Ivo Vidan

"Absalom, Absalom!" and "Wuthering Heights"

At the beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Miss Rosa tells Quentin the early story of Sutpen's Hundred: how the "man-horse-demon" "would abrupt"[1] upon the town of Jefferson, how he established his house and plantation at a distance from the community, how he married and begat his children.

· The tyranny of that "djinn" and "ogre" is first exemplified by the violent behaviour of his negro, who beats a horse in front of the church and then by Sutpen's bloody wrestling with his slaves in the lamp-lit stable, while all the children watch in horror or fascination, and the mother, Ellen, arrives in time to be a consternated witness of the fight and the screaming. It may be accidental, but is by no means surprising, that the reader is reminded of another great novel in which the main part of the story is told by an elderly woman (Ellen!) to a younger man about a demonically violent man who comes out of nowhere, appropriates a house and tyrannizes his wife, child and other inmates: *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

Upon careful perusal many parallels between the two books can be noticed, both in theme and in technique. Still, no direct borrowing can be cited, and it is questionable whether the word 'influence' is at all appropriate when one considers the particular type of closeness that can be established. Many years after writing *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner said of *Wuthering Heights* that it was "a book that I have admired for its craftsmanship but there's nothing in it that I would ever read again probably, though some day I might".[2] It is on record that he actually did read the novel again only eight months after this qualification of his interest,[3] which indicates that Emily Bron-

[1] William Faulkner: *Absalom, Absalom!*, New York, 1951, p. 8.
[2] *Faulkner in the University*, ed. by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, New York, 1959, p. 202.
[3] *Ibid.*, note.

të's work had an enduring attraction for him. Whatever the sub-
jective meaning of *Wuthering Heights* for the author of *Ab-
salom, Absalom!*, it might be worth while to compare the two
books, not as isolated masterpieces, but in terms of certain cate-
gories relevant to a clear definition of their respective generic
places in literary history.

I

In her study of *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, Louise
Y. Gossett mentions a number of Gothic details in *Absalom,
Absalom!*, "unacknowledged blood relationships, mysterious
sources of wealth, revenge, a midnight visit to a decaying
mansion, tangled wilds of forest and swamp, and atmosphere of
gloom".[4] With certain modifications (a different natural environ-
ment, though equally bleak, unexpected visits not necessarily at
midnight, more indirect and perhaps more psychologically signi-
ficant symbolically incestuous relationships) — she could have
been speaking of *Wuthering Heights!* Michael Millgate's ana-
lysis of *Absalom, Absalom!* mentions *Wuthering Heights* but
only recalls the similarity of their narrative structures. He dis-
cusses however at some length Gothic details in Charlotte Bron-
të's *Jane Eyre*, which he also finds in Faulkner's novel.[5] Olga
W. Vickery attributes the Gothic element to Miss Rosa's melo-
dramatic account: "What she does is create a pattern which
some have applied to the book as a whole — the Gothic novel
with its gloomy castles, dark, evil villains, and innocent victims.
As motive for and explanation of all the Gothic horror and
violence that she evokes, she posits a mysterious curse, though
she is curiously unable to decide whether it was incurred by
Sutpen, her family, or the South. In any event, Sutpen is, for
Miss Rosa, both curse and accursed. In the nightmare world
of her imagination, his evil assumes such gigantic proportions
that it threatens both social and cosmic orders".[6]

This is perhaps sobering: the overall general impression of
Sutpen that one usually carries along is that of a demonic mo-
nomaniac, but upon analysis one finds no outrageous outbursts
of sadism and few acts of violent enforcement of his will, no
actuall offences against other human beings except for the in-
sults of Rosa (Sutpen's quietly callous proposal should be con-

[4] Durham, N. C., 1965, p. 38.

[5] Michael Millgate: *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, London,
1966, pp. 162—3.

[6] Olga W. Vickery: *The Novels of William Faulkner*, Baton Rouge,
1964, p. 88.

trasted to the villains' melodramatic pursuits of maidens in Gothic castles!) and, perhaps deliberately, of Milly, both in the late years of bitter sadness after the failure of his design to establish a valuable, powerful and wealthy line into the future. One may not agree with arguments intended to prove his "innocence",[7] but though Sutpen is violent, sombre, full of sexual energy and devoid of human consideration or respect for persons, his behaviour is far from Heathcliff's sadistic agressiveness and his deliberate ruining of children and beating of young people. Nor can the theme of incest in *Absalom, Absalom!* be directly associated with Sutpen.[8]

Heathcliff too has had his advocates, although Charlotte Brontë calls him "unredeemed"[9] and questions the appropriateness of her sister's literary creation. Students of the Brontë sources have seen Heathcliff's energy come out of the Byronic inheritance of the Gondal myth and insist on the ambivalent character of the demonic archetype: "He is a fertilizing energy and profoundly attractive, and at the same time horribly destructive to civilized institutionalism",[10] says Dorothy Van Ghent.

