

LOST IN LANGUAGE: RHETORICAL ILLITERACY IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*,
ABSALOM, ABSALOM!, AND *INVISIBLE MAN*

by

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(Under the Direction of Douglas Anderson)

ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly common to speak of literacies in the plural. In place of the notion of literacy as a simple matter of decoding words on a page and reproducing written language, and as a skill one either does or does not have, we now distinguish between different kinds of literacy, many of which are deemed essential for modern life. It is now almost routine to speak of “digital literacy,” “scientific literacy,” or “financial literacy,” to cite just a few examples among many. The resurgence of classical rhetoric began in the mid-twentieth century in part to address the increasing literacy demands that have arisen with new forms of communication. This study explores rhetorical illiteracy within the novels of three writers spanning the first half of the twentieth century. Each novel grapples with the often baffling and sometimes alienating changes that swept through American culture and forever altered the texture, pace, and complexity of life as well as the lexicon with

which we describe or shape it. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) might seem to have little in common with one another, depicting as they do such disparate experiences of American life. From the privileged classes in turn-of-the-century New York, to small-town Mississippians living in the aftermath of civil war, to a young African-American traveling north to Harlem and into the social and political cross-hairs of racism, communism, pan-Africanism, and a host of other forces meeting at mid-century—all three novels feature characters ill at ease in their putative “home” language. These novels illustrate that literacy in the first half of the twentieth century was far more complex than is often assumed and not nearly so removed from the kinds demanded of present citizens of the “information age” and “knowledge economy.” Moreover, all three novels defy taxonomies imposed by others that serve to limit expressive possibility, reveling instead in a proliferation of meaning, a profusion of signification—or, as Ellison's protagonist proclaims, “a world of infinite possibilities.”

Index words: rhetoric; literacy; language; business discourse; positivism; double-entry bookkeeping; *kairos*; *ethos*; *pathos*; *logos*; invention; Edith Wharton; *The House of Mirth*; William Faulkner; *Absalom, Absalom!*; Ralph Ellison; *Invisible Man*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly common to speak of literacies in the plural. In place of the notion of literacy as a simple matter of decoding words on a page and reproducing written language, and as a skill one either does or does not have, we now distinguish between different kinds, many of which are deemed essential in modern life. It is now routine to speak of "digital literacy," "scientific literacy," or "financial literacy," to cite just a few examples among many.

Certainly, what is required of "literate" citizens today is far more extensive than it was for previous generations, particularly with the proliferation of new media, the internet and, more recently, social networking. In fact, much of the attention in recent years to the changing demands of literacy focuses on the internet and the visual rhetoric employed so frequently with new media, especially as political and commercial advertisers have grown more adept at using these new technologies.

The resurgence of classical rhetoric began in the mid-twentieth century in part to address the increasing literacy demands that have arisen with new forms of communication. As Catherine Hobbs and James Berlin have noted, the new attention to rhetoric was "part of the rediscovery of the complexity of language in all its manifestations, a complexity which many in English studies restricted to literary texts, seeing all other discourse as a simple signal system."¹ Writing instructors began to emphasize and study the difficulties involved in producing texts as well as consuming

them, thus the academic fields of Rhetoric and Composition, and their sister discipline Speech Communications, began.

For contemporary scholars of rhetoric and composition, any form of literacy requires a full consideration of the "rhetorical situation," the contexts surrounding any symbolic act, including the medium or technology in and through which the symbols appear. For example, in his book *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber defines contemporary computer literacy as threefold: functional, critical and rhetorical, defining the latter as "insist[ing] upon praxis—the thoughtful integration of functional and critical abilities in the design and evaluation of computer interfaces."² Selber's definition includes four parameters that reinforce the importance of using technology and language in ways that are reflective and critical, rather than purely utilitarian: persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and social action.

But long before computers were common, I.A. Richards, Kenneth Burke, and others approached rhetoric in similar ways, as a means of promoting community identification and as meaningful only with the context of a particular discourse. They sought to establish rhetoric as a corrective to the "proper meaning fallacy," the notion of "a direct link between words and the things or ideas they represent."³ Instead, they regarded language as epistemic, as shaping reality and creating knowledge as well as reflecting it. If miscommunication is a primary factor in war and conflict, then language could also be marshaled to help resolve or forestall conflict. Burke's famous formulation of mankind expresses a cautious optimism that language can help undo some of the damage it causes, if people could avoid being tools of the systems they create: "man is a symbol using, making, and mis-using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from

his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection."⁴ To become literate in the ways language is used and abused, then, equips a person with at least the *potential* for human progress, if not its full realization.

