in his world the parent with black blood determines the race of the child. Bon is legally black, not his father’s son but his mother’s, and, hence, cannot be part of the patriarchal design: getting land, building a house, founding a dynasty. And so, having devoted some four years establishing the trajectory for the linear procession of the “ones that would come after him” (220) toward the “forwarding of the design” (262), he is forced to halt his “advance” (264) and remove himself from the sequence that he has initiated. He resigns all “right and claim” (264) belonging to him as the original author of the family line and seeks to cut and tie off the line by providing his son with a name that associates him with no family and with a “legal guardian rather than parents” (74).
But the unwanted products of one’s sexual/procreative life cannot be “clean[ed] up” as are the “exploded caps and musket cartridges after the siege” (265). Paternity involves two acts, generation and acknowledgment, one biological, the other social, and it is the second that is the source of the father’s authority granted by society, as Levi Strauss argues, in order to prohibit and prevent incest. But for Sutpen paternity is an entirely symbolic act, a means only of self-perpetuation and expansion, with the mother merely “incidental” and the offspring “replicas of his face” (23). Hence when he tries to deny that other self outside the self he represses it and guarantees its reappearance in other forms. The fact of Bon’s generation becomes the repressed content in Sutpen’s history, and it returns with a vengeance to disturb the pattern of his design.

There is, then, an ironic incompatibility between Sutpen’s conscious design, the pattern that he wished to impose on his life, and the actual design that he is in the process of weaving. And, as we shall see, that irony permeates every part of the novel. (Worth noting at this point, however, is the fact that Sutpen’s repeated attempts to accomplish his wild design provide a sort of genetic pattern for the novel itself as the story gets told over and over again in a futile effort to get it right.) At the simplest level it manifests itself in the fact that Sutpen “helped to bring about the very situation which he dreaded” (268), unwittingly repeating the affront that he had suffered as a child when he turns his son from the family mansion. More suggestively, by refusing to acknowledge his offspring he releases a force that removes from his hands the power of determining the pattern of his life.

Bon, who seems to have been “fathered” on his mother not by a “natural process” but to have been “blotted onto and out of her body by the old infernal immortal male principle of all unbridled terror and darkness” (313), appears and immediately confuses traditional family relationships bringing about a “fateful intertwining” of the threads of the Sutpen family line and causing a “fatal snarly climax” (167), a “horrible and bloody mis-
chancing of human affairs" (101). Seducing brother and sister "almost simultaneously" (92) "without any effort or particular desire to do so" (93), he initiates an "abnegant transference" (103) causing brother to "metamorphose into, the lover, the husband" (96). Unacknowledged by his father, he appears as a hidden genetic disorder, "some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character" (104) that provokes fatal interminglings and mergings, both miscegenation and incest.

The tangles of the Sutpen genealogy become those of the novel itself, for the history of his family does not come to us through his children but by way of strangers whose knowledge is based on communal gossip and who are narrating the history only as a way of telling their own stories, thereby entangling the weave of Sutpen's design with that of their own. Hence the "boy-symbol at the door" (261), which marks the beginning of Sutpen's design by establishing its purpose and direction, has its meaning equivocated and contaminated as it is entangled in a network of similar images. The entire novel is governed by a dialectic of inside and outside, its action regulated by doors and windows open and closed but not according to the geometry of Sutpen's design. Interiors in the book do not shelter as much as stifle as the example of Sutpen's great house makes clear. All who enter die there as individual family members seem doomed to cancel each other out. "So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon" (377-78).

So it is that the last surviving member of Sutpen's line, a "hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy" and a "dried up woman not much bigger than a monkey" (214) put into question his assumption that his descendants have been "riven free from brutehood." Indeed Sutpen himself, as he nears the end of his life, seems drawn back to that world he has tried to close out, back to "people whose houses didn't have back doors, but only windows" (233). Wash Jones's "rotting cabin" (285), site of
Sutpen's death, suggests the ones of his youth; Jones's granddaughter is an ironic reminder of Sutpen's "unmarried sister" (227); and the young Sutpen himself seems somehow replicated in Jones when he is prevented by Clytie from entering the great house.

The tangling up of the family sequence, the collapse of the genealogical line into a series of unnatural relations contaminates the linear purity of Sutpen's design, and it also puts into question the idea that the forces operating in history are controlled by either destiny or human intentions. As a profusion of tangled events, the history of the Sutpen family is not the product of the "capabilities of a demon for doing harm" (181), not an example of "moral retribution," of the "sins of the father come home to roost" (267), not the result of a "minor tactical mistake" (269), but apparently is governed by "blind accident" (222), "sheer chance" (102). It appears as a "child's vacant fairy tale" (146), a "shadow realm of make-believe" (147) where there is a "curious lack of economy between cause and effect" (119). Indeed the entire novel suggests a condition of existence without origins. Sutpen himself as a phantom or shadow is not locatable, and the novel is filled with odd metamorphoses, abrupt transitions, characters sliding into other characters, identities merging, scenes and persons echoing one another, voices and words blending together "without comma or colon or paragraph" (280).

