

**William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*:
A Narrative of Inexhaustible Word and Unfathomable Past**

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to cast light on William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in terms of its linguistic and communicational woes. A proliferation of research has been done on the novel, yet little heed has been paid to the verbal underpinning of its narration, which is associated with certain social and cultural interrogatives. Faulkner, who avows to be telling the same story repeatedly (the story of the Old South), voices through his literary work the anxieties and uneasiness he feels towards language. Long taken for granted as a mere tool of articulation, language proves to be an entity that is neither fully exhaustible nor communicates a message that is readily fathomable. The textual analyses of the characters' narrative language and their relation to it mirror the author's own meditations over the "word" and his endeavor to bring the reader into that arena of verbal and mental wrestling. Communication thus becomes an ongoing struggle, with the self, the word and the world, one that might be dreadful or futile but never escapable.

Keywords: communication, language, William Faulkner, the Old South

Introduction

It is often believed that language is to literature what marble is to sculpture (Sapir, 1921, p. 237). While words are the sole raw materials at the hands of writers, the crafted works of poets, for instance, may be the epitome of language's most exalted beauty. Unsurprisingly, such a relationship has been subject to various ponderings which marked the critical and literary works of many, yet the issue is particularly regarded by modernists with a denser and sharper earnestness. The theory and the practice of the literature of the twenties sees "the Logos, the Word" as an incarnation of "the Divine" (Watkins, 1971, p. 77). Hence, the modernist perspective probes into an unprecedented awareness of the real world, the literary world and the linguistic medium which converges the two. Hinging on a sense of skepticism towards the dichotomy of soul and flesh, word and world, the modernist urge to reconsider, and thus reconstruct, the conceptualization of language puts the world—at least semantically and semiotically—onto a new self-searching pathway. T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and others were among the first to bring forth a new awareness of language. Their literature, however, does not offer some substitutive "awareness" on a silver platter. Readers are called to engage in a fraught struggle for a new awareness of not only literature but the world as a whole.

Esoteric, poignant, allusive, void, fragmented, and chaotic ... these are but a few of the many descriptions that attempt to account for the fluid perception of language that surfaced with modernism. The social breakdown and the overall decay that swept the world by the end of WWI were mirrored through the works of novelists and poets who delved into the recesses of the human psyche, raiding the past, suing the present (not necessarily for a redress but rather a probing inquest) and suspending the future on the edge. As the "holy"—and holey—foundations of Western civilization were brought to ashes by a rapacious war, the old conventions and mores failed to sustain their accuracy and validity; and thus new pathways were sought. A not-entirely unjustified over-generalization pigeonholes all modernists in the fields of arts and humanities into a nonconformist stance which disapproves of all that reeks of old dogmatic notions. Yet, exceptions exist. It is not to be imagined, for instance, that modernist literature is a set of homogeneous works that built up insurmountable fences between pre- and post-modernism. Such heterogeneity can be best exemplified in T.S. Eliot's oxymoronic essay "Tradition and Individual Talent," which indicates the modern poet's rebelling instinct against the imitation of the traditional, though not wholly overthrowing that which is established, such

as forms, genres and language itself. “Making it new,” thus, does not stand for “unmaking” but for an urge to “become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (as cited in Watkins, 1971, p. 13). Being at once motivated by a quest for rigor and genuineness instead of ostensible uniqueness or outlandishness, modernist writers, poets and playwrights experimented with style, form, syntax and genre in varying levels, each according to his or her literary dauntlessness and individual talent. The Lost Generation—as they are aptly referred to—sing together more like a meaningful cacophony than an alliterative chorus. Therefore, language became the primary subject of several experimentations, both prosaic and poetic. The word metamorphosed into much more than an ornamental object but a semantic entity in its own right. William Faulkner’s use of language is one such example of a multilayered entity.