Robert B. Heilman maintains that the function of the Gothic in the history of the novel was "to open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally approved emotions; in a word, to enlarge the sense of reality and its impact on the human being . It became then a great liberator of feeling. It acknowledged the nonrational — in the world of things and events, occasionally in the realm of the transcendental, ultimately and most persistently in the depths of the human being".[11]

It is here perhaps that one might try to distinguish the Gothic attributes in the world of *Wuthering Heights* from those in *Absalom, Absalom!*[12] Faulkner can hardly be connected with

[7] Cleanth Brooks: *William Faulkner, The Yoknapatawpha Country,* New Haven and London, 1966, p. 296; F. Garvin Davenport Jr.: *The Myth of Southern History,* Nashville, 1970, p. 97.

[8] The incest theme in *Absalom, Absalom!* is part of the process of degeneration both on the family level and on that of its wider symbolic significance. On the incest theme in *Wuthering Heights* see note 26.

[9] Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights,* Harmondsworth, 1951, p. XVI (Editor's Preface).

[10] Dorothy Van Ghent: *The English Novel, Form and Function,* New York, 1967, p. 200.

[11] Robert B. Heilman: "Charlotte's Brontë's 'New' Gothic", in *The Victorian Novel,* ed. by Ian Watt, London—Oxford—New York, 1972, p. 179.

[12] Faulkner, says Malcolm Cowley, "combines two of the principal traditions in American letters: the tradition of psychological horror, often close to symbolism, that begins with Charles Brockden Brown, our first professional novelist, and extends through Poe, Mellville, Henry James

the Romantic expression of an activist drive of the soul to sub-
due the deadening influence of established institutions, but
rather the opposite: he reconstructs the historical situation of
his country through the perspective of its inherited guilt,
through the curse of Cain and the inexorable fate which perta-
ins it for the slavery, the violence, and the enforced miscegena-
tion. In Faulkner's South, historical consequence have become
human nature, and the ideological significance of Charles
Brockden Brown's American adaptation of the Gothic tradition
— as diagnosed by Leslie A. Fiedler — is pertinent to *Absalom,
Absalom!*:

> It should be noticed that the shift from the ruined castle of
> the European prototypes to the forest and cave of Brown involves
> a shift not just in the manner of saying what the author is after.
> *The change of myth involves a profound change of meaning.* In
> the American gothic, that is to say, the heathen, unredeemed wil-
> derness and not the decaying monuments of a dying class, nature
> and not society becomes the symbol of evil... Our novel of terror,
> that is to say (even before its founder has consciously shifted his
> political allegiances), is well on the way to becoming a Calvinist
> exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened
> attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition. The Eu-
> ropean gothic identified blackness with the super-ego and was
> therefore revolutionary in its implications; the American gothic (at
> least as it followed the example of Brown) identified evil with the id
> and was therefore conservative at its deepest level of implication,
> whatever the intent of its authors.[13]

Thus the "macabre search"[14] in *Absalom, Absalom!* is there
as an image of the painful, horrifying process of gradual insight

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(in his later stories), Stephen Crane, and Hemingway; and the other tra-
dition of frontier humor and realism, beginning with Augustus Long-
street's *Georgia Scenes* and having Mark Twain as its best example".
As for *Absalom, Absalom!*, its "somber and, at moments, plainly incred-
ible story" seems to belong "in the realm of Gothic romances, with
Sutpen's Hundred taking the place of the haunted castle on the Rhine,
with Colonel Sutpen as Faust and Charles Bon as Manfred. Then sud-
denly it dawns on you that most of the characters and incidents have
a double meaning: that besides their place in the story, they also serve
as symbols or metaphors with a general application". *The Portable
Faulkner*, ed. by Malcolm Cowley, New York, 1951, p. 22 and pp. 12—13
(Introduction).

[13] Leslie A. Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel*, London,
1970, p. 151. Harry B. Henderson III, in his *Versions of the Past, The
Historical Imagination in American Literature*, New York, 1974, sees
Faulkner's view as belonging to the conservative, "holistic", philosophy
of history. (See esp. pp. 254—65).

[14] Ilse Dusoir Lind: "The Desing and Meaning of *Absalom, Ab-
salom!*", in *William Faulkner, Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. by Frede-
rick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, Michigan State University Press,
1960, p. 289.

into the historical forms of the primal guilt of the South.[13] If the South of Quentin Compson — and of the other characters from whose points of view Faulkner chooses to expound his stories — is a myth, it is one that can be embodied in the morbid suggestiveness of Sutpen's death from Wash Jones' rusty sythe, of Henry's inexorable bullet in his half-brother's body, in the perverse degradation of the effete, frenchified Sutpen offshoot, Charles Etienne de Saint Velery Bon.