Charles Schuster offers an elegantly simple definition of rhetorical literacy, as "the power to be able to make oneself heard and felt, to signify. Literacy is the way in which we make ourselves meaningful not only to others but through the other to ourselves."⁵ Such a definition describes well the struggles faced by each of the fictional characters I will discuss in this study, for their difficulties stem not only from a failure to be heard or understood but also from an inability to make themselves meaningful to themselves. Equally important for my study, however, is the expansive view of rhetoric offered by Berlin and Hobbes, quoted above, that takes in language in *all* its manifestations, not merely literary texts or even written texts, but also including informal speech and nonverbal communication.

This study explores rhetorical illiteracy within the novels of three writers spanning the first half of the twentieth century. Each novel grapples with the often baffling and sometimes alienating changes that swept through American culture and forever altered the texture, pace, and complexity of life as well as the lexicon. Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) might seem to have little in common with one another, depicting as they do such disparate experiences of American life. From the privileged classes in turn-of-the-century New York, to small-town Mississippians living in the aftermath of civil war, to a young African-American traveling north to Harlem and into

the social and political cross-hairs of racism, communism, pan-Africanism, and a host of other forces meeting at mid-century—all three novels appeal to an older code (as Wharton's and Faulkner's Old Testament titles suggest) and feature characters ill at ease in their putative "home" language.

These novels illustrate that literacy in the first half of the twentieth century was far more complex than is often assumed and not nearly so removed from the kinds of language facility demanded of present citizens of the "information age" and "knowledge economy." It was no more sufficient then than now, for example, merely to decode words on a page in order to understand them, or produce written language in order to be understood, since discourse had already splintered into many different kinds, all requiring particular expertise.

Moreover, all three novels defy taxonomies imposed by others that serve to limit expressive possibility, reveling instead in a proliferation of meaning, a profusion of signification—or, as Ellison's protagonist proclaims, "a world of infinite possibilities."⁶ The extraordinary control of language on display in each of these novels-- particularly in contrast to the struggles of the characters they portray--is testament to the centrality of language in the authors' own lives, for their works render vividly the urge to understand ourselves through words, even as they demonstrate the ultimate futility of fully achieving that desire. They express the possibility, if not likelihood, that there is, after all, no linguistic home to return to where all meaning is made clear. To find meaning is to make it oneself along with other social beings--all of us being, in Burke's phrase, "symbol-using animals." If, as the invisible man recognizes, there is "a magic in spoken words,"⁷ the magic resides in language itself and not within the would-be verbal conjurer.

These novels further attest to the ways in which language speaks *us*, despite our supposed mastery of it. In each of these works, major characters struggle against an insufficient rhetorical register that threatens (and in some cases succeeds) to undo them. Because social and cultural change bring with them linguistic change, even entirely new forms of discourse, the demands of literacy constantly change as well. To be literate, however, is not to master the signifying possibilities of language, but merely to devise, as Robert Frost once said of poetry, “a momentary stay against confusion.” As Ellison told students at Bennett College, creative expression cannot grant us peace; at best it gives us “only a fighting chance with the chaos of living.”⁸ These novels complicate our notions of what it has meant to be truly literate in American culture over the past century and challenge the supposed transparency of “ordinary” language.

Rhetorical Literacy

The very meaning of literacy has always been highly contested. Not only have definitions shifted over time, as Harvey Graff points out, they were never more than vague to begin with.⁹ As recently as the *National Literacy Act of 1991*, for example, Congress defined it as “an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential.”¹⁰ The legislation did not elaborate on the level of “proficiency” required to achieve these nebulous goals but instead created the National Institute for Literacy to further study the issue. In the meantime, of course, it imposed new expectations on the education system to ensure that all students, and more importantly future workers, emerge from high schools and colleges fully equipped with these ill-defined skills.

Numerous studies and histories of literacy have emerged in recent decades exploring everything from basic reading and writing instruction,¹¹ to all manner of media literacy,¹² to the "hidden" or "vernacular" literacies practiced in everyday, nonacademic settings, particularly by marginalized groups.¹³ In her landmark ethnographic study, *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt traces the changing meanings of literacy from 1895 to 1985 in the lives of more than eighty Americans, focusing especially on the relationship between literacy and economic change.¹⁴ Her study treats literacy as "a resource—economic, political, intellectual, spiritual—which, like wealth or education, or trade skills or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers."¹⁵

Brandt's work has obvious implications for the teaching of writing and speaking, given that employers and governments alike expect communications and problem-solving skills to be fully "portable" and transferrable to other workplaces and situations. The irony is that standardized testing and much of what passes for writing instruction today continue to produce "decontextualized skills" that disregard and often interfere with the critical thinking abilities the desired transferability requires. In short, the growing calls for more rhetorically based communication instruction often come from the same people whose top-down policies—standardized testing, increasing class sizes, outsourcing of writing instruction--make such teaching all but impossible to deliver.