"Yes," Quentin said. "The two children" thinking Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn’t matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking
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Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve and Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (261-62)

This admirable passage offers a view of human life that differs markedly from the linear and sequential one implied by genealogical succession and transmission in a line descending from the father and at the same time puts into question the familiar view of birth as a loss of origin or a fall from a condition of pure presence into one of an individualized and derived existence. Here is a world where each person is linked umbilically to everyone else and all have an equal originality because the problem of priority in time does not exist: “nothing ever happens once and is finished,” for this is a world of repercussions rather than events. What is important is not the sunken pebble but its watery echo, that ripple space that is the very rhythm of life. Here “Environment” transcends familial and individual differences, so that beings “born half a continent apart” are nevertheless “joined, connected after a fashion” by a sort of “giologic umbilical” which “laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature” (258). Individual differences are present as the repetition in the above passage of the word “different” emphasizes, but they don’t “matter.” The temperature, the molecularity, the reflecting qualities of separate pools, qualities that would characterize and individualize were the pools not joined, are subordinate to the rhythmic ripples that move across all their surfaces. Emphasized here is the the human family rather than a particular family line. And it is suggestive in this connection to recall Faulkner’s remarks that Sutpen did not believe that he was a member of the human family. “He was Sutpen. He was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has got to belong to the human family.” 17

And it is important also to remember the story of Echo and Narcissus for the passage (and the novel) knot together a num-
ber of thematic strands from the Ovidian version of that myth. Like it, *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on the relations between love and death, repetition and originality, visual and vocal forms of representation and suggests a world energized by motions and sounds from the past in such a way that the present moment becomes an effect that continues after its cause is gone. Faulkner, like Ovid, tells of "bodies changed / To different forms" as he reconstitutes a world that no longer exists. Like the voice of the bodiless nymph, those that speak in *Absalom, Absalom!* are echoes of beings who have faded away. But while Ovid's nymph vanishes into voice, Faulkner's disembodied voices metamorphose into text. As echoes of dead and disembodied voices, those of the characters of *Absalom, Absalom!* are haunted as Miss Rosa's is by a ghostly presence that at times seems to take it over: "Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish...not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house" (8). It is this ghostly presence that both is and is not there that makes the voices of all the characters sound alike, echo one another, although each stands for an individual who once tried desperately to tell his or her own story, to weave his or her own pattern into the rug of life. But the original voice in each case is displaced by its repetition, as the pebble is by its watery echo, and the primary relation becomes one between signs that echo each other. This is a process that at once puts into question the notions of originality and intentionality and suggests the way in which "texts eclipse voice and speak silence." It is this sense of voice as the sign of absence rather than presence that so disturbs Quentin, for in spite of his momentary celebration of a world where everything is connected, he remains committed to the ideal of patriarchal design and is deeply disturbed by his failures to embody the buried voice of the father. It is that failure that seems to him to doom him to talk in the "long silence of notpeople in notlan-
guage" (9) and to bring to the entire novel the atmosphere of death.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is permeated by the odors and signs of death. Its title laments loss and absence, and that loss is repeated and echoed throughout the text.²⁰ It opens in the "dim coffin-smelling gloom" (8) of a room in Rosa Coldfield's house, closes in the "stale and static and moribund" (345) atmosphere of Quentin and Shreve's "tomblike room in Massachusetts" (336), and its "climax" is the revelation of a living "corpse" (373) in the "inviolate and rotten mausoleum" (350) that is the ruins of Henry Sutpen's great house. Even marriage and conception are shrouded by the presence of death. Sutpen's house is the "cacoont-casket marriage bed of youth and grief" (136) and Wash Jones's granddaughter the "female flesh in which [Sutpen's] name and lineage should be sepulchered" (134).

But if the book is centrally concerned with the "instant of dissolution" (191), with the "irrevocable and unplumbable finality" (173), it also, like *Wuthering Heights*, "performs a multiple act of resurrection, an opening of graves or a raising of ghosts."²¹ The events that it records are those of a "dead time" (89), its voices are the sounds of "dead tongue[s] speaking" (129) from beyond the grave, and its characters and narrators "shades" and "phantoms" (97) who have long since been "graved and sepulchered" (130). The novel, in other words, insistently keeps before the reader the apparently contradictory assertions that death is total obliteration and that the dead in some way live on beyond the grave. If the dead person is one who no longer responds, who is absent, how are we to understand these voices that are themselves haunted by the voices of other ghosts?

