The Episteme of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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> Man is an animal of experience, he is involved *ad infinitum* within a process that, by defining a field of objects, at the same time changes him, deforms him, transforms him and transfigures him as a subject.
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> Foucault, Remarks on Marx[1]

Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault's view of subjectivity can inform William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!,* where the formation of the individual's discursive history is crucial to all action. *Absalom, Absalom!,* with its obviously prejudiced, self-conscious, self-reifying, superficial yet fundamental story-telling, can be seen to epitomise the development of 'truth,' or epistemic knowledge as these two theorists describe it. We see characters consolidating their knowledge through narration, as events around Thomas Sutpen are invented, told, retold and reinvented. Some characters are aware of their determination by the episteme, but its power over their destiny is such that their being conscious of it does not allow them to change themselves, as if they were describing someone else beyond their control. This paper will explore how Foucault and Heidegger's view of how discourses form a society's system of knowledge or *episteme* may shed light on this (celebratedly) opaque text.

Absalom, Absalom! has been singled out for its confused modernist perspective, sometimes ascribed to inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the details. Dirk Kuyk, Jr. shows these are minimal,[2] and Gerald Langford shows that Faulkner was not consciously making a modernist statement when in changing a plot line he missed several necessary revisions of chronology.[3] The impact of narration is recognised generally in Faulkner's writing, and especially here, but has not been explained. In *The Archaeology Of Knowledge,* Foucault criticises this kind of search for contradiction. Rather than being disappointed in a search for "an ideal, continuous, smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx,* tr. R. James Goldstein, James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 124.

[2] Dirk Kuyk Jr, *Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom! (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 60.

[3] Gerald Langford, *Faulkner's Revision of* Absalom, Absalom! (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 3-4. Kuyk shows that the " contradictions" critics find in *Absalom, Absalom!* are produced by their attempted explanations of effects of the text rather than the text's inconsistencies. Criticising Floyd Watkins, he writes:

> Because his [Watkins's] argument demands inconsistencies, he went prospecting for them but too seldom assayed the nuggets he found. A few were true gold, mainly the editorial slips that Langford would later explain. Most of the other inconsistencies that Watkins found are trivial … Far too often Watkins presents as inconsistencies his own misreadings (60, criticising Floyd Watkins, "What Happens in *Absalom, Absalom!," Modern Fiction Studies,* 13 (Spring 1967), 79-87).

Kuyk also suggests that Quentin and Shreve's account is not as speculative as some have assumed, on 61-2.

NUCB JLCC, 10 (1) 2008,

calm unity of coherent thought," he proposes "to map, in particular discursive practice, the point at which they are constituted, to define the form that they assume, the relations that they have with each other, and the domain that they govern." That is, discursive knowledge as formed is by nature inconsistent and we should incorporate such inconsistencies into the description of entities such as the human subject Sutpen. Sutpen embodies a "contradiction that has its model in the simultaneous affirmation and negation of a single proposition,"[4] totally committed to a design which he destroys, as both a ruthless pragmatist and an overweening idealist. But these "contradictory" assertions about and by Sutpen do not exist at the same level. Rather than causing the narration to fail, local contradictions are part of the very formation of the discourse of the text that exposes Sutpen and his design. An entrenched perplexity about *Absalom, Absalom!* (especially amongst earlier critics) obscures its depiction of the episteme's work on characters and their resultant alienation and desire. (I would cite Cobley, Radloff, Sherry and Garfield as the critics closest in approach to mine.)[5] We can see in the text statements about the way the "world" forms and continues to constitute itself in knowledge which have been glossed over by criticism that assumes they are simply, anarchically ironic.

Foucault's "archaeological" method is to look at a document without presuming its intentions or world view, and without applying (perceived fundamental) truths beyond its discourse:

> One is not seeking, therefore, to pass from the text to thought, from talk to silence, from the exterior to the interior, from spatial dispersion to the pure recollection of the moment, from superficial multiplicity to profound unity. One remains within the dimension of discourse.[6]

Words are not simply poor reflections of something more fundamental, and the emphasis Foucault places on the discourses that form knowledge finds its radical counterpart in the universe of Faulkner's fiction, in which the strength of tradition emerges in utterances dominated, even determined by previous utterances. As Foucault explains:

> Having become a dense and consistent historical reality, language forms the locus of tradition, of the unspoken habits of thought, of what lies hidden in a people's mind; it accumulates an ineluctable memory which does not even know itself as memory. Expressing their thoughts in words of which they are not the masters, enclosing them in verbal forms whose historical dimensions they are unaware of, men believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting themselves to its demands. The grammatical arrangements of a language are the *a priori* of what can be expressed in it.[7]

Language and its traditions form the speaking subject's world and bring about whatever is possible for

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[4] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 155.