Faulkner’s Southern prose has placed him among the most renowned and revered literary figures in the history of literature. His Yoknapatawpha compilation traces the intertwining histories of a number of Southern families whose fate seems bound to the region’s past. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, which was published in 1936 and has had a seemingly inherent ability to generate criticism and controversy over successive epochs, Faulkner tells the story of the Sutpen family. The family’s eventual downfall results from the racist social mores prevailing in the Antebellum South. Thomas Sutpen, so deluded by the age-old plantation dream, “dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and planted his land” through the unscrupulous exploitation of black slaves (Faulkner, 2005, p. 40). As he is no more than a poor and ragged man from the West Virginia mountains, he seeks “the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable” in a southern society that cherishes appearances and ostentatiousness over anything else (ibid., p. 15). The Civil War erupts when he is halfway through realizing his design of a dynasty. His tainted dream is demolished once his “half negro” son returns from New Orleans to reveal his father’s secret and unforgivable past to a society obsessed with racial discrimination. Many years after the Sutpen family is obliterated, the story is still repeated by those who survived such times to those who did not witness them.

Apart from its intricacy at the thematic level, the novel poses further problems at the stylistic and linguistic levels. Faulkner’s elaborate and yet somewhat peculiar and formless style has been subject to various queries. In answer to these, he states in a correspondence with Malcolm Cowley that “I am telling the same story over and over which is myself and the world.... I am trying to say it all in one sentence between one Cap and one period ... not only the present but

the whole past upon which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present second by second” (Cowley, 1966, p. 14). As such, his narrative language is heavily laden with a sense of inarticulateness that lies at a stone’s throw from utter impotency in regard to the narration itself. This powerlessness to communicate a past which seems to transcend the grasp of the present or even language itself is nowhere more apparent than in the writer’s use of *the word* itself. If his mastery of language is beyond questioning, his view of it is not quite so. His stance seems to hover above voicelessness and beneath voicefulness; he neither cherishes the illusion of fully communicating the past nor repudiates the wording of it in the present. In a similar vein, Judith Lockyer asserts that Faulkner “has no easy relation to his medium [language],” a relation which he unveils through such novels as *Light in August*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Go Down Moses*, where he “locates his own anxieties about the possibilities and limitations *in language*” (Lockyer, 1991, p. 6, emphasis added). This uncertainty in regard to “the medium” (which is almost akin to an epistemological decentredness) takes different shapes in *Absalom, Absalom!*: sometimes it comes out as an outright distrust of words, at other times it is manifested as a denial to decipher whatever language encodes, and elsewhere as a proclivity to deem communication senseless and futile.

1. The Inexhaustible Word

A little more than a casual acquaintance with *Absalom, Absalom!*’s narration is enough to confirm one’s hunch that its author appears to be in a constant struggle with words at every turn of a sentence. This struggle, however, is not to be mistaken for difficulty, as Faulkner could write about a South that many were unable—or unwilling—to even imagine at the time. While many of his predecessors and some of his brilliant contemporaries (like Margaret Mitchell) were writing of the Antebellum South in a docile tone full of lilacs and magnolias, Faulkner wrote about all that was uneasy to imagine about it. This could be one important reason behind the struggle with and for words. The heavy—almost despicable—content of the novel, if inadequately wrought, would have amounted to no more than a wicked tale. Yet, Faulkner’s tale is for many no less than a magnum opus. In writing such a monumental but also hugely reviled work, Faulkner, as Douglas Mitchell (2008) states, “challenged the plantation legend by creating a different sort of planter archetype” (p. 140). It is such a challenge to the plantation tradition which frees the author from the necessity to confirm other southern narratives, while the desire to write about his people’s history and the thirst to experiment with the full potential

of his language remain. His thirst for narration and language seems unquenchable, as if the more he learns of its particularities the more he is unsatisfied with his own handling of it. The word simply seems to be inexhaustible.

1.1. A distrust of the word

The opening of *Absalom, Absalom!* is a fourteen-line sentence. This can be taken as a cautioning note to readers of what they are about to face. Faulkner's use of long sentences (often paragraph-length) cannot be discarded as mere "narrative prowess" that intends to puzzle readers. For instance, Ellen, the mistress of Sutpen's Hundred, is described as

a woman who had vanished not only out of the family and the house but out of life too, into an edifice like Bluebeard's and there transmogrified into a mask looking back with passive and hopeless grief upon the irrevocable world, held there not in duration but in a kind of jeering suspension by a man who had entered hers and her family's life ... with the abruptness of a tornado, done irrevocable and incalculable damage, and gone on. (Faulkner, 2005, p. 60)