The narrative technique distances the actual events, for its primary purpose is not to render individual destinies, to make us watch personal crises and dramatically achieved decisions, but to create a partial vision of history that is generally valid but works itself out in a plethora of individual destinies.[16]

The Gothic element of *Wuthering Heights*, on its part, does not contribute to the placing of its characters into a historical vision. It is rather a view of cosmic forces at play in individuals, of amoral impulses finding outlet in acts of cruelty unacceptable to any civilized code. The vivid metaphors in the language of the main characters connect their actions and impulses with the world of nature, the energy of wind, rain, and sun, the changes of seasons. Gothic horrors were employed by earlier writers for the creation of mere sensationalism through a mechanic accumulation of incidents without any deeper thematic significance. They were brought by Emily Brontë into the sphere of psychologically consistent human behaviour and have been given a symbolic function. In her novel they point beyond the individual onto the free play of human passions and the need of the psyche to overcome repression; in Faulkner the Gothic serves to show the pressures of the past and the impossibility to overcome it, the patterned fate of a historically formed and confined community.

II

The basic difference between the two novels is, of course, that in *Absalom, Absalom!* there is no Catherine. This makes a comparison between the two books more difficult, since a *Wuthering Heights* without Catherine is like *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. Nevertheless, the court is complete in

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[15] This speculative "macabre search" can be compared to the physical one in *Intruder in the Dust*, where it exists on the level of grotesque humor along the lines of Mark Twain.

[16] "The solidity of Faulkner's provinciality provides the unshakeable foundation for his immensely ambitious exploration of the fundamental human themes with which he is always primarly concerned, and the examples of Hardy and Emily Brontë may suggest that Faulkner is not alone among novelists in pursuing the universal in terms of the intensely local." Millgate, p. 164.

all its temporal hierarchy; the pattern of family relationships in the two novels is basically analogous.

Each novel follows a family history through at least three generations. We know something of Sutpen's childhood and family background, but it is only with Sutpen himself that the name, its reputation and power, become established. The second generation: Judith and Henry, Clythie, Charles — the generation which should normally expand the inherited amenities — undergoes a profound rift, an inner conflict predetermined by the social and racial dichotomy of Sutpen's involvements; concerns for legitimacy, colour, threats of incestual recognitions, are issues which bring ruin to what could have otherwise survived as a prosperous and firm home. The wilful degradation of Sutpen's only grandchild, Charles Etienne, and, in turn, the final regression of Charles Etienne's offspring, Jim Bon/d/, wind up the sequence of this luckless outburst of constructive energy which will leave its imprint throughout a century of Yoknapatawpha history.

Wuthering Heights also deals with three generations — in fact with the interlinked relationship of members of two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons. Before deciding whether there is any significant comparison to be drawn with the inner movement of the Sutpen line, it seems advisable first to examine more closely the genealogical pattern in Faulkner's work.

Foundation; inherent conflict and division; moral and physical decadence — these three stages in the Sutpen history have their analogies in a number of narrative works in all nations: the Rougon-Macquart cycle by Zola and *Les Thibault* by Roger Martin du Gard in France, M. E. Saltykow-Shchedrin's *Golovlyow Family* in 19th and Maxim Gorki's *The Artamonows* (translated in 1927 in America as *Decadence*) in early 20th century Russia, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* in Germany and Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* in England. Other nations have their own modifications of what appears to be a fictional sub-genre, for it seems to have not only thematic, but also structural features. Thomas Mann spoke of his distant Norwegian models, Kieland and Lie;[17] more closely, in the genealogical pattern, in Croatian literature Miroslav Krleža created plays and shorter fiction dealing with the fortunes of the Glembay family and the members of its collateral branches.

The first attempt at defining the "genealogical novel" may have easily been an article by A. E. Zucker in PMLA in 1928,[18]

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[17] Thomas Mann: *Gesammelte Herke in zwölf Banden,* S. Fischer Verlag (Copyright 1960), vol. XI, p. 550.

[18] A. E. Zucker: "The Genealogical Novel, A New Genre", PMLA, Vol. 43, 1928, pp. 551—60.

but a more concentrated and more precise development from this source appears in Robert Morss Lovett's study of *Buddenbrooks:*

> Genealogical novels ... must be distinguished from the simpler novels such as *Clarissa Harlowe* or *The Newcomes.* In those, the destiny of the individual hero or heroine is visibly influenced by his membership in a family group which thus assumes a role more active than mere background. In the genealogical novel, however, the family itself serves as a hero, and its fortunes are followed throught several generations. Such a plan is usually dictated by an interest extending beyond personal histories and problems, by a more scientific concern with the principle of environment and heredity, wich can be discerned only by observatons carried through a cycle of individual lives.