One place to begin a consideration of such a question is the Sutpen family graveyard, with its "five headstones" among the "clump of cedars" (187), for Faulkner, like Melville, is fascinated by the relation between the acts of interment and inscription, with the attempt "to give to the language of senseless stone" a voice that assures "that some part of our nature is imperish-
able.” 22 From one point of view these “block[s] of stone with scratches on [them]” (127) are “little puny affirmations of spurious immortality” (191–92) which “pediment a forgotten and nameless effigy” (164), they and their silent inscriptions, like the ruins of Rome for Hawthorne or the pyramids for Melville, signs of a nonrecoverable absence. On the other hand, for women “who lead beautiful lives” (191), who “draw meat and drink from some beautiful attenuation of unreality in which the shades and shapes of facts—of birth and bereavement, of suffering and bewilderment and despair—move with the substanceless decorum of lawn party charades, perfect in gesture and without significance or any ability to hurt” (211), funeral rites and monuments are of “incalculable importance” (192), not because women believe that we are immortal beings or because they think that such rites and monuments will preserve for future time some vestige of the dead. No such flights from death are necessary, for they have a “courage and fortitude in the face of pain and annihilation which would make the most spartan man resemble a puling boy” (191). Funerals and graves for them are pure representations and possess an aesthetic rather than a metaphysical significance. Like the poetic worlds of Swinburne and the other late Romantics and Decadents that Faulkner admired, funerals and graves offer a realm of purity where human action becomes aesthetic gesture and death as death remains hidden. Hence the visit of Bon’s octaroon mistress to his gravesite appears as an “interlude,” the “ceremonial widowhood’s bright dramatic pagentry” (192) resembling a “garden scene by the Irish poet, Wilde,” or a sketch by the “artist Beardsley” (193), where even the heavy marble tombstones seem “cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who with the passing of twilight would return and strike them and carry them, hollow fragile and without weight, back to the warehouse until they should be needed again” (193). The brute fact of Bon’s death is not represented. There is only a “closed door” (150), the “echo” of a shot (150), and a “shadowy... abstraction... nailed into a box” (153). There is “no corpse,” no “imprint of a body on a mattress” (152), “no trace of
him, not even tears” (152), only “that mound vanishing slowly back into the earth, beneath which [there is] buried nothing” (158).

But if Judith, who remains “absolutely impenetrable, absolutely serene,” displaying “no mourning, not even grief” (127), seems at times to draw her sustenance entirely from an unreal world of pure representation that is “all breathing human passion far above,” she also recognizes that the significance of acts of ceremonial memorializing does not extend beyond the performance itself. Such pageants are precisely “interlude[s]” (193), and the pieces of marble that are left after the performance is over can convey none of its “dramatic pageantry” (192). All that remains are “two flat heavy vaulted slabs” that are “cracked across the middle by their own weight” and “three headstones leaning a little awry, with here and there a carved letter or even an entire word momentary and legible in the faint light” (188). As Judith acknowledges when she leaves the letter with Quentin’s grandmother those stones scratched with a name and two dates signifying the beginning and end of life can only mark the absence of living speech and human presence because the words on them are “graved” (191), removed from the dynamic interplay of is and was that characterizes human life.

What Judith seeks, then, is a form of impress that will be more than aesthetic gesture but that will be free of the deadening weight of pure materiality. This pursuit leads her, finally, out of the family graveyard, for she discovers that the way to make a “scratch, that undying mark on the face of oblivion” (129), is to take some sign of the personal, the familial, the local and to give it to someone “the stranger the better . . . it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened” (127). Directed toward a stranger, “to keep or not to keep, even to read or not to read” and without “date or salutation or signature,” the letter is the sign neither of time, place, nor person. In that sense its “faint spidery script” differs importantly from the scratches on the tombstones in the Sutpen family graveyard.
There there is only silence; here a “dead tongue” speaks. And yet the script appears “not like something impressed upon the paper by a once-living hand but like a shadow cast upon it which had resolved on the paper the instant before he looked at it and which might fade, vanish, at any instant while he still read” (129). As Quentin reads he has access not to the presence of the letter’s originating source but only to “the words, the symbols” (101), and the shadowy shapes that they invoke.

Like the fragmentary sentences that generate The Marble Faun or like the mysterious names in the guitar and handkerchief in Pierre, the surviving letter is an object separated from its originating source, removed from the authority who could fill in salutation and signature, establish the identities of the writer and the reader. Hence its meaning, its significance is problematic, and it forces us to “re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation” (101).

We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames . . . which sound to us like Sanscrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions . . . . They are there, yet something is missing, they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and fading and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense. (100-101)

The past persists not in the form of some grand, carefully woven design but in the form of these orphaned remnants, signs of human happenings which survive simply as a result of having passed from “one hand to another,” kept perhaps merely out of whimsy or curiosity and rediscovered in some “accidental
fashion" (49) in that “forgotten chest” by someone similarly motivated. These “rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking” (303) suggest the way in which the past at once exists in and is created by the present and thereby implies a form of relatedness that differs markedly from the model of patrilineal descent. “The people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting” are present only in the forms of initials and nicknames in letters without salutation and signature preserved perhaps by people who were strangers to their authors and exhumed and freely interpreted by numerous unrelated voices.