This single sentence "recapitulates" a story which is not even yet unfolded. In its density it captures the nexus of the entire narration in a manner that induces the reader to search for a deeper—maybe less befuddling—understanding of the character, the unrevealed plot twists, the region and time in which such mishaps occurred, and most importantly the glimpse of life portrayed by the statement. To readers unfretted by the length and compactness of such statements, the seeming impenetrability is but an indication of humans' helplessness in the face of the world they live in, both its past and present. This sense of disability creates a separation between the world, the word and the consciousness which attempts to communicate the first through the second. Blame could be laid on the medium, i.e., language, yet the utmost struggle against such helplessness is inescapably manifested in the form of words. Faulkner, who was part of the movement called the "Southern Renaissance" or "renascence" (1930–55) along with Ellen Glasgow, Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Anne Porter, and Erskine Caldwell, contributed to that "outpouring of history, sociology, political analysis, autobiography, and innovative forms of journalism" through a fictional south which bears a "true" resemblance to the "real" south (King, 1982, p. 5). Such "outpouring" is a both a collective and individual endeavor to come to terms with the old south. That is why Faulkner's morbid tales come along with an unavoidable

loss of trust not only in the world but in the word as well. Very telling is Olga Vickery's delineation of Faulkner's struggle to surmount a distrust of both:

Truth must eventually be fixed by words, which by their very nature falsify the things they are meant to represent. This distortion inherent in language is the reason for the tortuous style of *Absalom, Absalom!* ... [T]he long sentences bristle with qualifications and alternatives beneath which the syntax is almost lost. (Vickery, 1964, p. 86)

Interestingly, this distrust of the word and its aptitude to fully carry meaning does not generate a "writerly abnegation" of the word but rather an excessive use of it. That is why several qualifiers, adjectives, adverbs and descriptive phrases are employed each time a narrator claims to provide an accurate account of what "really happened." Back to the first sentence, for instance, one cannot help noticing the unusual detailed description of the establishing scene. Beginning "from a little after two o'clock" until the first period, we find a "long still hot weary dead September afternoon," "a dim hot airless room," "blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers," "latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes," and "flecks of the dead old dried paint" (Faulkner, 2005, p. 7). This is the result of an apprehension, if not an anguish, that utterances would go unnoticed, mistaken or not fully perceived; yet it often does little to elucidate a "truth."

Another example is, Thomas Sutpen, the figure around whom the story revolves. Though he barely cares to introduce himself by name to people in Jefferson he is given so many names as if his character transcends simple or unilateral characterization. Particularly, Miss Rosa Coldfield seems to exert huge efforts in search of a way to describe him; that is why she uses horrid words such as: "man-horse-demon," "Faustus," "Beelzebub," "ogre," "beast," and "demon" when telling Quentin Compson about the ghost figure which dominates her tale. Powerful as these words are, they still fall short of accounting fully for "the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration," and so remains a phantom in Quentin's conception (ibid., p. 7). Despite the fear, outrage and hatred which haunts Rosa's memory and pushes her to extensively speak about Thomas Sutpen, she can only "evoke" a fading image of him. For Quentin that figure is no more than a ghost from the past. This is because he sees even her, the narrator, as a "ghost" who is "telling him about old ghost-times" (ibid., p. 9). Eventually, when Shreve, Quentin's fellow at university, hears the story, he assumes it "would still have been the same story if the man had had no name at all" (ibid., p. 247).

Beside the novel's intricate and lengthy statements, the state of communication between its many narrators and their addressees complicates the narration even further. Sometimes, characters seem to vanish in the midst of the conversation to a time past. The ceaseless lapse between past and present indicates a failure to sustain communication. Miss Rosa Coldfield, for instance, insists on seeing Quentin Compson in order to tell him her family's story, yet she is unable to maintain an uninterrupted line of thought, for her thoughts are always drifting back to the past, and so all her efforts to communicate with him (and through him to the world) are rendered fruitless. Her narrative voice is referred to as "talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound" (Faulkner, 2005, p. 1). One might well argue that the words with which she narrates her story are not solidified enough, to the extent that both she and Quentin are carried not away from those words but into them: Both narrator and narratee depart from the present scene and the story-lines that are concretely heard to seek what is unheard between the lines. Similarly, readers may find themselves carried by words into the novel's world or into their own. In such a case words are no longer *signifiers* of well-defined *signifieds* but instead seem to function as "teleporters" through which time and space can be traversed.