[5] Bernhard Radloff, '*Absalom, Absalom!* An Ontological Approach to Sutpen's 'Design," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature,* 1986 Winter, v. 19:1, 45-56, Charles Sherry, 'Being Otherwise: Nature, History, and Tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!' Arizona-Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory,* Autumn 1989, v. 45:3, 47-76, Deborah Garfield, 'To Love as 'Fiery Ancients' Would: Eros, Narrative and Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*,' *Southern Literary Journal,* 1989 Fall, v. 22:1, 61-79.

[6] Foucault, *Archaeology,* 76.

[7] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,* tr. unidentified collective (New York: Vintage, 1994), 297.

him or her to think and remember. The archaeological method allows us to retrieve a character's episteme and subjectivity by taking the statements about him or her in the text seriously, not discarding them as "merely" ironic but analysing the relationships these statements establish within this world.

Faulkner foregrounds how knowledge develops, depicting a discursively formed universe that serves as an extreme example of Foucault's (and as we will see later Heidegger's) conceptions of an historically constructed subject and world.[8] Statements made by characters about reality become reality for those characters. Discourse produces a character's consciousness, perception, motivation and the form of his/her desire. Laura Donaldson thus notes that "the Sutpen tradition infuses its participants with an immediate reality which situates them in the center of its meaning," and that tradition is a "fiction" involving "perceptual reconstructions of the actual event."[9] John T. Matthews writes that "Faulkner abides by paradoxes more complicated than Vickery's formulations: silence, preconsciousness, perception, memory, and action are all structured by writing."[10]

As Foucault describes it, the discourse creates "the object":

the object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light.[11]

Statements, which produce a situation rather than describe a pre-existing one, are adopted by the human subject as reality. Examples occur throughout *Absalom, Absalom!,* which begins by emphasising the predetermined nature of knowledge:

they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that   a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat.[12]

Faulkner notes that Rosa calls the room an office and acts in a particular way because of her father's preceding pronouncements. Ragan notes that the novel thus stresses "the impact of the past upon Miss Rosa's thinking,"[13] yet it affects all the characters. This deterministic view of humans, as slaves to the previously established, the discursive utterances given by previous generations, is described by Heidegger:

For man, as he journeys everywhere, is not without issue in the external sense that he comes up

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[8] While Foucault may be prepared to admit external forces play a part in an evolving episteme, Faulkner's universe is closed to anything outside its own statements of truth.

[9] Laura E. Donaldson, "The Perpetual Conversation: The Process of Traditioning in *Absalom, Absalom!* ," *Modernist Studies,* 4 (1982), 183 and 189. This article provides a thorough grounding in the way narration becomes tradition, thus determining human behaviour, and is thus particularly useful because it does not depend on Heidegger, Freud, Lacan or Foucault, though Merleau-Ponty, who influenced Foucault, is admittedly quoted.

[10] John T. Matthews, *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 38. Vickery is an "anti-language" critic. Matthews supposes that Derrida was the first to argue thus against Rousseau, not mentioning any theorist who may have presaged or prompted Derrida, such as Heidegger.

[11] Foucault, *Archaeology,* 45.

[12] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 5.

[13] David Paul Ragan, *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!: *A Critical Study* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 20.

against outward barriers and cannot go on. In one way or another he can always go farther into the etcetera. He is without issue because he is always thrown back on the paths that he himself has laid out: he becomes mired in his paths, caught in the beaten track, and thus caught he compasses the circle of his world… He turns round and round in his own circle. He can ward off whatever threatens his limited space.[14]

For Heidegger, statements enter into the consciousness of the characters and are then passed on to others, forming the limit of their world. Faulkner seems to concur when he admits that "there is nothing new to be said, Shakespeare, Balzac, Homer have all written about the same things."[15] The derivative nature of acting is considered in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Sutpen insists that "most of the deeds, good and bad both … had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books." The descriptions that have been handed down to Sutpen categorise and give value to all action, so Sutpen understands there is a definite limit to what can be done within his world. Likewise, nomenclature is important, for "nobody yet ever invented a name that somebody didn't own now or hadn't owned once."