Brandt demonstrates how ordinary Americans have been caught in an "inflationary cycle" of literacy skills, whereby certain kinds of literacy are devalued, become obsolete, or are deemed insufficient for new demands.¹⁶ Her study treats literacy "in context," a perspective that has

developed in challenge to views that equate literacy only with the technical matters of decoding or encoding of written language, a literacy lodged merely in discrete linguistic and scribal skills such as sounding out, spelling, or semantic fluency. This narrower approach has been faulted for treating literacy as if it were a decontextualized skill, neutral, self-contained, portable, a skill without regard to contextual conditions. Although this narrow, technical approach continues to influence literacy instruction and assessment in schools, there are growing calls for approaches to literacy that more rigorously incorporate the realities of its situated dimensions. From a contextual perspective, literate abilities originate in social postures and social knowledge that begin well before and extend well beyond words on a page.¹⁷

Although Brandt does not specifically regard hers as a study of rhetorical literacy, her broad, highly contextual definition of literacy surely incorporates rhetoric, and her study is, by design, rhetorical in nature. Because it describes primarily print-based literacies, however, it is of limited use for my purposes here, as the focus of the present study resides outside of any classroom and includes nonverbal and spoken communication as well as print.

The characters I discuss are not unlike the real-life human beings Brandt chronicles, who must adapt to increasingly more complex forms of communication or be left behind. But they do differ in that their struggle is not so much against "documentary reality"—the paperwork requirements that have come to constitute the "basic features of work and life" over the last century¹⁸—but against a more generalized proliferation of new discursive modes and the confusion their interactions can cause. Many a real and

fictional person has been strangled by the red tape of modern life, to be sure, but my concern here is with characters whose primary struggle is not against bureaucracy, but against the ways in which the meanings of words and symbols seem to shift imperceptibly and without warning, in response to unseen forces—a primary emphasis in rhetorical instruction today.

Although none of the fictional characters I discuss can be called illiterate by any standard definition, past or present, the very narrowness of those definitions and the simplistic view of language they represent certainly contribute to situations like those I describe, where people otherwise gifted with language (like Wharton's and Ellison's protagonists), or capable enough to achieve traditional success (like Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen), struggle to understand others and make themselves understood because they lack a full rhetorical register.

The Rhetorical Turn

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the role of public education changed and its mission expanded to pave the way of upward mobility, made possible through "open enrollment" in college admissions. As James Berlin has demonstrated, rhetoric and composition since the time of Aristotle had been important parts of the curriculum.¹⁹ But as a college education came to be regarded more as a means to an end, as well as a means of establishing a coherent national identity, curricula came to reflect more practical concerns and composition was regarded as a "remedial" course. Vernacular languages replaced the classics, English departments began, and the focus in composition became estranged from its rhetorical origins. Unity, coherence, and most of

all correctness were of the utmost importance, with few textbooks even discussing persuasion as one of the aims of writing.

As Berlin has shown, until the eighteenth century rhetoric and poetics typically shared the same epistemology and had a dialectical relationship, rhetoric's concern being with "symbolic action within the material world, with practical consequences as the end, while poetics is concerned with symbolic action for itself, with contemplation of the text for its own sake."²⁰ With the enthronement of the poetic text and denigration of the rhetorical that began in the eighteenth century, the divide between "art" (literature) and "science" (rhetoric) widened, particularly in the academy.

During the Great Depression, many in both fields felt the need to connect readers and students to larger social and political currents. Rhetoric in particular was enlisted as a tool for civic engagement and social empowerment, while even acclaimed writers felt pressure to write in more politically responsive ways. Warren Taylor's 1938 essay "Rhetoric in a Democracy" called for "teaching writing in a way that would serve the political role of the individual in a democratic state," arguing that teaching language "as symbolic action carrying consequences in the material and social worlds" would provide students with "genuine knowledge" by helping them recognize the motives inherent in linguistic forms and performances.²¹ As David Tyack and Larry Cuban have shown, educational reformers of all political stripes have held in common "a shared conviction that education was the prime means of directing the course of social evolution,"²² though such strategies have served in part, they argue, to "divert attention from more costly, politically controversial, and difficult societal reforms."²³ So while many have

linked education and democracy, few have had the political resolve to ensure that education actually serves democratic ends.

By the 1930s, composition had become a discipline in its own right, but its place within English departments generally has been regarded as a “service” to the rest of the university, where students' poor writing is to be corrected and polished before they move on to other, ostensibly more important studies. Since the 1960s numerous scathing critiques of this situation have emerged, asserting among other grievances that this imbalance in status results in economic exploitation of graduate students and adjunct instructors, who teach the bulk of writing classes.²⁴ Composition also took a rhetorical turn around this time, resulting in a number of “new” rhetorics based in whole or in part on classical traditions, many of them interweaving theoretical positions taken from poststructuralism, feminism, queer studies, multiculturalism, and many other perspectives.