The author continues by saying that much of the genealogical novel's interest is based on a biological and sociological concept and that works of this type are therefore a fairly recent development in literature.[19]

Lovett's definition seems to allude to Zola's conception of his own fictional world as a beginning of the idea of the genealogical whole in the novel of naturalism and modernism. In 1868, while he was planning his cycle, Zola wrote a "General Draft of the Work's Movement", in which he applies the biological factor of heredity to a family within the social dynamism of the Second Empire. In the preface to the first novel in the series on the Rougons and the Macquarts Zola says:

> ... The group, the family that I intend to study has for its characteristics too great demands, a feature of our time that runs after pleasures. Physiologically, they are a slow sequence of nervous and sanguinic events which appear in a race after the first organic lesion, and which, according to the *milieu*, determine in each individual race its feelings, desires, passions, all human manifestations, natural and instinctive, whose fruits bear the accepted names of virtues and vices. Historically they spring from the people, penetrate throughout the whole modern society, climb to all positions, with that essentially modern sweep that the lower classes aquire in their walk through society; thus by their individual dramas they tell the history of the Second Empire, beginning with the coup and ending with the treason at Sedan.[20]

Can Thomas Sutpen's "design" be seen as the kind of project of enjoyment and satisfaction that Zola has in mind?

Zola's own idea ramified into a number of fat volumes dealing with very distant offshoots of his initial family founders, but when one looks at the more wieldy works of the other

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[19] Robert Morss Lovett: "Buddenbrooks", in *The Stature of Thomas Mann,* ed. by Charles Neider, New York, 1947, p. 113.

[20] Emile Zola: *Les Rougon-Macquart* I, Bibliotèque de la Pléiade, 1960, p. 3.

authors that were mentioned above it is clear that the process of degeneration crystallizes in three main stages. These are not necessarily three successive generations — there may be more as in *Absalom, Absalom!* or, on the other hand, the founders (or those who have achieved the culmination of wealth and constructive firmness), the generation of inner disjunction and the generation in which the dissolution of the family principle takes place, need not follow strictly in a parents-children-grandchildren sequence.

The polarization at the second stage of the family cycle usually happens between that part of the generation which respects inherited norms and an accepted life style and that part which embraces what is new, anarchic, rebellious, aesthetic rather than utilitarian, verging on the decadent and on what degrades traditional moral values. In the last phase, illness, frivolity, artistic exclusiveness, or revolutionary commitment which negates all family inheritance, material and moral, have destroyed the uniting thread provided by their ancestors, and the family ceases to exist as a coherent, organic whole. The last phase is represented by children, only potentially present in the novel (*Les Thibault*, Faulkner), by young people who have rejected the values of their family but still feel as if they were a part of the family (Galsworthy), by people who have developed an artistic sensibility the foundation for which they were given by their family; yet at the same time the display of that sensibility means a transcending and denying of the family (Hanno in *Buddenbrooks*), or if such young people have no opportunity for genuine creativeness, or no strength or sufficient talent, they remain frivolous with tragic or burlesque consequences (The Golovlyows, Krleža's *Leda*). Representatives of that generation can also be sensitive, intelligent revolutionaries who do not succeed in developing their full potential (Martin du Gard, Gorki), tolerant followers in the footsteps of the older generation, without imagination or without strength to maintain continuity (Jacob Artomonov, Jason Compson), dumb, inferior bearers of the biological stigma *(Absalom, Absalom!)*, madmen, women ruined by promiscuity *(The Sound and the Fury)*. The exhaustion of the family can assume an infinite number of forms, but their function within identical structures has essentially one and the same meaning.

The total vision of a genealogical cycle implies such a complexity of human relationships that most works of the type consist of several books. After Zola's novels, *Les Thibault* and *The Forsyte Saga* are characteristic examples of such extended cycles, but in Faulkner there is an even larger composition at work — a cycle of cycles comprehending the whole Yoknapatawpha complex of notable families and their inner relationships

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and dissolutions. The basic structure of *Absalom, Abaslom!* applies also to the Sartorises, as well as to the Compsons, the Mac-Caslins, the Stevenses. Faulkner's style and the rich inventiveness of the multiple point of view that informs each of his novels in a different manner, are in tune with his characters' complex perspective of the past — which is the only significant repository of human values in this interpretation of human relationships.

It is an image of fatality impregnated by a keen sense of an achieved ending: *Fin de siècle? — No, fin du monde!* are the words in a turn of the century conversation in Oscar Wilde,[21] and the catastrophic conception of a genealogical cycle belongs to the era opened up by the Nietzschean criticism of the middle class civilization that on the eve of 1900 so much impressed the young future author of *Buddenbrooks.* The basic idea of the organic development and exhaustion which Zola offered as scientific, looks back for its aesthetic realization to the ideas of natural growth, intrinsic energy, and subjective form that accompanies the poetic creativity of Romanticism. And Heathcliff, that archetypal figure of satanic negativity in his Blakeian fierceness and his destructiveness of conventional structures upon which house and family are built, can hardly be detached from Byronic and Gothic Romanticism.