Conversely, the absence of a common understanding is enough for a subject's humanity to be questioned by Faulkner's characters. The human species is generated by a common language:

> *neighbours who were at least of my own kind, who had known me all my life and even longer in the sense that they thought not only as I thought but as my forbears thought,* [contrasts with Clytie] *who was so foreign to me and to all that I was that we might have been not only of different races (which we were),not only of different sexes (which we were not),but of different species, speaking no language which the other understood.*[16]

Heidegger translates Plato's definition that "man is a rational animal" as "man's Being is 'defined' as … that living thing whose Being is essentially determined by the potentiality for discourse."[17] We can see also in Faulkner, language comes from a tradition that gives the characters an understanding that limits their possibilities and characters adopt, as generations have before them, a particular way of thinking which circumscribes them, defining their being.

Some characters show awareness of the import of their statements and articulate the particular stasis that dominates their author's universe, but they are still not capable of contradicting it. Previous statements exert power over all individuals, particularly in the self-conscious, literary milieu presented to us by Faulkner. As opposed to our own world, the universal regularities of his texts are greater in their authority, more evident in their effects and less covered over by a rhetoric of 'choice.' What "the town believed" becomes fact, generated by and reinforcing the encompassing knowledge. So, for instance, Quentin "did know that she [Rosa] had never before tonight quitted that house after sundown." Rosa Coldfield does not wrestle

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[14] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), tr. Ralph Manheim (1959; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 157-8.

[15] James Meriwether and Michael Millgate (ed.), *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-62,* (New York: Random House, 1968), 238. Faulkner's sense of static epistemic determination contrasts with Foucault's analysis of "change", though Foucault's view is not necessarily more humanistic than Faulkner's. Overall, Faulkner's universe is probably more absurd and closed than Foucault's description of our own. Though in *Absalom, Absalom!* the Civil War does disrupt values temporarily, the characters of Sutpen and Rosa demonstrate that Southern values remain the same in the long term

[16] Faulkner, 199, 219, 126.

[17] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* tr. John Macquarie, Edward Robinson (Harper San Francisco, 1962), 47 (Greek omitted).

with already determined opinion: *"they will have told you doubtless already that I...."* Despite her angst, her ironic tone is to no avail as she already tacitly acknowledges the power of common knowledge, and limits herself to elaborating her given "history" of alienation. The town can fabricate knowledge and thus truth, "since they now believed they knew why Henry had shot Bon,"[18] even though events did not happen this way. The Puritanical, racially chauvinistic episteme of Faulkner's characters becomes their rationale for thought and action.

In Faulkner characters do not apply criteria of self-interest or utilitarianism[19] to their concerns, but rather heed predigested aphorisms of obscure deontology and act accordingly. Differentiating characters' and readers' epistemes, Faulkner contrasts any rational criterion the readers might have in mind with the arbitrary truths the characters accept. Even in the morally and legally questionable practice of tracking down Sutpen's employee, the French architect, Sutpen applies a small-minded criterion of what is appropriate: "he would have to get out and borrow some dogs. Not that he would have needed dogs, with his niggers to trail, but maybe he thought that the guests, the others, would not be used to trailing with niggers and would expect dogs." Characters can only act if others do the same: "Neither papa nor Ellen said: Come back home. No: This occurred before it became fashionable to repair your mistakes by turning your back on them and running."[20] The characters insist that this conformity of behaviour, and this limit to the knowledge of what is possible is normal and proper. Personal volition is explicitly condemned, as the community's ethics coincide with the limits of their world, established by tradition and, at most, modified by unseen others. Faulkner agrees with Heidegger that morality comes out of the accidental reifications of discourse: "Being itself, interpreted as idea, brings with it a relation to the prototypical, the exemplary, the ought."[21] What seem to be moral actions are empty forms passed down as expected and unthinking reflexes, and so one must display *"seemliness to bereavement even though grief be absent,"* because form is all important.