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking became audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too, quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath. (303)

In the same way that the tangle of human relationships resists the sequential simplicity implied in the idea of a pater familias who initiates successive generations of offspring, so it also equivocates the idea of narrative or story as the orderly unfolding of a plot from a single authoritative source as well as the notion of representation as a perfect mirroring of object and image. Shreve and Quentin are not blood relatives, but they are joined together by cords stronger than blood lines. And the “happy marriage of speaking and hearing (316) that unites them also creates the shadows in which they exist. Sitting in their “tomb-like room in Massachusetts in 1910” (336) they create and then merge with shadows from the 1860s. Not even aware of “which
one had been doing the talking" (334), they at once tell and live
the story of Charles and Bon and Henry Sutpen, become in a
certain way both fathers and sons, creators and interpreters.

Shreve ceased again. It was just as well, since he had no lis-
tener. Perhaps he was aware of it. Then suddenly he had no
talker either, though possibly he was not aware of this. Be-
cause now neither of them were there. They were both in
Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not
even four now but compounded still further, since now both
of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon,
compounded each of both yet either neither, smelling the
very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years
ago. (351)

All seem like one another in blood and spirit: each is some-
how repeated in the other, since the sharp boundaries separating
one individual from another no longer exist. And the tale that
they tell is not burdened by the unities of time, place, and action
or by the demands of causal sequence. This is a realm of romance
reminiscent of Hawthorne's description in "The Custom House"
of "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and
fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary Way meet, and each
imbue itself with the nature of the other" (SL, 36). And also like
Hawthornian romance it is a world partially generated by
"popular rumors," what Hawthorne calls the "chimney-corner
tradition" (HSG, 123), a world born of "a few old mouth-to-
mouth tales" (100), "rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talk-
ing," that is to say communal gossip or idle talk. In Faulkner's
world as in Hawthorne's gossip may be viewed as the true voice
of the community since it transcends boundaries of self and fam-
ily by being associated with no identifiable source and by having
existed prior to the involvement of any single individual, or, to
put it as Homer Brown does in his suggestive analysis, gossip
"establishes an authority without an author."23 It is, in effect,
parentless and suggests displacement and disaffiliation.
Absalom, Absalom!, however, is not entirely the product of an endless round of old tales and talking. Framing and to some extent grounding the communal chatter about Thomas Sutpen are two letters, the one Judith leaves with Quentin's grandmother and the one Quentin's father writes announcing the death of Rosa Coldfield. Now letters in novels usually differ from gossip in being private rather than public communications. They are written by a particular writer and are intended for the eyes of a particular reader. They are, in short, privileged communications and as such often name the source or provide the answer to the novel's puzzle and in so doing, to use Brown's formulations, “close the round of speculation that is gossip . . . [and] replace the substitute parent with a parent-Truth.” This is the sort of letter that Quentin and Shreve imagine that Bon dreams of receiving from Sutpen, the one that will confirm his origins and make events fall into a pattern “which would reveal to him at once, like a flash of light, the meaning of his whole life, past—the Haiti, the childhood, the lawyer, the woman who was his mother” (313). “He would just have to write ‘I am your father. Burn this’ and I would do it. Or if not that, a sheet, a scrap of paper with one word ‘Charles’ in his hand, and I would know what he meant and he would not even have to ask me to burn it” (326). But this letter is neither sent nor received in Absalom, Absalom! In its place stand two more ambiguous documents: one “without date or salutation or signature” and the other dated “Jefferson Jan to 1919 Miss” (173), addressed to Quentin Compson, and signed by his father. As with many of the textual details of Absalom, Absalom! these two apparently unrelated communications bear a shadowy echoic relation to one another.

Because there was love Mr. Compson said There was that letter she brought and gave to your grandmother to keep. He (Quentin) could see it, as plainly as he saw the one open upon the open text book on the table before him, white in his father's dark hand against his linen leg in the September
twilight... thinking Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long thinking Yes, Shreve sounds almost exactly like father: that letter. (207)

This passage is the most obvious example of a series of troubling associations that link the two letters without disclosing any obvious reason for the linkage. Reading the passage, we recall the figure of Mr. Compson “his feet once more to the railing, the letter in his hand and the hand looking almost as dark as a negro's against his linen leg” (89); the letter that opens “My dear son in his father’s sloped fine hand out of that dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father’s hand could lie on a strange lamp-lit table in Cambridge” (173); the figure of Quentin himself looking with “brooding bemusement upon the open letter which lay on the open text book, his hands lying on the table before him on either side of the book and letter” (238); and, finally, the “faint spidery script not like something impressed upon the paper by a once-living hand but like a shadow cast upon it which had resolved on the paper the instant before he looked at it” (129). These curious repetitions suggest a number of questions: what is the relation between the “once-living hand” that authored the letter without “salutation or signature” (100) and the “dark” negro-like one that holds it, between its “spidery script” and the “sloped fine hand” of the other, between the “sardonic whimsical and incurably pessimistic” (129) voice of the one and the “whimsical ironic hand” (377) of the other, and, perhaps most curiously, between the literal and figurative uses of the word “hand”?

