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Yoshiaki FURUI

“My Dear Son”: Imagining Letters and Unmaking the Father in Absalom, Absalom!

William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is a novel full of letters. The novel begins with Quentin Compson receiving a note, “a summons” (5) from Rosa Coldfield that initiates his relationship with this old maiden and his involvement in the Sutpen legend. Mr. Compson, Quentin’s father, hands Quentin Charles Bon’s letter, which is the only extant letter addressed to Judith Sutpen. Then, Quentin, now at Harvard, receives a letter from his father that informs him of Rosa’s death. Furthermore, this letter’s physical presence on Quentin’s table receives repeated mention throughout the last four chapters. In addition to these “actual” letters, which are actually written and received, there are many “imagined” letters which Quentin and Shreve collaboratively imagine Bon might have written to both Judith and to Thomas Sutpen. It is thus no exaggeration to say that letters permeate the very fabric of *Absalom*, foregrounding the acts of reading and writing as one of the novel’s most significant thematic concerns.

Letters in *Absalom*, however, have not received critical attention commensurate with their conspicuousness. Scholars have primarily examined the ways in which various characters participate in narrating the history of the Sutpen family, scrutinizing the function of voice and speech in their imaginative reconstruction of the past. From Stephen M. Ross’s study (1989) to a recent article by Jeanne Follansbee (2011), this issue of “voice” has occupied a prominent place in *Absalom*.
criticism. However, it is also true that a handful of critics offered deconstructionist readings of Absalom's letters in the early 1980s, when deconstruction held critical sway. This essay attempts to reinstate letters as the center of critical inquiry and to discuss them in a different register than the foregoing criticism. The present study takes letters as a contested site where a father-son struggle plays out.

Critics have long discussed this question of Quentin's struggle with his father's authority. In revisiting this now-classic issue, the present inquiry draws attention to another important father-son relationship: Charles Bon and Thomas Sutpen. This detour into the past proves conducive to illuminating the present moment Quentin inhabits, especially since much of what is told regarding the Bon-Sutpen relationship is the product of Quentin and Shreve's collective imagination. In other words, this essay engages with two levels of the father-son relationships that dialectically influence one another: the one between Quentin and Mr. Compson and the other between Bon and Sutpen. The synthesis of these two levels reveals that letters constitute a crucial site where father-son paradigms play out in a closely-knit web of two differing temporalities, the past and the present. An examination of Quentin's imaginative reconstruction of Bon and Sutpen's father-son relationship sheds light on his own struggle with his father. Central to the understanding of Quentin's struggle, I argue, is this temporal imbrication where what he sees in the past reflects back what he is now. Through the invention of letters, Faulkner's novel creates a temporal continuum between Bon of the mid-nineteenth century and Quentin of the early twentieth century. This essay concludes by probing the question as to whether Quentin succeeds in bridging the temporal distance between past and present through his engagement with letters.

"Out of Another World": Quentin's Responsibility

An examination of letters in Absalom illuminates one important aspect of the novel: temporal distance. Letters necessarily foreground various forms of distance—temporal, spatial, and psychological—and they assume the function of bridging those distances by serving as a conduit between the addressee and the addressee. Gurkin Janet Altman, in a discussion of letters in novels, has elaborated on the various forms of distance created by letters: "Epistolary discourse is a discourse marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript." Thus, letters
emphasize the temporal and spatial distance between correspondents. “Yet,” Altman adds, “it is also a language of gap closing, of writing to the moment, of speaking to the addressee as if he were present. Epistolary discourse is the language of the ‘as if’ present” (Altman 140). Letters are thus involved in a double contradictory motion: opening and closing gaps.