To the general public, however, “rhetoric” remains something of a dirty word. If, on any corner in the western world, one were to ask “What is rhetoric?” the answer would most likely be a negative one. The popular conception of rhetoric has been, throughout its 2500-year history (and especially during election years) the art of manipulating language to deceive. Put another way, rhetoric is what one's opponents practice--sophistry and silver-tongued deception--while “we” speak the truth, plainly and unequivocally. Unsurprisingly, then, histories of rhetoric nearly always, by necessity, take up a defensive position, whether one speaks of the practice of rhetoric or the discipline devoted to its study. Brian Vickers makes this situation plain in his title *In Defense of Rhetoric*, in which his mission is to rescue rhetoric from Plato and restore

legitimacy to this ancient art.²⁵ Other historians and rhetoricians have staked out equally defensive positions in defining the parameters of the field, such that the discipline of rhetoric and its sister composition often have been explained from the bunkers.

Although the study of rhetoric and composition has gained considerable respectability over the course of the twentieth century, disciplinary anxiety and the search for intellectual—and especially institutional—legitimacy remain very much at the forefront of scholarship, including most histories of the field, haunting even the most basic questions of who “we” are, what “we” do, what rhetoric is or ought to be. Historians of rhetoric who set out to answer these questions must, almost by necessity, proceed defensively, from a position of negation: rhetoric and composition are thus defined, first and foremost, by what they are not, with the historian's preoccupation with legitimacy leading inexorably to exclusions and lacunae in the historical record that make future battles all but inevitable, perhaps unwinnable or, worse, not worth winning.

The proper institutional home of rhetoric and composition continues to be a vexing question, as many compositionists find they have little in common with their colleagues in literary studies (and vice versa), and the two-tiered structure existing within many departments continues to delegitimize the intellectual value of their work. Even if those who teach upper-division and graduate students in rhetorical and composition theory are no longer relegated to the lowest tier, the graduate students and adjuncts who teach the bulk of actual composition classes remain largely invisible to their departments and institutions, despite the best efforts of many conscientious administrators and faculty. Short of massive changes in hiring and tenure practices at

the very top levels of universities, however, it is highly unlikely that this situation will be improved simply by relocating composition instructors to different buildings or programs.

Little would be gained here by rehearsing the institutional struggles between rhetoric and composition and literary studies, which have been well documented elsewhere. My goal, rather, is to offer a bridge between the two fields (large and diffuse as both have become) by showing how each can enrich the other. In fact, the fields often are not so far apart to begin with, as demonstrated by the landmark studies of Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, and Mikhail Bakhtin, in which literature and rhetoric work in tandem to inform both disciplines.²⁶

Burke's literary criticism is still cited frequently, but it is primarily his theories of language that have secured his place among rhetoricians, particularly his position that language functions rhetorically as "a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."²⁷ For Burke, "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric, and wherever there is rhetoric, there is meaning."²⁸ Among Burke's most important contributions to both fields are the "terministic screen" —the notion that people use symbols to form a screen or grid through which to make sense of the world—and the dramatistic pentad—a method of inquiry using the five dramatic elements of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose that "invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action"²⁹ Through these concepts, Burke offered scholars in many fields a way to better understand the connection between language and ideology, and his work is still considered especially vital to the field of rhetoric and

composition. Because Burke's focus is primarily on the author's persuasive aims, however, his methods are of limited use for the present study.

Wayne Booth was another towering figure who straddled the fields of literary criticism and rhetoric, and he shared Burke's belief that all narrative is rhetorical. His 1961 work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is still widely taught, and many of his concepts—including the implied author and the unreliable narrator --have long since become standard tools of the literary scholar. In the preface to the first edition, Booth notes that even the writer of non-didactic fiction uses particular rhetorical devices in order to “impose his fictional world upon the reader” and to “help the reader grasp the work,” however disguised the rhetoric may be or how conscious the writer is of his own persuasive aims.³⁰ The measure of “good” literature, in Booth’s estimation, is “whether *the image he creates of himself*, his implied author, is one that his most intelligent and perceptive readers can admire.”³¹ These are all valuable insights, to be sure, and literary scholars employ them as a matter of course, often without realizing it. But, as with Burke, Booth focuses on the rhetorical purposes and devices of authors, rather than on the rhetorical confusion their characters face.

The Russian literary critic, philosopher, and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin offers perhaps the most useful approach to the present study, particularly his notion of heteroglossia, which he defines as follows:

The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions—social, historical, meteorological, physiological—that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time

will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve.

Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible to that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such, it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress.³²

Because it is "practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve" these colliding forces of text and context, we cannot tease out, with any precision, all of the threads woven into a given utterance. Bakhtin argues, however, that since the language of any novel is "revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages," dialogue unmasks the "socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives."³³

What I attempt here is a rough mapping of the "socio-ideological" systems at work in each of the novels in this study. In this way, I hope to reverse what I regard as the generally one-way trajectory between rhetoric and literature, with the tools of rhetorical theory being applied to literary texts. Aside from first-year composition classes that "use" literature to teach writing, rarely is literature employed in the service of better understanding rhetoric as a subject. Rarer still is literature explored for what it can tell us about rhetorical literacy in the broader culture, which is my central aim here. How have people of varying educational levels and socioeconomic circumstances adapted, or fail to adapt, to new modes of expression, if they even recognized them as such? Miscommunication abounds in literature, as it does in life generally, yet few have framed the misunderstandings on which so many plots turn as an issue of rhetorical literacy. If,

as Burke put it, “every question selects a field of battle,”³⁴ I choose to contest the terrain on which literature and rhetoric have traditionally waged war by asking if both do not, in essence, seek similar answers of written texts, despite using dissimilar methods of inquiry. By posing the question of rhetorical literacy in the three novels I discuss here, I hope to bring the fields of literature and rhetoric one step closer together, healing a divide I find largely artificial and mutually destructive.

The Linguistic Turn

Because these works demonstrate an overt engagement with language, they are ideally suited to a discussion of the “linguistic turn” within philosophy and related fields that began in the earliest twentieth century but did not become widely dispersed until the 1970s. Such ideas nonetheless were in circulation much earlier, particularly among writers and thinkers interested in philosophy more generally, most notably Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, and reaching all the way back to Gorgias and other Sophists.

Contrary to the “metaphysical” view of language that Derrida attributed to Plato, these new philosophies held that language is constitutive, and not merely descriptive, of reality, that language is not a transparent medium of thought or reality, and that language is socially constructed rather than fixed in meaning. As I suggested earlier, however, Platonic philosophy has hardly been toppled by these notions of language. Despite the inroads made by poststructuralism over the past few decades, in many respects the “dialogue” between Plato and Gorgias still goes on, even within the academy, though the divide no longer breaks down so neatly between disciplinary boundaries.

In a 2000 interview with Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, Judith Butler questions the assumption that words are transparent carriers of meaning, particularly as it relates to anti-intellectualism and the frequent call for scholars to be more “accessible” to readers.³⁵ Butler, who often has been charged with undue opacity in her own writing, is dismayed by the increased calls for scholarly work to be to appeal to “common sense” through a “common language” and to be written within the terms of an “already accepted grammar.” Butler is not “in favor of difficulty for difficulty’s sake; it’s that I think there is a lot in ordinary language and in received grammar that constrains our thinking.” Butler points out that “accessible meaning, common sense, and the public sphere are all fictions that deceive us into believing that we all inhabit the same linguistic world,” a disturbing reality for her, given what poststructuralism has shown us about language. Butler says we must accept, as a “social responsibility,” that “there is *no* common language anymore,” something she calls “one of the most profound pedagogical problems of our time, if not one of the most profound political problems of our time.”³⁶

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan posited that humans are not at home in language at all, and that this is an intrinsic feature of language itself. This premise, which has been further elaborated by Julia Kristeva and others, provides, for me, the most compelling explanation of language’s power to comfort and mystify us simultaneously. Admittedly, this notion accords with the post-structuralist view of language I prefer to the long-standing Platonic ideal of one-to-one correspondence between word and object. As the Platonic view still holds sway in many circles, it is my intent that readers need not be card-carrying Lacanians to follow my argument or share its conclusions.

Because Lacan's ideas inform my project but do not comprise its methodological heart, I will risk oversimplifying his position for the sake of brevity. For Lacan, our entrance into language severs forever the state of nature into which we were born, “the real” where distinctions between self and others do not exist. Once the child recognizes its difference from its mother and all others and submits to the linguistic, cultural, and legal norms of society, it enters into the symbolic order through which it can participate in a community sharing the same language and basic principles of self-regulation. Between these two stages dividing the “real” and “symbolic” is the “imaginary” order of the “mirror” stage, where the child’s first recognition of itself is in fact a misrecognition, in that it appears more unified and separate than it actually is. According to Lacan, one never fully leaves behind the imaginary stage and, because of this, even the most conventional and law-abiding among us suffer from the anxiety produced by desires that can never be fully satisfied. That is, we experience the *lack* that defines us all as human.