These are complicated tangles, but we can begin to unknot them by noticing that both letters are directly related to the act of narration. As Mr. Compson sits on his porch, which is illuminated by a single light, its “globe stained and bug-fouled” (89), holding the letter in his hand, he gives his account of the Sutpen family romance, and Shreve and Quentin spin out their version of the same tale seated at a “lamp-lit table” with Quentin
"brooding . . . upon the open letter which lay on the open text book" (238). In neither case however does the letter serve as ground or source for the narrative. The one that Quentin reads at the conclusion of his father's account does not answer or substantiate Mr. Compson's version of the Sutpen story by providing privileged information. Indeed the letter seems less of a private and personal communication between lovers than a document, philosophical treatise, or "commentary" (129), a part of whose meaning is that it can be read later as a historical record of the moment. Moreover, without salutation or signature, it raises the question of who is speaking and to whom and introduces the theme of writing as a sort of disaffiliation, a disclosure of the absence of a single father. As it passes from Mr. Compson's hand to those of his son it becomes in an obvious way a communication between someone who is not the writer and someone who is not the reader. It becomes a part of that anonymous world of "old tales and talking" (303) that Quentin has "learned, absorbed . . . without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it, with it" (212). And in so doing it breaks free of the tangles of Sutpen's failed design and out of the silence of the family graveyard.

Mr. Compson's letter announcing the death of Rosa Coldfield initiates and frames the action of the second half of Absalom, Absalom!, the first part of it being given at the opening of Quentin and Shreve's version of the story and the last delayed until the very end when, surrounded by the "pure snow-gleamed darkness," Quentin is at last able to "read it . . . finish it" (377). Its presence on the table, "lying at such an angle that [Quentin] could not possibly have read it, deciphered it" (217), provides one of the dominant motifs of the novel's second half, for the narrator returns to it repeatedly as if to suggest that it holds the answer to the novel's mystery.

There was snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve, his ungloved blond square hand red and raw with cold, vanishing. Then on the table before Quentin, lying on the open text book beneath
the lamp, the white oblong of envelope, the familiar blurred mechanical Jefferson Jan 10 1910 Miss and then, opened, My dear son in his father’s sloped fine hand out of that dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father’s hand could lie on a strange lamp-lit table in Cambridge; that dead summer twilight—the wisteria, the cigar-smell, the fireflies—attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room across this strange iron New England snow. (173)

This passage introduces the details whose repetition will provide the setting for Quentin and Shreve’s telling of Sutpen’s story: the chilly Harvard dormitory room illuminated by the desk lamp and growing colder as they talk, the open letter upon the open book between Quentin’s hands, and Quentin’s brooding presence. As Quentin speaks, his voice “repressed” (218), “suffused restrained” (277), his tone “sullen, flat” (253), his attitude one of “brooding bemusement upon the open letter which lay upon the open text book, his hands lying on the table before him on either side of the book and the letter” (238), he seems to be “talking . . . to the letter lying on the open book on the table between his hands” (253). The insistent almost ritualistic quality of these repetitions suggests a direct relation between the letter and Quentin’s narrative. John Irwin has argued that in narrating Sutpen’s story Quentin is seeking to best his father by achieving temporal priority to him in the narrative act, and the narrator’s insistence on the importance of the letter would seem to strengthen Irwin’s argument. But Quentin’s “sullen bemusement” (280) does not express his problematic relation to his father; rather it signifies his “youthful shame of being moved” (280) by the events of his story. And the relation between the letter on the book between his hands and the “shadows . . . of shades” (303) that it in some way generates involves more than a struggle for authority.

To begin with, the letter serves as a sort of umbilical paper cord that links together a network of differences and distances. It first appears in the text five months before the date of its
composition—"the odor, the scent, which five months later Mr. Compson's letter would carry up from Mississippi and over the long iron New England snow and into Quentin's sitting-room at Harvard" (31)—and in so doing disturbs the illusion that the narrative is a progressive unfolding of events in time. Like the history of the Sutpen family that it records, the novel's own events seem already both to have and have not occurred, or, rather, in some curious way to be happening all at the same time, and, hence, suggest a process that puts into question traditional assumptions about fictional representation. It is not just that the letter is able to bring back the moment and person that existed in another place and at another time and render them to the senses as if they were actually present but also that it is itself already there in the place and the moment.