The distance given particular emphasis in Absalom is precisely a temporal one. Absalom is a historical novel in which the present inhabited by Quentin and the past haunted by the Sutpen family interact in a dialectical manner. Quentin’s attempt to understand the Sutpen legend is nothing but the act of transcending the long temporal distance that lies between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Noteworthy in this context is that Quentin’s engagement with the past begins with his receiving a note from Rosa Coldfield: “[Quentin] had yet in his pocket the note which he had received by the hand of a small negro boy just before noon, asking him to call and see her—the quaint, stiffly formal request which was actually a summons, out of another world almost—the queer archaic sheet of ancient good notepaper written over with the neat faded cramped script” (5). In response to this note from “another world,” Quentin travels to Rosa’s abode, where Rosa’s monologic narration initiates him into the Sutpen legend. Also worth noting is that Rosa’s message both materially and symbolically bears the imprint of the past because it is written on an “archaic” sheet made of “ancient” paper and in the “faded” script, as if it had been scribed a long time ago. Furthermore, Rosa’s “ancient” and “faded” letter is thematically consistent with the world to which Quentin is introduced: it ushers him into “another world,” the distant past that the Sutpens still haunts in Rosa’s memory. Rosa’s letter thus collapses the temporal distance between past and present, plunging Quentin into close proximity with the uncanny past.

That Rosa’s letter stands at the threshold of Quentin’s initiation into the past is all the more supported by a vital revision Faulkner made when developing his short story “Evangeline” (1931) into a full-fledged novel Absalom. “Evangeline” begins quite similarly to Absalom, with an unnamed narrator receiving a message from Don, a character prefiguring Absalom’s Shreve: “I had not seen Don in seven years and had not heard from him in six and a half when I got the wire collect: HAVE GHOST FOR YOU CAN YOU COME AND GET IT NOW LEAVING MYSELF THIS WEEK” (“Evangeline” 583). Faulkner retained a similar opening in Absalom, though with a crucial difference: while the narrator in “Evangeline”
receives the message in the form of a wire, Quentin receives a written note. Faulkner's abandonment of "the wire" in favor of the letter bespeaks the author's specific interest in letters as a central vehicle of communication in *Absalom*. Historically considered, Faulkner's revision indicates his intention to cast the means of communication in *Absalom* specifically into the nineteenth-century cultural milieu. As many historians have demonstrated, the telegraph did not become a widely available means of telecommunication until the turn of the century. In that sense, "Evangeline" is consonant with and reflective of the cultural shift in terms of telecommunications in the early twentieth century. In contrast, mid-nineteenth century America depended on letters as the primary means of private communication. This historical information speaks to the possibility that Faulkner intended to let the aura of the mid-nineteenth century seep into the timeframe of 1909, thereby implicitly fortifying the connection between past and present as well as foreshadowing the recurring presence of letters throughout the novel. Put differently, the reception of a letter at the very beginning of the novel lends structural coherence to its overall engagement with letters. The reception of Rosa's letter forms an important continuum with Quentin's subsequent reception of Bon's and Mr. Compson's letters and with his imaginative reconstruction of Bon's letters in Chapter Eight.

Rosa's letter showcases how the economy of epistolary communication operates in *Absalom*. Receiving a letter is not just a passive act, but any letter tacitly demands a response from its addressee. Altman argues that "the reader [of a letter] is called upon to respond. If there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (Altman 89). This is indeed the very dynamics at work at the beginning of *Absalom*. Rosa's letter summons Quentin, and in response to her request, Quentin goes to Rosa to listen to her story. However, there seems to be more than just Rosa's letter to which Quentin is urged to respond. When Quentin desires to know the reason why Rosa chose him as a listener to her story, Mr. Compson answers: "[S]he chose you because your grandfather was the nearest thing to a friend which Sutpen ever had in this county. . . . She may believe that if it hadn't been for your grandfather's friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here." He then adds the following conjecture: "So maybe she considers you partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him" (8; italics
added). This word “responsible” suddenly implicates Quentin in a distant past on which he has no direct bearing. Here, there is an important association between the words “responsibility” and “response”: now that he is responsible, he is required to respond to the past in some way or another.