My project, then, begins from the Lacanian position that our entry into the symbolic order results in a lack that prevents us from finding ourselves fully at home in language. It follows, however, that some people are still more alienated from the symbolic order than others. Julia Kristeva applied the term “abject” to describe those who are marginalized, for various reasons and to differing degrees, and who elicit reactions of horror or disgust within the surrounding culture, which, in its abhorrence of difference it refuses to acknowledge or assimilate, forces the abject outside of the symbolic order. As societies change, the symbols and the rules through which they achieve understanding change as well, forcing their subjects to either adapt or become

even less at home in their native tongue. Even people who formerly enjoyed high status within a culture—like Edith Wharton's protagonist Lily Bart--can become abject, outsiders, by their refusal or inability to adapt to such changes and the new kinds of literacy they impose. Their skills, attitudes, and beliefs can easily become outmoded or even obsolete as new social, political, and economic realities emerge.

Social and Economic Contexts

The pace and complexity of American life, particularly the nation's economic life, increased exponentially in the decades following the Civil War, as corporations exercised new freedoms, the stock market took root in the public imagination, and wave after wave of financial panic ravaged the country. It was during this time also that economies of scale first become possible and feasible. It is in the period between 1870 and 1900 that “we can first speak of the mass demand of a national urban market—a market created by the railroads and sustained in effectiveness by rising per capita incomes...a quantum leap in the scale of demands for goods and services.”³⁷ This period also was transformed by the growing power of corporations in most aspects of American life, particularly in the “remaking of cultural perceptions” by providing the value system and blueprint through which most public and private organizations are structured, as Alan Trachtenberg has so persuasively revealed.³⁸

The period following the Civil War also was marked by a rapid increase in new fields available for study at the “new university,” most notably in the social sciences. The discipline of economics, while not new, underwent significant changes during this time, as the name change from “political economy” to “economics” suggests. During what some have termed “the empirical turn” within the field of economics, long-established

ties with the larger political and social world gradually fell away in favor of mathematical models. The new social sciences of sociology and psychology likewise were marked by a desire for scientific precision and quantifiable data, as were the emerging fields of business and professional education.

In her study *A History of the Modern Fact*, Mary Poovey examines the origins of double-entry bookkeeping as a prototype of what she calls "the modern fact," upon which systems of state and commerce have come to depend. Poovey begins her rhetorical study of the "fact" in order to uncover "the obscure traces of likeness" between numbers and metaphors as epistemological units.³⁹ Numbers are no more transparent, impartial, or value-free than are figures of speech, she asserts, since their creation obscures the selecting hand and the necessary fictions required to balance the books. The fictions of credits and debits that enable one to balance both sides of the ledger were, paradoxically, meant to demonstrate honesty, "because preserving the precisions of the system required anyone who wrote in the books to act as if these fictions were true and in so doing, to help make them so."⁴⁰

Poovey argues that the system of ledger-writing "demonstrated that the idea of system could carry moral connotations whose effects exceeded the referential function of mercantile writing, because one of these effects was the establishment of creditworthiness itself."⁴¹ Not only did the balances of a merchant attest to his individual creditworthiness, but "the system's formal coherence displayed the credibility of merchants as a group," since the rectitude of their system required a strict adherence to the rules of accounting.⁴² With the merchant (and, later, statisticians) by this system esteemed as model citizens whose veracity could not be denied, governments had a

basis for the "reason of state" argument put forth most ardently by Francis Bacon.

Under this theory, the importance of commerce to nation-states could be demonstrated using numbers, with merchants enlisted to provide their exclusive expertise in matters of trade, replacing the prince and his advisors.

As Frederic Jameson has shown (via Max Weber), disciplining and ordering one's life by rational means had explicitly religious ends, and doing well in the world (e.g. being a good businessman) was a by-product or evidence of a religious life. Thus, "Calvin did not desacralize the world; on the contrary, he turned the entire world into a monastery"⁴³ With the coming of modernity and the growing dominance of the capitalist mode of production, however, there was no longer a need to justify rationally ordering one's world practices for religious ends. Here, Calvinist spirituality has performed the role of vanishing mediator, acting as "a *catalytic agent* which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms. With "the removal of the brackets, the whole institution of religion itself (or in other words what is here designated as 'Protestantism') serves its turn as a kind of overall bracket or framework within which change takes place and which can be dismantled and removed when its usefulness is over."⁴⁴ This "catalytic change" that valorized rational business methods exemplifies the unseen forces at work in a society, while also demonstrating Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, in which he argues that social control is maintained most effectively not by force or coercion, but through a culture's tacit acceptance of the dominant class's values, which over time come to be regarded as "common sense."⁴⁵

The New Writing

The valorization of rational business methods extended to the act of writing, with the "plain style" of scientific and business writing held as factual, transparent, and arhetorical. But accounting is a discursive act, as Erik Dussere notes, despite all pretenses to the contrary: "The complete account is concerned with telling or narrating an event or action, with all the descriptive, explanatory, and ethical elements that the process of narration entails."⁴⁶ But the origins of double-entry accounting and its connections to the field of rhetoric have been elided by most historians, a situation Poovey strives to correct. She reports that in the late sixteenth century, "number still carried the pejorative connotations associated with necromancy" and black magic.⁴⁷ She notes that "[i]nstead of gaining prestige from numbers, double-entry bookkeeping helped confer cultural authority on numbers" by borrowing both tactics and prestige from the field of rhetoric.