1.2. A dismantled syntax of reconstruction

One of the major features of Faulknerian style is the employment of relative clauses and appositives. Though deemed by many critics such as Bernard de Voto and Arthur Scott as a mis- or over-use, these two recurrent patterns of syntax have a modulating and amplifying effect. For example, Quentin, reflecting once again on his bizarre meeting with Miss Coldfield, thinks:

And maybe it (the voice, the talking, the incredulous and unbearable amazement) had even been a cry aloud once, ... long ago when she was a girl—of young and indomitable unregret, of indictment of blind circumstance and savage event; but not now: now only the lonely thwarted old female flesh embattled for forty-three years in the old insult, the old unforgiving outraged and betrayed by the final and complete affront which was Sutpen's death. (Faulkner, 2005, p. 14)

The crescendo note of appositive nouns and phrases in this statement draws attention to a complex and deep understanding of an otherwise simple pronoun "it" or a trivial "girl." In such instances, readers are induced to labor in reconsidering every segment of information provided

to them. In a way, they are led to overcome the oddity and dimness of such narration. Nevertheless, the case is not always so since, as Scott (1953) notes, “even then he [the reader] may have to drive himself savagely through the first half of the novel before he begins reaping rewards which seem commensurate with his effort.... Many readers never reach this level in Faulkner” (p. 91). After all, not everyone is willing to delve deep or “suffer” through such intensity. This intensely complex structure, even at sentence level, though so vexing, parallels the thematic concerns of the novel. In other words, it voices the modernist preoccupation with issues of truth, veracity and history. Hence, the story does not lend itself to an easy understanding or ready-made interpretation but rather requires a searching, attentive and multi-faceted reading to patch the different pieces together. Unlike realism’s claim of picturing the truth and reality of a certain people, era or region, modernism sees that no absolute or factual account of either past or present exists. Fiction is probably humanity’s desperate attempt to retell that part of its past memory which it deems “true.”

Readers of *Absalom, Absalom!* are expected to “reach that state of fatigue of which breathlessness is a symptom” and become “fellow-panters, eagerly turning chaotic pages to learn the next terrifying tragedy” (Bernd, 1995, p. 119). And such a state is not the outcome of the syntactical complexities only, but also of the “persistent attempt to understand the past from a group of partially perceived fragments” (Hugh, 1971, p. 545). The sense of fragmentation and inconceivability that prevails in the novel echoes the social and psychological aridity that infected the later generations of southerners after the Civil War and the general atmosphere of the Great Depression as well. In view of such a sense of disruption, modernist fiction attempts to articulate rather than cloak the incohesiveness and malaise of human life. If the world were all one chaotic dismantled “patch-work” why would literature pass through it as a neatly set embroidery? Though, stylistically, *Absalom, Absalom!* seems to leave an impression of enclosing meaning within the boundaries of language, it in effect reflects destruction, loss and a desperate hope for reconstruction. Even those who did not live in the past could not exorcise their memory of its specters. Despite striving to understand it, all they get are words like “an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 12). Quentin, for instance, feels torn between the side of him which aspires for an academic career in Harvard College and the other side of him which feels doomed by “the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” (ibid., p. 9). Without going through such

fragmentation of thought and language, it is hardly achievable to save the present from its past inhibitions or reconstruct a new reality out of old ruins.

2. The Unfathomable Past

Faulkner's novels are often read against a background of history. Their publication at a time of great turmoil (depression, economic and cultural crises, etc.) further aggravated their dark tone. Yet their particular relation to the Antebellum South, the Civil War and Reconstruction makes them a fertile ground to project unvoiced anxieties (whether of personal history or communal memory) on the narration itself. It is engaged in an attempt to understand the past as a means to cope with the present. Though of the present no judgment can be passed, the past compellingly enough remains unfathomable. The southern antebellum history was not readily conceivable, at least to those who initially received the novel only a few generations away from its narrative, because a large majority of southerners—and this is what *Absalom, Absalom!* draws attention to—were nurtured on the plantation legend. Such a myth of the Old South as a fairy land of cotton, chivalry, belles and happy slaves was repeatedly endorsed in film, fiction, popular magazines and songs. The popular image of the south hinges on this:

The flirtations and courtships, the duels and dances, which fill the idle days of these charming men and women seem always to be set against a scene of manorial splendor dominated by a mansion with a glistening white portico overlooking green lawns sloping down to a placid river. In the cotton fields, the darkies, too numerous even to be counted, sing contentedly at their work. (Bohner, 1961, pp. 73–74)

Such endemic mythologization is why Faulkner's literature, and all fictional works that run against the flow of the plantation tradition, did not seem "very much attuned to the American experience" (Atkinson, 2006, p. 5). *Absalom, Absalom!* was seen as a novel that "turned the American success story ... into a racial tragedy that few foresaw in 1936 as a national dilemma" (Porter, 2009, p. 710). This, however, did not hinder the endeavor to write about the past in a manner that does not appease for the purpose of wish fulfillment or self-gratification.

2.1. A hollow word haunted by memory

The prevalence of repetition in the southern dialect is found throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* not only as a speech pattern but also as an inclination towards an exposition of a socio-cultural syndrome. The backlooking veterans, whether they fought in the war or not, have to repeat the

same story over and over again to make sure the past is “not even passed.” Quentin, for instance, when reporting Rosa’s tale, makes sure not to obliterate her emphatic phrases:

It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen (Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (Faulkner, 2005, p. 3)

The same story is repeated several times—mostly keeping the same wording—as if chanting would make of it a gospel, or the more emphasis put on it the more real it seems. After forty-three years of silence, she bluntly decides to disclose the unrevealed story. Seeing his puzzled looks at her unexpected request, she explains that in moving to the north he may “enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day [he] will remember this and write about it” (ibid., p. 10). So, “she wants it told” to others so that they will “know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth” (ibid., p. 4). Quentin’s father explains for his son Rosa’s stubborn insistence upon telling such a story. For her it is not a matter of individual outrage against the family private history but more of a burdening history that torments the collective memory. For Quentin as well it is a matter of identity and consciousness of which he cannot be released and to which he cannot reconcile himself. It seems for the old lady as for the young man, the story of Sutpen is not one tale from the south but *is* the story of the Old South.

In the subsequent retelling of this same story, alterations, objections, and refutations occur. The last are pivotal in the re-conception of the word as a medium of communicating a full truth. The repeated wording of the story instead of engraving it as an unalterable memory makes of it a myth, a non-existent past that is not fixed but ceaselessly changing into different versions. The word, thus, digresses from delivering a truth into disguising, concealing or even inventing a whole one out of nothingness. Quentin, after “listening . . . having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had” finds himself in “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” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 361). As a whole, the phrasing of the

past does nothing to integrate him thoroughly into the present. The stories and the living “among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves ... and bullets in the dining-room table” only make him feel “he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth” (and later to be learnt, he commits suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*) (ibid., p. 361; p. 12). Hence, if history is a mere collection of words, so is the present. And if the past can hardly be articulated into a certain statement, the present, accordingly, becomes a mere rhetorical existence.

2.2. A word of denial and defiance

Absalom, Absalom!, as alluded to by its title, is a narrative of lamentation, an outcry of loss that comes out baffled yet deafeningly loud. It can be taken as a father–son tragedy as much as it may stand for a communal elegy for a bygone Old South. In a constellation of denials, the characters renounce, refuse, resist and repudiate what they cannot reconcile; thus identity, genealogy and even memory are subject to disaggregation. Wording the ledgers of the past becomes an act of forceful revelation. Quentin might have never mentioned what Miss Rosa told him, if it were not in answer to Shreve’s question. That is why when his roommate assumes such a story is a confession that Quentin looks down upon his regional identity with disdain, he bursts out “I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 378). Quentin refuses to accept the implication of his words as if caught by a sense of guilt for having set down in words things he should have kept to himself.