Quite clearly, the creative power at work here is not the mimetic imagination that we usually associate with fictional representation. Significantly, the actual contents of the letter are unrelated to the time and place that it presents—it announces the death and burial of Rosa Coldfield on a frigid January day—and it accomplishes the presentation before it is fully read. Operating here is a process that changes our usual understanding of the relation between writing and reading, for when Quentin looks at the letter written in his father's "sloped fine hand" there is restored to view the September evening and the other letter "white in his father's dark hand." Here is a relational link that is the result not of an act of imitation but, as the above passage suggests, one of attenuation. Now the word "attenuate" suggests a process of refining, rarifying, thinning out and is used by Faulkner to describe not only the relation between writing and its effects but also those between past and present, reality and imagination, experience and memory. From the point of view of the present, the past is a "shadowy attenuation of time" (101); women are said to "live beautiful lives" because in their "very breathing they draw meat and drink from some beautiful attenuation of unreality in which shades and shapes of facts . . . move with the substanceless docorum of lawn party charades
perfect in gesture and without significance or any ability to
hurt" (211); and Sutpen's memory of his family's descent from
the mountain in West Virginia is in terms of an attenuation
rather than a period.

He didn't remember whether it was that winter and then
spring and then summer that overtook and passed them on
the road, or whether they overtook and passed in slow succe-
sion the seasons as they descended, or whether it was the de-
scent itself that did it, and they not progressing parallel in
time but descending perpendicularly through temperature and
climate—a (you couldn't call it a period because as he remem-
bered it . . . it didn't have either a definite beginning or a def-
ite ending. Maybe attenuation is better) an attenuation
from a kind of furious inertness and patient immobility, while
they sat in the cart outside the doors of doggeries and taverns
and waited for the father to drink himself insensible, to a sort
of dreamy and destinationless locomotion after they had got
the old man out . . . and loaded him into the cart again, and
doing which they did not seem to progress at all but just to
hang suspended while the earth itself altered, flattened and
broadened out of the mountain cove where they had all been
born, mounting, rising about them . . . and flowing past as if
the cart moved on a treadmill. (224-25)

This moment in Sutpen's life is present to him as the frag-
ments of his story are to Quentin and as the narrative events of
Absalom, Absalom! are to the reader. It appears to memory not
as a series of successive temporal moments marked by a definite
beginning and end but as a process of moving from one to the
other. The relationship between "furious inertness" and "dreamy
and destinationless locomotion" like those between rising and
falling, beginning and end, motion and stasis is not thought of
in terms of opposition but rather as a process where one cate-
gory is experienced as the result of or a sort of extension of the
other. One condition or action becomes the shadow or echo of
its opposite so that falling suggests rising, immobility, locomo-
tion, and the space of visible reality, those of imagination and
memory.29
The nature of the relationship implied in each of these cases is
suggested by the examples that the O.E.D. provides for
"attenuated": "The spider's most attenuated thread"; "As atten-
uated as parchment"; and "That most attenuated of all things, the
shadow of a shade." The process implied in each of these cases is
one of emptying out, becoming fainter, of losing substance to,
but not beyond, the very point of expiration, suggesting a world
that almost no longer exists, that seems about to fade at the very
moment we experience it. And this sense of fragility and imper-
manence, of a dissolving reality, infects and disturbs the rela-
tions between object/image, shadow/substance, thing/word,
and past/present so that one category seems the ghostly attenu-
atation or echo of the other. Language itself is thought of as a
"meager and fragile thread . . . by which the little surface cor-
ners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined
for an instant now and then before sinking back into darkness"
(251). Hence the writing of the letter without salutation or sig-
nature is "faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar
in shape and sense" (101), a "faint spidery script not like some-
thing impressed upon the paper by a once living hand but like
a shadow cast upon it which had resolved on the paper the in-
stant before . . . and which might fade, vanish, at any instant
while he still read" (129).
Words signify but not by standing unambiguously in the
place of an object which they represent or by making possible a
willed relation between a particular writer and a particular
reader. Quentin gazes at his father's letter "lying at such an an-
gle that he could not possibly have read it, deciphered it" (217)
and sees the other letter "as plainly as he saw the one open upon
the open text book on the table before him, white in his father's
dark hand against his linen leg in the September twilight where
the cigar-smell, the wisteria-smell, the fire-flies drifted" (207).
Mr. Compson's letter signifies something other than it repre-
sents, and this happens through a sort of magic that creates
relational links independent of both the author's intent and the interpretive activity of a reader. The "sloped fine hand" of the script generates meaning but it does so by breaking free of the gravitational fields of both writer and reader. As it rests upon the open textbook between Quentin's hands, a "rectangle of paper folded across the middle and now open, three quarters open, whose bulk had raised half itself by the leverage of the old crease" (217), it seems to have "learned half the secret of levitation" (238). Unlike the "flat slabs" in the Sutpen graveyard that "cracked across the middle by their own weight" and "vanishing" (188) into the ground can only signify absence, the "fragile Pandora's box of scrawled paper" (238) raises itself in "weightless and paradoxical levitation" (217) and fills the room "with violent and unratiocinative djinns and demons" (258).