Like Heathcliff, Sutpen was recognized above as a descendant of the Gothic protagonist (or rather — antagonist!). Can Heathcliff's and Sutpen's position within the family cycles in the two novels also be compared?

Writing about *Wuthering Heights*, Terry Eagleton speaks of the book's genealogical structure: "Familial relations at once provide the substance of antagonism and mould that substance into intricate shape, precipitating a tightly integrated form from the very stuff of struggle and disintegration. The genealogical structure, moreover, allows for a sharply dialectical relation between the 'personal' and 'impersonal' of a sort rare in Charlotte: the family, at once social institution and domain of intensely interpersonal relationships, highlights the complex interplay between an evolving system of given unalterable relations and the creation of individual value".[22]

This definition could also aply to every novel of the type that we have just examined, but there are differences that separate *Wuthering Heights* from a genealogical cycle: In the

[21] Oscar Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 198.
[22] Terry Eagleton: *Myths of Power, A Marxist Study of the Brontës,* London and Basingstoke, 1975, p. 98.

works of that generic group not one single character dominates the whole space of the novel. Even in the narrow environment of *Absalom, Absalom!* either Sutpen or Bon might be seen as a central figure, and, in fact, a wavering of the reader's attention between the relationships focussed on each of the two characters will substantially contribute to the effect of tension that originates in the inner drama of the novel. But even if we concentrate on Sutpen, as a counterpart to Heathcliff, the difference is significant. Sutpen is the founder of the family and belongs to it, whereas "as a waif and orphan, Heathcliff is inserted into the close-knit family structure as an alien; he emerges from that ambivalent domain of darkness which is the 'outside' of the tightly defined domestic system... Heathcliff is a purely atomised individual, free of generational ties in a novel where genealogical relations are of crucial thematic and structural importance; and it is because he is an internal émigré within the Heights that he can lay claim to a relationship of direct personal equality with Catherine who, as the daughter of the family, is the least economically integral member. Heathcliff offers Catherine a friendship which opens fresh possibilities of freedom within the internal system of the Heights; in a situation where social determinants are insistent, fredom can mean only a relative independence of given blood-ties, of the settled, evolving, predictable structure of kinship".[23]

In *Wuthering Heights* the disintegration of the family does not come from within, although the three stages in its drama seem analogous to the literary function of the three generations in the genealogical cycle. The drama of *Wuthering Heights,* contrary to that of the genealogical cycle, begins in the sphere of social and economic functioning:"... because the social unit of the Heights — the family — is both 'natural' (biological) and an economic system, it acts to some degree as a mediation between Nature and artifice, naturalizing property relations and socializing blood-ties... Heatcliff disturbs the Heights because he is simply superfluous: he has no defined place within its biological and economic system".[24]

Obviously, the passive fatalistic conception of the naturalistic inheritance, of which Faulkner is only a late proprietor, does not belong to the earlier, Romantic vision of Emily Brontë: if blood is important in her work it is not for reasons of race but as a metaphor of continued living, as a flow of vitality of both aggressor and victim. And yet alternations in the family relationships in *Wuthering Heights* are also brought about through conflict and conjuction. In this novel there is not only

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[23] *Ibid.,* pp. 102, 103.
[24] *Ib.,* pp. 105, 106.

the history of one family but of two which get related, and by
the end of the novel they are merged into one through the
marriage of their only surviving offspring. The genealogical
chart has a perfect symmetry, which has often been rightly ad-
mired in Brontë criticism.[25] The oldest generation, that of Mr.
Linton and Mr. Earnshaw, is not, as in genealogical cycles, that
of beginners, founders, but of typical, not particularly distingu-
ished representatives of the two social worlds. In the second
generation, the two children from each of the two homes and
two persons from the outside world, Frances and Heathcliff,
constitute three couples, and judging only by the scheme of the
marriage relationships one could not suspect the short and pro-
bably marginal significance of Frances on the one hand, and
the diabolic insinuation of Heathcliff into the life of every sin-
gle Earnshaw and Linton on the order. His impact is due to his
special relationship to Catherine, from which naturally there is
no offspring. The schematic pattern of the relationship is play-
ed against the dynamic rhythm of the story's progress. The
three couples produce three children altogether, which are
among themselves united into two consecutive marriages.