In a similar way, spirituality (of the Puritan episteme) is expressed in terms of commerce:

> Mr Coldfield apparently intended to use the church into which he had invested a certain amount
> of sacrifice and doubtless self-denial and certainly actual labor and money for the sake of what
> might be called a demand balance of spiritual solvency.[22]

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[18] Faulkner, 54, 73, 110, 165.

[19] Foucault's description of the sixteenth-century episteme's production of knowledge by appealing to authorities could equally describe Faulkner's epistemic acceptance of previous generations' statements:

> in the treasure handed down to us by Antiquity, the value of language lay in the fact that it was the sign of things. There is no difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition (Foucault, *Order,* 33).

[20] Faulkner, 180, 22.

[21] Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), tr. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 197. Heidegger describes this reification of morality thus:

> The ought was compelled to bolster up its claim by seeking its ground in itself. The moral claim ... had to present its own justification. Obligation, the ought, could emanate only from something which in itself raised a moral claim, which had an intrinsic *value*, which was itself a *value*. The values as such now became the foundation of morality (the ought). But since the values are opposed to the being of the essent in the sense of facts, they themselves cannot *be*. Therefore they were said to have validity. The values became the crucial criteria for all realms of the essent, i.e. of the already-there. History came to be regarded as a realization of values (198, Heidegger's emphasis).

[22] Faulkner, 116, 41.

Religion is part of the character's world (not other-worldly). Puritan book-keeping dominates the religion, which would have even God taking his directions from the machinations of capitalist banking, as characters must be able to draw on spiritual deposits as they would money from a bank. Reflecting Yoknapatawpha, Christianity is "a balance in whatever spiritual counting-house he [Mr Coldfield] believed would some day pay his sight drafts on self–denial and fortitude."[23]

Foucault's "archaeology" concentrates on discourses' regularities, the relations between statements and their transformation from a previous discourse to a later one. Claiming that "the regularity of statements is defined by the discursive formation itself," and the "fact of its belonging to a discursive formation and the laws that govern it are one and the same thing,"[24] Foucault defines the impersonal historical determinants that bring about a particular manifestation:

> The conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if ..one is to "say anything" about it … are many and imposing … It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations. These relations are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification [and] modes of characterisation.[25]

Outside forces may influence Foucault's episteme, but individuals never do. I would argue that all historical forces are ultimately conveyed through discourse and that such discourses set up or reconstitute relations between these elements: institutions, processes, patterns and norms. Pierre Bourdieu describes the effect of these discourses thus:

> discourse is a *structured and structuring medium* tending to impose an apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through the disguised (and thus misrecognised) imposition of systems of classification.[26]

The creation by discourse of further discourse has its own momentum, and it is this that Faulkner dramatises in the "curse of the South." Southerners become volitionless "ghosts," understanding the South because of "the air they breathed as they grew up" and living by precepts they cannot change even if they want to. When reflecting on their own unreasonableness, characters such as Quentin realise that they will always be enclosed by and never step beyond their forebears' history and understanding of things: *"I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do."*[27] Faulkner's characters describe the way the episteme and its discourses create a human being's propensities. In this case, Mr Compson relates what were originally Judith's statements:

> Because you make so little impression, you see. You get born and you try this and you dont 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

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[23] Faulkner, 69.

[24] Foucault, *Archaeology,* 116.

[25] Ibid., 44-45.

[26] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982), tr. Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Polity, 1991), 169.

[27] Faulkner, 228, his emphasis.

[28] Ibid., 105.

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.[28]

Destiny reveals itself through impulses in the character's unconscious, which can only be glimpsed by the character in his/her behaviour. Faulkner provides a persuasive account of the momentum of self-perpetuating discourses which cannot be overcome by the will of a particular character: a period is set up in which there is no change, progress or even evolution.[29] Characters do not know why they act the way they do, and are puppets moved by unseen forces, as their construction gives them their thoughts, actions and perceptions in a world shared by those around them. Yet each person looks to get ahead, "weave their pattern into the rug" and be recognised within society. Everything is predetermined, yet it does not work as the character feels it should. Elsewhere, he uses a riverine metaphor suggesting a physical connection and no difference in substance (all is discourse) between one subject and another, and the episteme that connects them. Knowledge moving from one consciousness to another:

> "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 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 Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us.* (215)