Mr. Compson’s logic in the above passage warrants attention. If Quentin is accountable “through heredity” for the past, Mr. Compson, by the same logic, should be equally responsible, for General Compson is not only Quentin’s grandfather but also Mr. Compson’s own father. Worth noting here is that Mr. Compson’s verbal transmission of the Sutpen legend to his son coincides with the transfer of Bon’s letter. It is only after Mr. Compson produces Bon’s letter before Quentin’s eyes that he begins to narrate the story (71). After finishing his narration, Mr. Compson hands Quentin this letter (101) as if to absolve himself of the burden of the Sutpen’s history symbolized in the material form of the letter. If “Quentin Compson is the final legatee to whom the story of Thomas Sutpen and his family is bequeathed” (Lensing 113), then Quentin is likewise the final legatee of Bon’s letter. Mr. Compson’s act of handing the letter to Quentin, then, can be interpreted as a paternal bequeathal of not only an important historical document but also responsibility for a particular past. This generational transmission of “heredity,” however, ends with Quentin. Unlike Mr. Compson, Quentin, the character who commits suicide in The Sound and the Fury (1929), does not have a son to pass on this responsibility to, thus representing a termination of a historical burden passed down for more than half a century.

Further examination of Quentin’s response/responsibility necessitates, if tentatively, attempting a definition of what his “responsibility” means. First and foremost, the revelation of Quentin’s responsibility marks a transformative moment for him as a young man that has hitherto engaged little with the past. True, since his childhood, Quentin has been vaguely familiar with stories of the past: “His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward” (7). Here he is figured as a purely passive receptacle of the stories about the past. However, once “responsible,” he cannot remain a passive listener, and he is held accountable for doing something as a response to the past to which he is now made privy. Bon’s letter, much more than just an imprint of the past, directly speaks to him. As Quentin begins to read
the letter, he hears "the dead tongue speaking after the four years and then after almost fifty more, gentle sardonic whimsical and incurably pessimistic, without date or salutation or signature" (102). These words, along with the letter's lack of a salutation, equate Quentin with Judith, the original addressee of this letter. Thus, no longer a passive receptacle for ghosts' voices, Quentin feels compelled to actively read and interpret the Sutpen story. Quentin's responsibility, then, is to offer a reading of the Sutpen legend that his father leaves ultimately unexplained: "It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know" (80). The reception of Bon's letter symbolically inaugurates Quentin's involvement in, as Rosa states, the "curse on the South" (14), turning Quentin from a passive recipient into an active respondent to the past.7

The act of reading written words in Absalom demands a reader's close attention and active engagement. As Bon's and Rosa's "faded" scripts indicate, written words in Absalom are often barely legible and require the reader's careful scrutiny of their material condition. Bon's script is not only faded but also handed to Quentin in a faint light that makes it all the less legible: "Mr Compson, carrying the letter, emerged from the house, snapping on the porch light as he passed. 'You will probably have to go inside to read it,' Mr Compson said" (71). Also noteworthy is the fact that the word "decipher" is repeatedly employed when Quentin tries to read written words. For example, Mr. Compson describes Bon's letter to Judith as "faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces" (80). Furthermore, in a scene in which Quentin encounters Bon's tombstone, the inscription on the stone is again barely readable: "[H]ere and there a carved letter or even an entire word [was] momentary and legible in the faint light which the raindrops brought particle by particle into the gloom and released" (153). Quentin must then look closely at the inscribed letters to decipher them: "Quentin looked at the three identical headstones with their faint identical lettering, slanted a little in the soft loamy decay of accumulated cedar needles, these decipherable too when he looked close, the first one" (155). Reading these "faded," "faint," and "almost indecipherable" letters requires Quentin's active commitment to closing the temporal distance between past and present.

Crucially, in approaching these nearly illegible letters, Quentin requires his father's assistance to read them: for Quentin, the act of reading is bound up with
the issue of the father-son relationship. Nowhere is this revealed more clearly than in the aforementioned cemetery scene in which Quentin reads the faded letters on the tombstone with his father’s guidance. Looking at Ellen Coldfield’s tombstone, Quentin wonders: “I wouldn’t have thought they would have had any money to buy marble with in 1869.” In response to this, his father offers an explanation: “[Sutpen] bought them himself” (153). This cemetery scene powerfully recapitulates a father-son relationship, in which Quentin has to rely on his father’s interpretive authority to decipher the inscribed letters. This is further corroborated by the fact that Quentin listens to his father’s interpretation of Bon’s letter before he actually reads it. In short, Quentin’s act of reading is always preceded by his father’s interpretation.