In terms of energy, passion, activity, the last phase in the
family saga is a weaker one than that which preeceeds it, just
as the tone and rhythm of the book is weaker here, and Heath-
cliff's outbursts are more mechanical, until they finally peter
out. There is no background justification for the sickly and
feeble Linton as against the lively, generous Cathy, as for com-
parable characters it is implied in the biological speculations
characteristic of genealogical cycles. The next stage however is
perfectly analogous to an essential type in the third generation
spectrum in such works. Hareton and Cathy, more reasonable
and cut down to human proportions, are, as has been said, a
lesser generation that Heatcliff and Catherine. They too may
remind us of the blind alley in the family development of the
Zola tradition. There are hints at ingrowth that may lead to
such an *impasse:* The symbolical completeness of Catherine and
Heathcliff, the suggestive fact of Heathcliff's relationship with
two sisters-in-law and the closed circle of Cathy's two
marriages with her only cousins.[26]

[25] A model analysis is that by C. P. Sanger ("The Structure of
Wuthering Heights), reprinted in *Wuthering Heights, An Anthology of
Criticism*, compiled by Alastair Everitt, London, 1967 (pp.193—208).
[26] "Might not Heathcliff and Cathy be brother and sister?", spe-
culates Eric Solomon in a short article, and maintains that "this view
supplies an answer to some of the novel's ambiguities". Also, "Heathcliff,
as Earnshaw's real son, would have an increased motivation for his
bitter insistence that Wuthering Heights must belong to him. (Above all,
the tragedy of *Wuthering Heights* is increased in intensity and inevita-

However impressive the similarities between the pattern of the genealogical cycle and that of *Wuthering Heights,* at the end of Emily Brontë's novel there in no extinction of the family in sight, as is the case, radically so, in *Absalom, Absalom!,* but a perspective of continuity instead: Hareton and Cathy may be standing at the beginning of a calm and prosperous family life for generations to come. Romantic optimism may be the result of Emily's working out of tragic clashes and pan-natural violence, and we may place it against the postanaturalist scepticism that, in Thomas Mann for instance, follows the scientific acceptance in Zola's *Dr Pascal* (the last volume in the Rougon--Macquart series), and is detectable in the modernist nihilism of Faulkner's historical overview.

III

The abstract features of a family novel thus acquire very opposite significance in the two books when the functions of each of the constituent parts are seen in the context of the whole. A comparable difference might be traced in the narrative technique in spite of the surprising similarities on the surface which, as it has been pointed out in the beginning, have set in motion the present investigation.

Michael Millgate has rightly written that "the progressive piecing together of events and interpretations from the evidence provided by a variety of narrators" in *Absalom, Absalom!,* "bears a certain resemblance to the structure of Emily Brontë's *Wurthering Heights*",[27] and yet the relationships in the narrative framework of the Sutpen and the Heathcliff stories are very different. As Millgate himself says, "Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson have an essential role to play in the total narrative structure; ultimately, however, the burden of recreation, interpretation, and suffering falls inexorably on Quentin, just as, with utterly different effect, Mr. Lockwood is the final reposi-

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bility if Heathliff and Cathy are seen not only as the products of their own wilfully destructive natures, but as the victims of a fate beyond their control ..." ("The Incest Theme in *Wuthering Heights*", *Nineteenth-Centrury Fiction,* XIV, June 1959, pp. 80—83.) In a somewhat different manner, Dorothy Van Ghent also relates Emily Brontë's use of the symbolism of the incest motive to the drama between Catherine and Heathcliff: "The incestual impulse appears as an attempt to make what is 'outside' oneself identical with what is 'inside' — a performance that can be construed in physical and human terms only by violent destruction of personality bounds, by rending of flesh and at last by death." (pp. 206—207). She then proceeds briefly to discuss in psychoanalytical terms other examples of "the implicit incestuousness of the 'two children' figure" in *Wuthering Heights.*

[27] Millgate, p. 163.

tory of the story of *Wuthering Heights*".²⁸ Contrary to Quentin, Lockwood has prompted Nelly to speak, but is a passive listener, the author's excuse for having the story told and a foil of average decency to the extreme disruption of conventional behaviour of which we learn. The telling of the story in both books is extremely sophisticated — perhaps more so in *Wuthering Heights,* where it has the appearance of artless spontaneity both in composition and in style. It might appear as an ordinary retrospective story beginning with a presentation of the current state of affairs, unusual enough to make the reader wonder about what had brought it about. Nelly's narration is unobtrusively interwoven with shorter accounts both by first and second rank actors in the story (Heathcliff himself, Isabella etc.), and by background witnesses, like Zillah and Kenneth. There are some letters, and there are Lockwood's own intermissions based on his initial experience. The story is presented as told over a longer period of time, and its final stage takes place after the *in medias res* situation in the opening episode, in fact after Nelly's retrospective narration had brought it up to the moment described in the first two chapters.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Rosa is not the only main narrator; Mr. Compson is throughout the novel even longer in that position than she is. He will give not only an account of events, but will contribute to an explanation of Miss Rosa's motives as a narrator. They both will rely not only on individual witnesses that are part of the mainstream story, but Mr. Compson will rely on what his father, General Compson, told him from knowing Sutpen and from having been told by him about his, Sutpen's past.