Father's history is transferred to Quentin and Shreve, as one generation passes on discourses which become reality for the next, and conversely Father and Quentin as part of the South are created in Shreve's retelling, his narration being the sum of knowledge about them. Shreve and Quentin obviously narrate the story of their father in *Absalom, Absalom!* and as their tellings create all the characters, then all other such permutations are likewise evident.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* characters are "diffused and scattered creatures drawn blindly limb from limb from a grab bag and assembled, author and victim too of a thousand homicides and a thousand copulations and divorcements." Without the model of a discursively constructed subject, the mechanical, grab-bag production of characters from the events of the past remains mysterious. All characters are constructed by previous visions:

> *It isn't yours nor his nor the Pope's hell that we are all going to: it's my mother's and her mother's and father's and their mother's and father's hell … the three of us are just illusions that*

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[29] Foucault compares two naturalists working in different epistemes:

> Aldrovandi was neither a better nor a worse observer than Buffon; he was neither more credulous than he, nor less attached to the faithfulness of the observing eye or to the rationality of things. His observation was simply not linked to things in accordance with the same system or by the same arrangement of the *episteme*. For Aldrovandi was meticulously contemplating a nature which was, from top to bottom, written.

Foucault, *Order,* 40, his emphasis.

he begot, and your illusions are a part of you like your bones and flesh and memory.

The alienation the characters experience comes from the world they have been given. The world of their fathers and mothers and the truths they imparted to their children are a hell of unfulfilled dreams and unpalatable realities, that give them their being as they "live among defeated grandfathers." Shreve contrasts a rational North with this world of the South: "What is it? … a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago ?" A narrative develops that is relived obsessively, repeated endlessly as the founding truth of the South's existence. Southern identity is one of failure, of being wrong in its war against the North. The pride Southerners affirm alienates them from the world around them, as their existence is lived in these past defeats: "The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years."

Faulkner identifies an idiosyncratic relationship of the subject to "choice" when he describes "that aura of a creature cloistered now by deliberate choice and still in the throes of enforced apprenticeship to, rather than voluntary or even acquiescent participation in, breathing."[30] The asphyxiating metaphor of not controlling one's own breathing opens up the tragic predicament of having one's destiny predetermined and yet owning it and being said to have accomplished it. By using the word "choice" ironically in relation to something ("breathing"), that is partially automatic, Faulkner suggests that the life of his characters is wholly determined, even their own thoughts. They are said to be "choosing" when captured in existence and exhibiting no free will. The individual "questions" and believes she/he is making decisions even as her /his possibilities are strictly determined. Heidegger expresses this as:

> Go bear without halt
> Question and default
> On your single pathway bound.[31]

Faulkner likewise uses the phrase, *"the grooved habit to endure."* [32] The word "choice" is not dismissed but comes to mean the particular relationship the previously determined subject has to his/her fate. Distanced from his/her own existence, the subject rationalises his/her given destiny as a "choice." We see ourselves choosing and striving after a goal that eludes us, even when it is really within us and determined beforehand for us. This blurring of real necessity with illusory choice is a pattern of thinking consistent with discourse's saturation of consciousness.

Despite the power previous epistemic statements have over characters, Faulkner makes it explicit that they are only "true" as long as they are part of the episteme. When the episteme shifts there is no resistance from characters because the new is "unnatural." The epistemic changes reveal characteristics of the preceding episteme[33] and ultimately the War does not change the nature of Southern society. The Civil War is intertwined with and generated by Southern history, and its significance and impact are likewise determined. The epistemic break may not seem that significant to us, the new episteme and the previous episteme may not seem that different, but to the characters involved, specifically the Coldfields, the changes are calamitous. Rosa's confusion comes from the

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[30] Ibid., 73, 287, 297, 310, 53. Similarly Rosa, elsewhere, suggests her birth and being can be annulled if she wishes: *"I must find, else breathing and standing there, I would have denied that I was ever born,"* 113.

[31] Martin Heidegger, "The Thinker as Poet" (1957), in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), 3.