Bon’s Letters to Sutpen

Despite the critical attention that the letters in Absalom have received, there is one important textual detail that has gone unnoted: Sutpen, as a child, was assigned to deliver a note for his father. In a conversation with Quentin’s grandfather, Sutpen recounts the experience in which he ultimately failed to deliver the letter to a plantation owner: “[Sutpen] didn’t even know he was innocent that day when his father sent him to the big house with the message. He didn’t remember (or did not say) what the message was” (185). Before entering this house, however, “[a] nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (188). This experience of failure as a messenger permeates the innocent boy Sutpen with a sense of class division that he until then had not realized existed. His failure of delivering the message dramatizes the originary moment of Sutpen’s first encounter with “another world,” the traumatic distance that seals his fate afterward because his efforts are thenceforward devoted to overcoming this class inferiority to become a powerful planter himself.

This pivotal episode in Absalom highlights an important association between writing and authority, one that the novel consistently presents in repeated representations of letters. The young Sutpen’s experience not only reveals to him the absolute distance from the planter class but also the ineffectuality of his father’s authority. The powerlessness of his own father is symbolically debunked to the boy Sutpen by the fact that his letter is prevented from reaching its addressee. As John T. Irwin has noted, “Comparing the plantation owner with his
own father, Sutpen rejects his father as a model and adopts the plantation owner as his surrogate father” (Irwin 49). Of particular interest here is that Sutpen’s growing literacy in the novel is concomitant with his ascendancy to the place of the father. He tells Quentin’s grandfather: “I had not then learned to read my own name. . . . But I had to know” (196). After fathering three children, creating a dynasty, and establishing his authority as a patriarch on Sutpen’s Hundred, Sutpen becomes a figure whose written words, unlike his father’s, assume a strong power. Sutpen’s words are now much coveted by his unacknowledged son Charles Bon, who awaits his letter as a sign of paternal recognition (261–66). Sutpen’s ascendancy to the patriarchal position in the Old South registers a striking shift from a boy who was the failed messenger of his father’s letter to a man whose letters are anticipated by his offspring.

Bon’s desire for paternal recognition revolves around his father’s letter. However, this much-longed-for epistolary communication ultimately does not materialize: “Maybe he [Bon] thought it would be in the mail bag each time the nigger rode over from Sutpen’s Hundred and Henry believing it was the letter from her that he was waiting for when what he was thinking was *Maybe he will write it then. He would just have to write ‘I am your father. Burn this’ and I would do it*” (261; italics original). Despite his anxious longing that never gets requited, Bon nonetheless attempts to indirectly communicate with Sutpen by writing letters to Judith:

[M]aybe he did write to Judith now, by the first nigger post which rode to Sutpen’s Hundred, about how it had been an uneventful summer and hence nothing to write about, with maybe Charles Bon plain and indelible on the outside of the envelope and he thinking *He will have to see that. Maybe he will send it back thinking Maybe if it comes back nothing will stop me then and so maybe at last I will know what I am going to do.* (266; italics original)

Bon writes his name on envelopes so as to signal his existence to his father, yet these messages are never received because the letters “didn’t come back” (266). Significantly, Bon’s failure to receive his father’s letter stands in an ironic contrast to Quentin’s reception of Mr. Compson’s letter, which addresses Quentin as “*My dear son*” (141; italics original). While Sutpen’s career essentially begins in his failure to deliver a message to his surrogate father, Bon’s tragedy is typified by his
failure to receive a message from his biological father. At stake in the economy of epistolary communication in Absalom is the question of whether or not an addressee will respond to a letter, just as Quentin is urged to take responsibility for the past by responding to Bon’s letter. By refusing to respond to Bon’s letters and to acknowledge his own son, Sutpen neglects to take responsibility for his past in Haiti, where Bon is supposed to have been born.