Contrary to what happens in *Wuthering Heights,* the story produced by Rosa and Mr. Compson is not a definite account that will not be further scrutinized within the novel. Data are reconstructed, hints a possibilites dramatized into actual scenes, unknown motives searched after and interpreted in the vivid exchange between Quentin, the deeply involved Southerner, and his somewhat ironically detached but increasingly excited Canadian friend Shreve.

We can ask ourselves whether the primary thing in the book is the Sutpen story itself, in the oblique perspective through which it is conveyed to the reader, or whether the very process of inquiry in not really the dominant dimension of the novel. Or to put it in terms of a somewhat less intricately composed work of seminal influence upon the writing of *Absalom, Absalom!:* whose story is *Lord Jim,* Jim's or Marlow's? Faulk-

²⁸ *Ibid.,* p. 154.

ner himself insisted in his University of Virginia answers that is was Sutpen's story.[29] But Richard Poirier is hardly unjustified in maintaining that the novel is "about the meaning of history for Quentin Compson".[30]

Never indeed is the telling in *Absalom, Absalom!* transparent enough to allow us a direct view of the main characters in crucial scenes, working out their relationship. Sutpen hardly says a word, apart from a few repartees imagined by Quentin. (It is almost a shock to see him humanly relaxed and careless in the story "Wash", where he is presented directly. That story, written a few years before the novel, is the source of a crucial event in the later, much more extended work.) Sutpen's plans and the significance of his "grand design" for himself are reported to the reader by Mr. Compson, who makes constant reference to his informant, General Compson. This should be compared to the cold shamelessness with which Heathcliff explains to Nelly the precise intention of his successive diabolic moves; e. g.:

> "My design is as honest as possible. I'll inform you of its whole scope," he said. "That the two cousins may fall in love, and get married. I'm acting generously to your master: his young chit has no expectations, and should she second my wishes, she'll be provided for at once as joint successor with Linton."
> "If Linton died," I answered, "and his life is quite uncertain, Catherine would be the heir."
> "No, she would not," he said. "There is no clause in the will to secure it so: his property would go to me; but, to prevent disputes, I desire their union, and am resolved to bring it about."[31]

The mortal tiredness of a Macbeth that falls over Heathcliff, comes after his success has proved unlimited and — so it seems — final. The perspective from which Heathcliff is seen, is that of people with an average, unoriginal moral sensibility. Quentin, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is highly strung himself, and Shreve feels deeply involved in achieving some kind of cogent interpretation: it is the highly stylized, radically unreal speech of every single character in *Absalom. Absalom!* that provides the distancing created in *Wuthering Heights* by the sober commonsensicality of the narrators.

The double indirectness in *Absalom, Absalom!* is due to the fact that the characters in the inner story are never, except for a few words, seen as talking to each other, and by the long

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[29] Gwynn and Blotner, p. 275.

[30] Richard Poirier: "'Strange Gods' in Jefferson, Mississippi: Analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Absalom, Absalom!"*, ed by Arnold Goldman, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., p. 15.

[31] P. 185.

periphrastic periods in which presentation, alternative specula-
tion, and generalized sententious evaluation coexist. And yet,
the narrative perspective varies from one chapter to another,[32]
and all the details that constitute the story are elaborated upon
at least twice.[33]

It has been said of *Lord Jim* that it "is made up of recur-
rences in which each part of the story has already happened
repeatedly when the reader first encounters it, either in some-
one's mind, or in someone's telling, or in the way it repeats
other similar events in the same person's life or in the lives of
others".[34] This is even more true of *Absalom, Absalom!* where,
as an analysis can show,[35] each event is repetitively gone over,
appart from the numerous anticipatory hints to events and
meetings and actions that are more fully presented later. In
comparison, *Wuthering Heights* seems to be a straight, basically
chronological account, uncomplicated by reflexion and histori-
cal reference. And yet, its skillful construction never allows us
to forget that the story is told to us through the mediation of at
least two narrators, which implies at least three time levels: a)
when the story is told, b) when a particular experience of Nel-
lie Deans takes place, and c) occasions to which her various in-
formants refer or to the future development of which she her-
self alludes, including also the reader's memory of M. Lock-
wood's opening visit to Wuthering Heights.

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[32] In the first chapter it is Rosa's voice speaking, in the second
the account is impersonal, combining information from Miss Rosa and
from General Compson (through Mr. Compson). Mr. Compson's know-
ledge is imparted in the third chapter in the third person and continues
in the fourth chapter in the first person. Miss Rosa's direct speech is
reported in chapter five, while in the next three chapters Quentin and
Shreve argue and complete each other, basing themselves on Mr.
Compton's letter. The final chapter is a direct factual account of
Quentin's and Miss Rosa's trip, though, as it were, in Quentin's memory
interrrupted by Shreve's simplifying interventions.