[32] Faulkner, 288.

hurdling of iron old traditions since she had seen almost everything else she had learned to call stable vanish like straws in a gale …"I was wrong. I admit it. I believed that there were things which still mattered just because they had mattered once …"

We can take this literally. At one time a thing matters because of its place within an established framework of understanding. Later, when the framework has changed (decayed, from iron to straw), that thing no longer has the same significance and so does not matter. Given the fundamental importance of the episteme for a character's reality, we can see how disorientating and galling such epistemic change is for Rosa, but she does not oppose the new reality. She accepts it (and is conditioned by it again), acknowledging even if only ironically that she was out of step with knowledge. Conversely, it is important to note also that her angst cannot be attributed to this change of episteme. As it was for Sutpen, the Civil War is for her an irrelevant interlude. Indeed even while she notes the lapse of everything that once mattered, she nevertheless writes poems lauding the troops.

In standing against the town which has embraced the epistemic change involved with the Civil War, Mr Coldfield reads loudly from his Bible, invoking a discourse that would have proved effective had not times suddenly changed. The conduct of the war directly contradicts (Mr Coldfield's version of) a Puritanism which is against "the idea of waste: of wearing out and eating up and shooting away material in any cause whatever." Yet the inconsistency does not thwart the change. Though one can see how certain characteristics of the earlier episteme bring the change about, none of them, no matter how universal they were claimed to be, stop the emergent episteme once it has appeared. The fundamental opposition is between an obscure but all encompassing history and those concerns of particular characters it renders trivial. The emergence of a new discourse is "an event" with uncontrollable consequences and apparently unjustifiable results. At the time, it is not obvious which truth might become central to a discourse, but looking back as the characters do (in the text), and as readers, we do (reading that text), the change appears inevitable. The reader recognises the working of history as ironic and irrational: "microcauses" that "cannot fit into any simplified unified teleological scheme" (as Gary Gutting expresses it with regard to Foucault).[34]

Mr Coldfield recognises (though not in these terms) that the troubling change he faces comes from his conditioning. Before the shift, he complains that his super-ego and his derivative conscience are subject to conflicting values, rebuking "the land, the country which had created his conscience and then offered the opportunity to have made all that money to the conscience which it had created."[35] While this crisis of conscience concerns the money Sutpen is making with his help (the nature of which is never disclosed), it illustrates how he cannot overcome his own conditioning and deal with the shift as it occurs. He fulminates

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[33] This is more so for Faulkner than Foucault, who concedes that "Archaeology does not deny the possibility of new statements in correlation with 'external' events," in *Archaeology,* 168. Foucault poses the same question in *The Order of Things,* 50:

> We may wish to mark off a period; but have we the right to establish symmetrical breaks at two points in time in order to give an appearance of continuity and unity to the system we place between them? Where, in that case, would the cause of its existence lie? Or that of its subsequent disappearance and fall? What rule could it be obeying by both its existence and its disappearance? If it contains a principle of coherence within itself, whence could come the foreign element capable of rebutting it? How can a thought melt away before anything other than itself? Generally speaking, what does it mean, no longer being able to think a certain thought?

He responds by discussing the limits of the archaeological method in *The Archaelogy of Knowledge,* and on 177, claims that the change of episteme

> functions as a complex, articulated, describable group of transformations that left a number of positivities intact, fixed for a number of others rules that are still with us, and also established positivities that have recently disappeared or are still disappearing before our eyes.

against the episteme that obliges him to observe mutually contradictory economic and moral imperatives. He chooses the moral above the economic, but not without some bitterness. After the shift, the moral imperatives he treasured and chose above self-interest prevent him from fitting in with the new order. Inappropriately heeding old criteria, he refuses to change, and so socially and physically perishes. His moral stand is anathema to the new values, as he locks himself in his room like a petulant child. Faulkner's view of history implies that it is puerile and contrary to the way things are to reject society's encompassing belief system, no matter what justification one has for doing so.

The shift is epitomised by Sutpen ironically gaining ascendancy over Mr Coldfield, whose spiritual bookkeeping is destroyed. Before the change he is near the top of the town's hierarchy because of his commitment to, and work in, the Methodist church and because he is a 'reputable'[36] trader with money, but his position is more a function of his family having lived in Jefferson a long time, as others have grown up knowing the significance of the name Coldfield within their system of genealogy. Sutpen is at best new money (at worst a criminal), and with no prior place within the scheme of things they cannot account for him. Coldfield loses his status because he refuses to support the war; Sutpen's participation in it raises his. Values such as frugality that were deemed important before are no longer endorsed by the community, which belittles, derides and condemns Coldfield.