Sutpen in many ways is characterized by his refusal to communicate with others. By refusing to write to Bon, Sutpen repeats the same fate that he underwent in his childhood. Despite Bon’s attempts to elicit a response from his father, Sutpen remains adamantly unresponsive. In Altman’s terms, Sutpen reneges on “the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world” (Altman 89). Such incommunicability has led several critics to note Sutpen’s monologism. Drawing on Bakhtin’s notions of “the dialogical” and “the monological,” Stephen M. Ross argues that “Sutpen, whenever he has spoken in the novel, has spoken univocally. . . . He is the personification of the principle of the monological” (Ross 84). By insulating himself in his monologism, Sutpen reenacts the same primary scene that he experienced at the entrance to the planter’s house. When speaking to General Compson, Sutpen recounts his boyhood experience: “The nigger never give me a chance to tell him. . . . He never even give me a chance to say it. Not even to tell it, say it” (191–92; italics original). The language in this passage resurfaces later in the novel when Bon says: “I gave him [Sutpen] every chance to tell me himself. But he didn’t do it” (272). Through his refusal to respond to Bon’s letter, Sutpen, as if to avenge his past traumatic experience, now proclaims his fully potent status as the father.

“My Dear Son”: Resisting the Father’s Letter

When attempting to discern a relation between Bon and Quentin in terms of their respective father-son relationships, there is no overemphasizing the fact that Bon’s letters to Sutpen are the product of Quentin and Shreve’s imagination in Chapter Eight. They collaborate in imagining what Bon might have written to his father and why he might have been waiting for his father’s letter. Then the question arises as to why Quentin and Shreve would choose to understand Bon as yearning for paternal recognition specifically through his desire for the father’s letter. Chapter Six, which opens with a transcription of the first half of Mr. Compson’s letter addressed to Quentin, is key in this regard. Furthermore, Chapter Nine,
where their creative reconstruction reaches a crescendo, concludes with another transcription of the latter half of the same letter. In short, Quentin and Shreve's section running from Chapter Six through Nine is literally framed by Mr. Compson's letter, and their reconstruction of the past occurs precisely within this epistolary framework. To comprehend this framework necessitates following the novel's progress chapter by chapter because Quentin's engagement with his father's letter goes through a gradual and important change toward the end of this section.

Mr. Compson's letter begins Chapter Six in addressing Quentin as "My dear son" (141; italics original). This epistolary address, though a common salutation, is significant when considering the father's authority with regard to his son. In her discussion of Faulkner's representation of father figures, Mauri Skinfill makes an intriguing argument about Benjamin Franklin's The Autobiography by calling attention to the fact that the book starts in the form of a letter to his son. Franklin's book begins in the following manner: "DEAR SON: . . . Imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the circumstances of my life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with . . . I sit down to write them for you" (Franklin 1). Noting this epistolary form, Skinfill then observes: "[Franklin] addresses the account of his rise from poverty to affluence to a 'Dear Son'—a moment marking the originary paternal transmission of the narrative of social mobility" (Skinfill 35). The address "Dear Son," Skinfill argues, translates the epistolary relationship between the author and the recipient into a power dynamic in which a father bequeaths his paternal legacy to his son who must passively receive it. Mr. Compson's address, "My dear son," similarly designates himself as the father and Quentin as his son, thereby hierarchizing their relationship by proclaiming his paternal authority.