[33] Chapters one to three deal with Sutpen's history from his arrival
in Jefferson to the Civil War, chapter four explores the Henry-Bon
relationship, and chapter five resumes the Sutpen story from the Civil
War to Sutpen's death; chapter six follows the family history for two
further generations, chapter seven reaches back to the antecedents of the
story's beginnings: to Sutpen's youth, and follows his life up to its end,
relying on details from several preceding chapters. The Bon-Henry re-
lationship is further scrutinized, explained, and reintegrated in the last
but one chapter, and the final chapter, a *coda*, tells of the ultimate events
that turn around the Sutpen house and bring about its consummation in
flames.

[34] J. Hillis Miller: "The Interpretation of *Lord Jim*" in *The Inter-
pretation of Narrative, Theory and Practice,* ed. by Morton W. Bloomfield
Cambridge Press, 1970, p. 223.

[35] See notes 32. and 33.

Still, the overall system of internal references is much simpler than is Faulkner's dense network of motifs. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrative keeps returning to a limited number of identical situations; in *Wuthering Heights* Nelly's story line continues in one direction and the sense of unity is strengthened by the fact that different incidents appear to have an analogous significance: Heatcliff's behaviour varies little in relationship to Cathy, Isabelle, Hareton, Linton, etc. What happens between pairs of persons also recurs periodically, sometimes with only slight variants.

Faulkner's frequent returning to a few focal situations may seem to be a mannerism, but it has a function: his intention is not to tell a story, but to display a process of practical hermeneutics — of interpretation and reinterpretation based on different concepts of life and history: it winds up, but does not end. *Wuthering Heights* has an ending, a happy one — and by ending it opens up into possibilities of new life. The horrors of the past are transcended in the natural growth of young people united. The difference between the two books is not just that between optimism and a sceptical acknowledgement of a historical *impasse*. The profound reverberations of a psychical breakthrough into freedom — freedom that turns out to be both from and for oppression — happen in a context of natural dynamism that acquires metaphysical significance. Yet they do not change the traditional character of Emily Brontë's story, however sophisticated the techniques of placing and distancing the world of its heroes.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* on the contrary, we seem to be dealing with a new phase in fictional organization that Joseph Frank called "spatial form".[36] Discussing modernist poetry and novels he explains the effects of juxtaposition and the reflexive reference of imagery. In a novel with an articulate story line like Faulkner's, the sequence of events seen through a prism of superimposed narrators becomes very complicated. It serves to establish certain thematic constants which will become focal for the subjective construction of meaning: the puzzling out and interpreting of the fictional narrators appears to be a model of the reader's own position towards the narrators in the fiction. Characteristically, in such works the amount of information that we dispose with is heavily reduced compared to that in realistic fiction, but the narrative situations that are dealt with recur often and in different conjunction within the sequence of narration. In this way they acquire crucial signifi-

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[36] Joseph Frank: "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" in *The Widening Gyre*, New Brunswick, 1963. The first version of the article appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. LIII, No. 2, Spring 1945.

cance for the interpretation of the whole. The meaning of "frozen moments"[37] in Faulkner radiates in repeated images, gestures, situations beyond the immediated context, and they thus become symbolic of the static, self-centered, stagnating historical consciousness of Faulkner's bi-racial South.[38]

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Wuthering Heights and *Absalom, Absalom!,* we may conclude, contain substantial similarities which are due not to an accidental use of detail, but to literary procedure in the use of imagery, thematic wholes, and narrative technique. The Gothic hero and the morbid paraphernalia that metaphorically express his drama, the family saga, and the structure of interlinked narration create analogies between the two books which have an interest that goes far beyond any possible borrowing or even unconscious influence.

Formally identical conventions belong to historical contexts removed from each other and therefore in their particular functions serve each time to create very different significance: one novel denotes a belated culmination of Romantic sensibility and the other is a self-extmining construct of great technical complexity registering a self-critical analysis of a world without a future. Methodologically this means that works displaying common features in convention, generic detail and technique, but distant in time and/or place from each other, should be differentiated through a study of their contrastive particularities, which put each into its own context of period and culture.

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[37] Robert Penn Warren: "William Faulkner", in *Forms of Modern Fiction,* ed. by William Van O'Connor, Bloomington, 1964, p. 143.

[38] Davenport, p. 124, quotes Cowley saying of Faulkner that "in writing his prodigious sentences he is trying to convey a sense of simultaneity, not only giving what happened in the shifting moment, but suggesting everything that went before and made the quality of that moment". (Malcolm Cowley: *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944—1962,* New York, 1966, p. 112).

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