The implied author condemns the Civil War because it breaks with previously accepted norms, interrupted

> by the War by a stupid and bloody aberration in the high (and impossible) destiny of the United
> States, maybe instigated by that family fatality which possessed, along with all circumstance, that

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[34] Gutting gives an explanation of the change of episteme as Foucault formulates it, explaining the relation of the genealogical and discursive elements (we can see designated by Faulkner under the category of 'Fate'):

> The simultaneous application of archaeology to discursive practices (eg., those, such as criminology, leading to the understanding of criminals) and to nondiscursive practices (eg., those, such as the prison system, leading to the control of criminals) enables Foucault to establish an essential symbiotic relation between knowledge and power. …Like other historians, he sees changes in nondiscursive practices as due to a wide variety of economic, social, political, and ideological causes. But, contrary to many standard accounts, he maintains that these causes cannot be fit into any simple unified teleological scheme (eg., the rise of the bourgeoisie, the ambition of Napoleon). Rather, he holds that nondiscursive practices change because of a vast number of small, often unrelated factors (ad hoc adjustments of existing procedures, the chance discovery of a new implement or technology), the sorts of "petty causes" Nietzsche made the concern of his genealogy. Thus, changes in the nondiscursive practices that constitute a society's power structure must be understood as due to an immensely complex and diffuse variety of microfactors (a "micro-physics of power"). (This approach does for nondiscursive practices what archaeology did for discursive practices: It eliminates the role of a central, controlling "subject.") The action of the microcauses can eventually lead to fundamentally new sorts of discursive practices and to a corresponding revolution in the correlated discursive practices (a new episteme). …genealogy does not replace or even seriously revise Foucault's archaeological method. It rather combines it with a complementary technique of causal analysis.

Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 271. While such a description of 'outside' events, such as the Civil War in Faulkner's text, has some resonance in the present context, it does seem to discount the extent to which "discursive practices" would structure "microfactors."

[35] Faulkner, 171, 67, 68, 214.

[36] Mr Coldfield "had had to sacrifice the hoarding, the symbol of the fortitude and abnegation, to keep intact the spiritual solvency which he believed that he had already established and secured," 69. Coldfield worries that his "old business between" Sutpen and himself, will be revealed to his grandchildren, 52. It is his discursive identity that he thinks is important: provided it remains untold there is no problem.

curious lack of economy between cause and effect which is always characteristic of fate when re-
duced to using human beings as tools, material.[37]

Epistemic conditioning is uneconomic because it must occur through the subject's internal displace-
ments, who while adopting new discourses is conscious of fundamental changes. Sutpen sees the machina-
tions of the war as external and thus irrelevant to his design, but both are products of a fate, centring on fail-
ure and lost ideals, constructed by the episteme. *Absalom, Absalom!* impresses upon the reader the impor-
tance of this fate, which is internal (psychical) but beyond the conscious control of characters, directed by
their desire and manifested in markedly self-destructive acts. Paradoxically the innateness of desire dissoci-
ates it from the individual who desires, as it is not recognised. Characters, especially Sutpen, are neverthe-
less culpable for what appear to be random, external catastrophes.

The war is condemned for making the United States stray from some unclear mission, which appears
sentimental because it is not explicitly defined and so relies on shared stereotyped assumptions which the
reader (outside the Faulkner universe) can only guess at. This unconvincing value judgement by a deliber-
ately problematic narrator, subverts all such judgements, as it is based on the criteria of a previous episteme
and on the inertia of the judge. Faulkner stands back from the idealistic yearning for an antebellum South
that characterises many of his Southern contemporaries, who compare the current South with a better past.[38]
As Richard C. Moreland points out, any indictment of the present South is an instance of this yearning.
Faulkner examines this agrarian utopian yearning in his characters and subverts it by focussing on their
creation of this objective, rather than on the objective itself. He also uses the device of the implied author
to distance himself from such a position. The correspondence of the New South's discontent and the disil-
lusionment with post-World War One Modernism, give those characters who wish to be somewhere else a
special pertinence for the twentieth-century experience Faulkner spoke to. Ultimately, the episteme of
Faulkner's South does not change greatly. The angst of Rosa and Sutpen does not come from the War and
is the same both before and after it.

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[37] Ibid., 98.

[38] Richard C. Moreland, *Faulkner and Modernism: Rereading and Rewriting* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990),
23, 26.