However, Mr. Compson's letter is not capable of fully exerting a sense of paternal power over Quentin, as it suddenly vanishes from the text after the transcription of its first half appears at the beginning of Chapter Six. His letter is literally cut in half. The reader has to wait until the beginning of Chapter Seven, where the letter's physical presence becomes suddenly foregrounded. As soon as this chapter opens, we find Quentin sitting before his father's letter:

He sat quite still, facing the table, his hands lying on either side of the open text book on which the letter rested: the 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 in weightless and paradoxical levitation, lying at such an angle that he could not possibly have read it, deciphered it, even without this added distortion. Yet he seemed to be looking at it, or as near as Shreve could tell, he was, his face lowered a little, brooding, almost sullen. (176-77)

This passage captures a bizarre positioning between Quentin and the father's letter. The letter is not wholly open, and its physical position is such that “Quentin could not have read it.” Yet Quentin appears to be “looking at it” without being able to “decipher” what is written therein. In this passage, Quentin is in limbo between the act of reading and of not quite reading, as if he cannot force himself to open the letter into full legibility and finish reading it. It is only after Quentin and Shreve terminate their imaginative reconstruction of the past in the novel that Quentin proceeds to finish his father's letter (301-02). This mysterious lacuna in Quentin's act of reading begs the question as to what may have transpired between his reading the first half of the letter in Chapter Six and the latter half in Chapter Nine.

Quentin's “delay” in reading his father's letter can be better understood through a reexamination of Bon's letter. Laurel Bollinger notes that Mr. Compson delays handing Quentin Bon's letter: “When Mr. Compson produces Bon's letter to Judith, presumably to substantiate his interpretation and thus to confirm his narrative authority, he does not give it to Quentin right away.” “Mr. Compson's interest,” she maintains, “lies as much in his own power of interpretation as in seeking 'truth'” (Bollinger 203). Bollinger's insight suggests that Bon's letter constitutes a site where Mr. Compson can articulate his narrative authority over his son. Mr. Compson's own account of what the letter means precedes its transfer to Quentin. We find Quentin constantly being met with his father's tantalizing remarks such as “[Y]ou will see the letter” (75) and “Yet here is the letter” (85). Thirty pages pass after the first mention of the letter (71) before Mr. Compson finally hands it to Quentin (101). Thus, Quentin is denied direct and transparent access to Bon's letter in the sense that his reading of the letter is necessarily filtered through his father's version of interpretation. Similarly, Quentin delays finishing reading his father's letter until he consummates his own interpretation with Shreve. If Mr. Compson's “delaying” is necessary for him to impose narrative
authority over his son, then Quentin’s “delaying” might signify an effort to exert authority over his father’s interpretation of the Sutpen legend.

Shortly following the passage quoted above in which Quentin broods over the father’s letter, he begins to narrate to Shreve what he has learned from his father about the Sutpens. The story, passed down from General Compson to Mr. Compson and finally to Quentin, details Sutpen’s early life, running from his failure to deliver his father’s letter through to his departure for Haiti. Immediately after Quentin finishes narrating the Sutpen story to Shreve, he again muses on his father’s letter: “He [Sutpen] went to the West Indies.’ Quentin had not moved, not even to raise his head from its attitude of brooding bemusement upon the open letter which lay on the open textbook, his hands lying on the table before him on either side of the book and the letter, one half of which slanted upward from the transverse crease without support, as if it had learned half the secret of levitation” (192–93). Significantly, Quentin’s narration of Sutpen’s failure to deliver his father’s message and his resultant abandonment of his father occurs between the above two passages, when Quentin is presumably looking at his father’s letter. What emerges out of this narrative structure is a curious coincidence that Quentin’s intense look at his father’s letter and the story he narrates in Chapter Seven dovetail to accentuate the same thematic concerns with the father figures (Mr. Compson for Quentin and Sutpen for Bon) and with letters (Mr. Compson’s letter and Sutpen’s letter that never came). Moreover, with his eyes intently fixated on his father’s letter, Quentin narrates the story of Sutpen’s failure to deliver the father’s letter and his subsequent abandonment of the father. The irony of this thematic imbrication is that, as David Krause suggests, throughout this chapter Quentin keeps invoking his father’s narrative authority by repeating the phrase “Father said” in his telling of the story about Sutpen’s abandonment of the father (Krause 275: 2002). The mode of Quentin’s narration explicitly disagrees with the content of his narration, making a contrast between Sutpen, who negates his father, and Quentin, who relies on his father. Given that Quentin’s narration is strewn with the phrase “Father said,” there is no wonder that, as Shreve points out, Quentin “sounds like [his] old man” (210). A narrator dependent on his father’s narrative authority—this is the portrait of Quentin that Chapter Seven powerfully presents to the reader. However, chapters Eight and Nine involve a gradual shift away from Quentin’s dependence on his father.
Quentin and Bon as Doubles