Like the familiar ghosts that haunt Hawthorne's "well-known apartment," these figures are "invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness (SL, 36). They can hardly be thought of as representations since that which they stand in the place of enjoyed only a shadowy existence. Bon, we recall, is present to Miss Rosa, who "never saw him," only as "a picture, an image" (74) which is not the copy of an original but which is suggested to her by "the name, Charles Bon" (75). Hence the picture which has no "skull behind it" is "almost anonymous" needing for a ground only a "vague inference of some walking flesh and blood desired by someone else even if only in some shadow-realm of make-believe" (147). And when the "shadow with a name" (146) vanishes, the victim of a "shot heard only by its echo" (153), it leaves behind only negative traces, a "print that was his save for [an] obliterating rake" (148), the "invisible imprint of his absent thighs" on a "nooky seat" (148), the lack of an "imprint of a body on a mattress" (152), and a letter without salutation or signature.

Such are the figures that are levitated into the "tomblike room" (336) with a "quality stale and static and moribund beyond any mere vivid and living cold" (345). While Quentin and Shreve sit talking and staring at one another, "their quiet regular breathing vaporizing faintly and steadily in the ... tomblike
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air" (299), listening to the chimes mark the passing hours, mov-
ing only to fill a pipe or to put on a bathrobe, and resisting the
temptation to retreat to "bed and warmth" (345) these shades per-
form "their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervi-
ous to time" (101). And as the two young men discuss, create,
and at last exist in these shades, they and their room, although
paradoxically still vividly and insistently the same, are trans-
formed into the realm of romance. As they come to identify
more and more with the lives of the shades they are creating, as
their "physical misery" is "transmogrified into the spirits' travail
of the two young men . . . fifty years ago" (345), they transcend
the individual differences that separate them, transcend "degrees
of latitude and temperature" (258), begin to breathe together,
"not individuals now yet something both more or less than
twins" (294), to talk as one, joined in a "happy marriage of speak-
ing and hearing" (316), and finally, to move together with the
shades they have created—"the two of them (the four of them)"
(335) from the room in Massachusetts to the one in New Orle-
ans, to the library at Sutpen's Hundred.

Not two of them in a New England college sitting-room but
one in a Mississippi library sixty years ago, with holly and
mistletoe in vases on the mantel or thrust behind, crowning
and garlanding with the season and time the pictures on the
walls, and a sprig or so decorating the photograph, the
group—mother and two children—on the desk, behind which
the father sat when the son entered; and they—Quentin and
Shreve—thinking how after the father spoke . . . Henry would
recall later how he had seen through the window beyond his
father's head the sister and the lover in the garden, pacing
slowly . . . to disappear slowly beyond some bush or shrub
starred with white bloom—jasmine, spiraea, honeysuckle per-
haps myriad scentless unpickable Cherokee roses—names,
blooms which Shreve possibly had never heard and never seen
although the air had blown over him first which had become
tempered to nourish them. It would not matter here in Cam-
bridge that the time had been winter in that garden too, and
hence no bloom nor leaf even if there had been someone to walk there and be seen there since, judged by subsequent events, it had been night in the garden also. But that did not matter because it had been so long ago. It did not matter to them (Quentin and Shreve) anyway, who could without moving, as free now of flesh as the father who decreed and forbade, the son who denied and repudiated, the lover who acquiesced, the beloved who was not bereaved, and with no tedious transition from hearth and garden to saddle, who could be already clattering over the frozen ruts of that December night . . . not two of them there and then either but four of them riding the two horses through the iron darkness. (294–95)

This admirable passage suggests the nature and status of Faulknerian romance. Joined in the “happy marriage of speaking and hearing,” Shreve and Quentin break out of their “tomblike room,” free now from the confining and defining bodily flesh and are “translated . . . into a world like a fairy tale” (318) where they are not restricted by the boundaries of family and self, time and space. Here lovers walk in a garden alive with flowers in December, their movements governed by “that rhythm” which the “heart marks” (294), and Quentin and Shreve, at once creating and inhabiting it, as free from the demands of verisimilitude as the text is from the restrictions of punctuation, move effortlessly “with no tedious transition from hearth and garden to saddle.” This is a magical world created by a sort of alchemical process that rarifies, refines, etherealizes, sublimes away the weight of material existence. Through the magic of “speaking and hearing” physical space becomes verbal space as “vaporized breaths” take the forms of “shadows . . . of shades,” those most attentuated of all things. And although this is a realm woven from that “meager and fragile thread,” language, it is a surprisingly vital one, characterized by coursing blood, “the immortal brief recent intransient blood” (295), and energized by acts of “simple passion and simple violence” (101).