Contrary to the origins of rhetoric as a means of resolving property disputes and upholding "the distribution of power...in part by regulating the production of knowledge,"⁴⁸ Poovey stresses the democratizing potential of the earliest system of bookkeeping, one that "implicitly challenged the status hierarchy that rhetoric upheld,"⁴⁹ because the rule-governed writing it required made entries interchangeable with those made by any other person, regardless of status. Citing John Mellis's accounting textbook from 1588, Poovey calls attention to his explicit reference to "the double-entry ledger as merely one of a *system* of books, which must be taken together to understand what the all-important balances mean." Divorced of context, no single book in the system revealed an accurate state of affairs.

The accuracy conferred on double-entry by its strict rules of accounting made the writing also seem "transparent instead of performative, as rhetoric so obviously was." One important book in the system was the memorial, wherein each day's business transactions mixed numbers and narration (such as we find in Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!*) and, some days later, were translated into a single currency, the money of account.⁵⁰ Those parts of the narrative that could not be quantified, or monetized, were to be written in the margins in short sentences, "without superfluous words," making it easier to transfer information to the final book, the ledger itself, where only what was "essential" made it into the record.

Writing style in general underwent significant changes in the sixteenth century at around the same time double-entry accounting, of which the ledger is the cornerstone, emerged.⁵¹ The new developments in writing, particularly a heightened concern for grammatical structure, showed a pronounced similarity to the scientific writing of which the ledger is but an extreme example. The "new" writing demanded a more diagrammatic form of representation, breaking up the text into its constituent parts with headings, paragraphs, a tight compact style of composition. As expository prose began to more closely resemble the language of the ledger with its lack of apparent style, the appearance of accuracy became more valuable, and "the precision of arithmetic replaced the eloquence of speech as the instrument that produced both truth and virtue."⁵² Mercantile writing was an appealing model to seventeenth-century scientists and moral philosophers, in particular, because it was ideally suited for presenting knowledge as "uninterested."⁵³ As Poovey notes, the writing style itself underwrote the fiction that "knowledge generated in the laboratory had nothing to do with politics and

the assertion that this knowledge, which was artificially contrived, could be confirmed by an audience of credible witnesses but held good for the world at large."⁵⁴ The "plain" style soon dominated other fields as well. Poovey explains that "[e]mphasizing stylistic difference where we might expect to find a description of method helped signal the superiority of the new mode of analysis without raising troubling questions about the place of fictions in the method." Because the mode of representation seemed transparent, readers' focus was on the mode itself and "not on the stages of analysis by which systematic knowledge was being produced."

Poovey notes that early nineteenth-century champions of statistics relied on this style to argue that their mode of representation was free of the "ornamental excesses associated with rhetoric." It hardly need be said how profoundly this style influenced the discourses of economics and, later, business and related fields.⁵⁵

By the nineteenth century, the "plain style" prevailed in English composition as well, which was just then becoming a distinct discipline, one in which (as James Berlin has demonstrated) the "objective," positivistic pedagogy of current-traditional rhetoric became dominant (and would remain so for most of the twentieth century). Both economics and composition were influenced greatly by the emerging disciplines of psychology, sociology, and behaviorism, as well as the general approbation of all things "scientific," "rational," "measurable." In current-traditional rhetoric, language is regarded as empirically verifiable and "the real" is located in the external world, as it is generally in economics, business management, and in various social sciences, where numbers usually are presumed to "speak for themselves" and constitute a fixed, indisputable "truth." To be sure, the financial calamities of the past few years have called into

question such views, though they remain with us even now. These ideas were not (and are not) confined to intellectuals and academics, however, but made their way into public consciousness through newspapers, magazines, educational venues, and literature.