An inquiry into Bon’s letters in Chapter Eight raises a question of who invents these letters. Despite the fact that Shreve does most of the talking in the chapter, the novel’s unnamed narrator complicates the reader’s sense of voice by repeatedly stating that it does not really matter who is speaking. Quentin and Shreve merge and duplicate: “Not two of them in a New England college sitting-room but one in a Mississippi library sixty years ago . . . not two of them there and then either but four of them” (236–37). Before they imagine the lawyer’s letters, Quentin and Shreve are described as “both thinking as one” (243). Eventually the scene arrives at a “happy marriage of speaking and hearing” (253), after which Shreve comes to invent Bon’s letters (261–66). However, immediately after imagining the failure of epistolar communication between Bon and Sutpen, Shreve finally ceases to talk: “Shreve ceased. That is, for all the two of them, Shreve and Quentin, knew he had stopped, since for all the two of them knew he had never begun, since it did not matter . . . which one had been doing the talking” (267). These examples coalesce to demonstrate that the invention of Bon’s letters occurs in Quentin and Shreve’s intimate collaboration, a product of their “marriage of speaking and hearing.” Despite this merger of Shreve and Quentin, however, Shreve arguably possesses a predominant role in imagining Bon’s letters throughout Chapter Eight. Although Quentin plays a definite part in imagining Bon’s letters with Shreve, his participation is motivated by Shreve’s active role both in reading and leading Quentin.

Critics have underscored Shreve’s role as a reader of the South. For instance, J. Hillis Miller argues that “Shreve the Canadian is the reader’s representative [and] the outsider who wants to understand the South” (Miller 268). Shreve also “reads” Quentin, observing this Southerner at a close range. He examines Quentin musing on his father’s letter: “Yet he [Quentin] seemed to be looking at it, or as near as Shreve could tell, he was, his face lowered a little, brooding, almost sullen” (176). Chapter Seven involves Shreve observing Quentin in such a way, reading his roommate and his relationship to the South. More important, Shreve serves to help liberate Quentin from his dependence on his father by repeatedly calling into question Mr. Compson’s narrative authority: “Your old man . . . When your grandfather was telling this to him, he didn’t know any more what your grandfather was talking about than your grandfather knew what the demon was talking about” (220); “[Y]our old man was wrong here, too!” (275); “Your old man
wouldn't know about that too” (286). Shreve persistently refers to Mr. Compson as “old man,” not “your father.” Given the fact that elsewhere Shreve refers to Mr. Compson as a “father,” it can be surmised that he chooses the derogatory “old man” to question Mr. Compson’s authority. Shreve’s appellation for Mr. Compson is similar to his description of Rosa Coldfield as “old gal” (143) and “old dame” (143, 144), to which Quentin immediately corrects him: “Miss Rosa, I tell you” (143). Tellingly, Quentin does not correct Shreve’s reference to his father as “old man,” as if concurring with Shreve in his denunciation of his father’s wrong reading.