In this sense the passage can stand as a synecdoche for the
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novel. Its action issues from confining spaces, “dim hot airless rooms” (7) and cold tomblike ones and its voices from the mouths of seated, almost immobile, figures—Miss Rosa “bolt upright in the straight hard chair,” her legs “straight and rigid” (7), Mr. Compson, seated, his feet on the veranda railing, “letter in his hand” (89), and Quentin seated “facing the table, his hands lying on either side of the open text book on which the letter rested” (217). Into this constrained, restricted world, its limits set by the narrator’s insistent, hammering repetition of details of place, time, setting, posture “abrupt” (8) the djinns and demons, “notpeople” talking to one another in “notlanguage” (9) bringing with them movement, alternating gallops and halts, whose rhythms are controlled not by the tic-tocs of time but by the “heart and blood of youth” (294).

Nevertheless this world is the product of an enchantment, the result of Shreve and Quentin’s being drawn into a deeply imaginative but antinatural frame of mind, a process that is initiated not by the phantoms that fascinate them, not by the supernatural as such, but by a letter announcing a death. And the inevitable disenchantment occurs when Quentin and Shreve stop talking and like Miss Rosa after the death of Henry Sutpen, “[go] to bed because it was all finished now” (376) to await the “little death” (275), as an “iron and impregnable dark” descends with the empty sounds of Poe’s Raven: “Nevermore Nevermore Nevermore” (373). And this moment of disenchantment is the moment of the return of Mr. Compson’s letter.

then he could not tell if it was the actual window or the window’s pale rectangle upon his eyelids, though after a moment it began to emerge. It began to take shape in its same curious, light, gravity-defying attitude—the once-folded sheet of paper out of the wisteria Mississippi summer, the cigar smell, the random blowing of the fireflies. . . . It was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now.

Now he (Quentin) could read it, could finish it—the sloped
whimsical ironic hand out of Mississippi attenuated, into the iron snow. (377)

As Quentin lies "still and rigid on his back with the cold New England night on his face . . . his eyes wide upon the window" (373), the "rectangle of the window" slowly becomes the "rectangle of paper" (217) that undeciphered had produced the supernatural effects of the previous hours. Now, paradoxically, surrounded by darkness he is able to read it, and once it is deciphered it loses its gravity-defying power to elevate and spiritualize. All that remains in the Pandora's box now is the delusive "hope" (377) of an afterlife expressed in Mr. Compson's characteristically ironic tone. The "sloped whimsical ironic hand out of Mississippi" that earlier had been for Quentin the hand that held Bon's letter now becomes pure script and the magical process of attenuation an empty language game as "ironic hand" is attenuated into "iron snow," a linkage that the O.E.D. describes as the result of either "ignorant or humorous perversion."

With the end of the story comes a draining of the creative source. The pressures of the here and now, the weight of an "iron and impregnable dark" (360) become too heavy to resist. The imagination can no longer find the power to conjure up the living shadows whose presence from the beginning has provided the force to resist the threat of annihilation. In the end the present cannot be sustained by a past that is fading away and the imagination cannot maintain its life-sustaining fire when the action through which it lives comes to a stop. In the end that piece of scrawled paper that had generated the ghostly presences provides them with a final resting place: "The weather was beautiful though cold and they had to use picks to break the earth for the grave yet in one of the deeper clods I saw a redworm doubtless alive when the clod was thrown up though by afternoon it was frozen again" (377).

*Absalom, Absalom!* perhaps more than any of Faulkner's other works, reveals the ghostly dimensions of narrative, the way in which stories give the past an afterlife by opening graves
and raising ghosts while at the same time they presuppose and record the fact of death. Faulkner is fond of insisting that he writes in order to say “No to death,” but, as his admirable foreword to *The Faulkner Reader* suggests, he is clearly aware of the problematic status of that “No.” The words “Kilroy was here” scribbled on the “wall of the final and irrevocable oblivion” seem as much the signs of a radical absence as a form of resurrection. What remains on this side of the wall is the “isolation of cold impersonal print,” black marks on the page that stand as the sign of the absence of the author who is only a “dead and fading name.” And yet if they presuppose a death, they also exert a supernatural or ghostly effect; words resurrect and energize not the author but a demon who engenders the “deathless excitement in hearts and glands whose owners and custodians are generations from even the air [the author] breathed and anguished in.” From this perspective the novel is a Pandora’s box containing demons and ghosts ready to be brought back from the grave by anyone who chances to open its covers and read.