For Faulkner, there seems to exist an intriguing interplay between silence, defiance, words and acceptance. For instance, Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen tend to prolong the dreadful and deadly confrontation through a carefully cloaked silence. They escape mentioning the unpleasant reality of which they are both aware. Instead they prefer the wordless roar of war to settle the matter, “since it would not be the first time that youth has taken catastrophe as a direct act of Providence for the sole purpose of solving a personal problem which youth itself could not solve” (ibid., p. 120). Because they are incapable—or unwilling—to face the truth, silence becomes a mere “attenuation and prolongation of a conclusion already ripe to happen” (ibid., p. 118). Their insistence upon escaping reality comes in a turn-a-blind-eye sort of a way, as if not acknowledging the calamity through words makes them less prone to its consequences.

This intransigent sense of denial can be seen in readers’ response to the novel as well. Faulkner’s literary works were never welcomed with enthusiasm; rather they were often

shunned on account of their complex unpleasantness. What *Absalom, Absalom!* communicates, for instance, can hardly be understood by those far removed from the southern setting, as it is scarcely accepted by readers whose past literary experiences include no such unorthodox view of the Old South. A renowned Southern historian asserts that Faulkner is one of those who are regarded with “shock, of denial that they told the essential truth or any part of it—in many cases—of bitter resentment against them on the ground that they had libeled and misrepresented the South with malicious intent” (Cash, 1956, p. 419). Consequently, in both worlds, the fictional and the real, words stimulate denial. Words are, as well, a way to express a strong defiance of social and cultural traditions.

3. The Futility of Communication

Conversation does not necessarily mean genuine communication. The expression of one’s inner thoughts might be sheer babbling, as Faulkner puts it: “a cacophony of terror and conciliation and compromise babbling only the mouth-sounds, the loud and empty words which we have emasculated of all meaning” (1955, p. 34). Such awareness of words’ failure may have different outcomes: some keep up an overtly phony attempt to communicate whereas others resign themselves into silence. Many of the characters in the novel, such as Mr. Coldfield, Ellen and Judith, prefer a reclusive silence to uttering anything at all. Ironically, the silence is sometimes more eloquently expressive than utterances. A good case in point is that of Judith and her father, who “did not need to talk. They were so much alike that ... the need, to communicate by speech atrophies from disuse and, comprehending without need of the medium of ear or intellect, they no longer understand one another’s actual words” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 59). Hence, conversing in an audible language of syllables and stresses is rendered pointless. What seems to convey a meaningful message is instead wordlessness.

Such a sense of futility is almost akin to fatality, as if one’s words would never alter the predestined course of events. Quentin Compson, “who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South”, comes to such a realization after a prolonged attempt to come to terms with the past; he finds no escape but the “long silence of *notpeople*, in *notlanguage*” (ibid., p. 2, emphasis added). If the silence of Judith and her mother Ellen is no surprise since they—as southern ladies—could not defy the “soulless rich surrender anywhere between sun and earth,” Sutpen’s confused and belated communication costs him the collapse of his entire plan (ibid., p. 196).

As a whole, the message that *Absalom, Absalom!* conveys so clearly through its characters' attitudes is the incommunicability of the past and the present.

Conclusion

It seems while the word and the world do not always choose to reconcile into a compatibility of signified and signifier, the chasm in between—significant or not—is where communication occurs. Human beings, ever since the dawn of history and all through humanity's mishaps and fortunes, attempted to keep a two-ways communication going not ceaselessly or tirelessly but more like instinctively. Language, voiced or voiceless, is sometimes all the proof that humans lived. Writing about a history, a war, and a people, William Faulkner renders the particularities of a communal and individual experience into an evenly repeated tale. In such a tale, Faulkner's relation to language does not seem to rest on a given touchstone; it instead lingers in between an aggravated endeavor to reach full expressiveness and a sense of impotency to mold words at one's will. Both alternatives, however, meet at one point: that is, the inescapability of communication. Win or lose, human beings need and ought to communicate just the same, the novel seems to suggest. As long as man is not finally and irrevocably silenced by some cataclysm, he will have to use words even if only as an elusive sign of life. Words thus are "that fragile thread . . . by which the little surface and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either" (Faulkner, 2005, p. 129). The relationship between language and the world is a paradoxical one. Such a paradox is most highlighted through literature. This, in its modernist phase, articulates a distrust, a defiance, a willingness to destruct, but also a hope to reconstruct the word—and transitively the world—anew.

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the scholarly influence of a seminar delivered by Professor Fouad Djemai on the writing of this research paper.