From here, it is worth returning to the parallel that was drawn earlier between the two father-son relations, Sutpen/Bon and Mr. Compson/Quentin. What is immediately noticeable about the two is that they constitute the exact opposites. Whereas Sutpen refuses to acknowledge Bon through his writing, Mr. Compson pronounces his paternal position in relation to Quentin by his epistolary address, “My dear son.” Totally differing relationships between the father and the son emerge through the focus on epistolary communication. It is in this context that we have to revisit the question of why Quentin and Shreve choose to understand Bon’s yearning for paternal recognition through the desire for the father’s letters. One possibility stemming from the foregoing discussion is that Quentin and Shreve seek to offset the authoritative power of Mr. Compson’s letter by imagining Bon’s failure to gain paternal acknowledgement. To borrow Carolyn Porter’s words, Sutpen’s letter that never comes, a sign of refusal of paternal acknowledgement, “unmakes the father” (Porter 193: 1995) for Quentin, counteracting his reception of his father’s letter that designates him as “My dear son.” Through the displacement of his own struggle with his father onto Bon’s relation with Sutpen, Quentin, in collaboration with Shreve, unmakes his father’s authority. The fatherless Charles Bon, as represented through Quentin and Shreve’s imagination, can be seen as Quentin’s double, the inverse image of the father-bound son. In other words, Quentin’s reading of Bon ultimately ends up reflecting what he is now, failing to close the distance between past and present: for at the very moment he desires to respond to the past, he begins to engage in his present struggle with his father. Quentin’s foray into an unfamiliar past terminates when he encounters the self-reflexive image. As he projects his own image onto the past, this uncanny past may perhaps be not unfamiliar but very well familiar to Quentin. This unfamiliar past is “uncanny” specifically in the Freudian sense: “[T]he uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and
had long been familiar” (Freud 124). Thus, while believing that he is confronting an unfamiliar past, Quentin in actuality is engaging with something most familiar to him: his conflict with his own father.

**Coda**

It is only after Shreve and Quentin conclude their narration that Quentin finishes reading his father’s letter. In contrast to its existence earlier in the novel, Mr. Compson’s letter in Chapter Nine emerges before Quentin into full legibility: “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” (301). At this point in the novel, it is as if Quentin becomes liberated from the constricting influence of his father’s authority. Yet the important question remains whether Quentin’s final reading of the letter marks a truly liberatory moment for him, who started out the interpretive endeavor with responsibility for the “curse on the South.” The ironic significance of Quentin’s “liberation” is that it throws into relief the persistence of that curse in the present moment. Quentin’s endeavor to interpret the past, an enterprise initiated by Rosa’s letter and further complicated by Bon’s and Mr. Compson’s letters, ultimately presents him as a failed reader of the past, a reader deeply submerged in the present moment. Thus, the meeting of past and present, which is suggested as possible during the outset of the novel, ultimately goes unaccomplished in the end. Quentin’s imaginative journey into the unfamiliar is actually a path to encountering the familiar.

**Notes**

I would like to thank Barbara Ladd for her constructive comments on earlier versions.

1 Many critics have followed Ross’s lead, shedding light on the implications of voice in *Absalom*. Among others, see Dalziel 277–94 and Lockyer 62–71.

2 For criticism on *Absalom*’s letters, see Bielawski 29–54; Ziegler 646; Scherer 168–77; Muhlenfeld 66–80; and Watson 116–29. Also see Krause’s two other essays (1983 and 1984).

3 For a recapitulation of the critical discussion on this point, see Irwin 64.

4 For other informed discussions about the father in *Absalom*, see Bollinger, Porter (1995 and 2000), and Bleikasten.
20 Yoshiaki FURUI

5 On this revision process, see Watson 115.

6 For historical developments in communications media in the US from the mid-nineteenth through the early-twentieth centuries, see Starr's and John's studies. On the importance of letters during the Civil War, see Faust's work.

7 Quentin's relationship with Bon's letter is similar to Ike McCaslin's engagement with the plantation ledgers in "The Bear" (1942). The ledgers Ike reads are not merely the record of dry facts and numbers. It creates a space where the writers actively engage in a textual conversation. Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy write to each other on the page: "29th of Oct 1856 Renamed him... 31 Oct 1856 Renamed him what" (254). Most significantly, Ike himself joins these writers, adding to the ledgers a small but important portion of his family history: "Traced by Isaac McCaslin to Jackson Tenn. and there lost... Jan 12 1886" (261). Ike was born too late to exchange words with the writers of the ledgers but not too late to respond to what is written there and assume "responsibility" (263) for the past in the present time. In this sense, Ike's engagement with the ledgers registers his act of recovering "dead letters" that remained unread and unresponded to for several decades by his family members.

8 On Sutpen's monologism, also see Bollinger 212.

Works Cited


22 Yoshiaki FURUI