Although current-traditional rhetoric (the most widely taught kind of composition instruction throughout this period and extending well into our own time) initially sprang from the democratizing purpose of developing universal, scientific understandings of the writing process—much like the birth of double-entry accounting—it quickly devolved into a narrow focus on correctness in usage, grammar, and punctuation. Because of its apparent universality and scientific appeal, it was ideally suited for the market-based system of mass production, which now included teaching as well as manufacturing. Stripped of its potentially liberating functions and thoroughly systematized, composition could now be taught more consistently with less pedagogical training. Positivistic methods in other fields like the social sciences likewise emerged from progressive ideals, like the Enlightenment notion that the human should no longer be understood through the products of elite culture, such as art and literature but could be placed under the vastly more inclusive and democratic scientific lens. It was only when positivistic social science became fully integrated in technologies of bureaucratic government and then into marketing and such that it severed its own ties to Enlightenment thought.⁵⁶

Because of the more utilitarian ends to which writing instruction aimed, composition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century de-emphasized persuasion in favor of dispassionate exposition and stressed rational arguments only occasionally

supplemented by appeals to *pathos*. As Elizabethada Wright and Michael Halloran assert, "[w]ithin the ethos of professionalism, passion would ideally be eliminated altogether, and so persuasion, once the overarching purpose of all rhetoric, became a concession to the weakness of the audience."⁵⁷

Literary study was not immune to the lure of positivism and the facticity that seemingly scientific methods and a "disinterested" style could confer on the discipline. On the contrary, in order to support its academic legitimacy, English adopted and adapted this style in order to achieve professional standing on a par with more "rigorous" disciplines that had more obvious social utility. The formalism of New Criticism answered this need quite capably by appearing to demonstrate the self-contained autonomy of literary texts, whose internal inconsistencies could always be swept under the rubric of "paradox" or "ambiguity."

New Criticism offered the added benefit of seeming to be divorced from the messy outside world of politics, economics, history, and other sordidness—much as scientists had used the ostensible transparency of numbers to make a tacit claim of objectivity and disinterestedness in the outside world. Ironically, the most fervent New Critics were the Fugitive Agrarians, who lamented the deracination of self and community caused by industrialism, yet whose methods—when practiced alone rather than as a starting point—deracinated the text from virtually all its surrounding context. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's concept of the "affective fallacy," whereby any reader's reaction to a text was discounted as a factor in interpretation, further marked New Criticism's appropriation of scientism.⁵⁸

Although the literature of the period is my primary lens, I will also explore the historical contexts surrounding each work and author to show how these new “scientific” discourses, sacralized through the Protestant work ethic, came to influence other ways of speaking, writing, and thinking. It is routine now, for example, to speak of “the bottom line,” “at the end of the day” and “in the final analysis,” as though such principles apply equally to the human and the mechanical. These “metaphors we live by” (to borrow Lakoff and Johnson’s well-known phrase) to some extent result from the molding of language by powerful interests with nearly unlimited access to the many public and private institutions through which a culture’s values are mediated. But changes in the ways we think and speak rarely result from top-down attempts at regulation; rather, all speech is, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s phrase, “full of other people’s words.” That is, every utterance is inflected by so many other voices that, “having taken its meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, [it] cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads....cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.”⁵⁹

My goal is not to vilify such discourses. Rather, I hope to show the disorientation, even dislocation, that sometimes accompanies new systems of thought and the coinages they introduce into circulation within the general economy of language. This disorientation is all the more the case when they become the new “coin of the realm” that one has either to master or resist, at some cost. “Text-speak” and the new language ushered in by social networking sites are but the latest instances of the phenomenon I explore in this work. Though the texture of life has changed dramatically in the past half-century, I will argue that the first half of the twentieth century had just as

dizzying an effect on Americans as the age in which we now live, if not more so. If “change is the only constant” in the twenty-first century, those living through the earliest decades of the last century faced a much steeper learning curve than most of us today, and we have had the benefit of their experiences to midwife us into this point in time.

The three protagonists considered in this study are all, to varying degrees, deemed abject by their surrounding culture. Lily Bart is outcast from her social group but can find no place in the lower reaches of society in which to live. Thomas Sutpen is never fully accepted by the people of Jefferson, Mississippi, but over time is begrudgingly admitted on the basis, first, of his staggering financial impact and, later, of his valor in war. These things notwithstanding, he ultimately is killed by the formerly loyal Wash Jones for failing to understand the emotional components of communication. Not surprisingly, the character in this study who is most abject is the African American protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who is an outsider even to most others of his race. He encounters a long series of ejections, from the black college in the South to the union meeting and paint factory in the North, and eventually is shut out by The Brotherhood.

Chapter two concerns Edith Wharton’s 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*. Wharton’s protagonist, Lily Bart, loses her already precarious social footing in New York society not only because she lacks a place in the new social order ushered in by Wall Street’s ascendancy, but also because she lacks the means to understand or be understood in the new kinds of language that come to dominate this once familiar world. Lily’s charms remain undimmed in the new order, but because she is blind to subtexts and non-verbal cues, she misreads situations in ways that prove fatal. The story of Lily Bart is not only about the commodification of all human interaction or even

the financial terms in which this domination is rendered. The language of the stock market has become the linguistic grid within which other discourses exist.

I discuss a vastly different character in chapter three, Thomas Sutpen, in William Faulkner's 1936 novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* While Sutpen lacks the social grace and facility with language that Lily Bart has by birth and training, he soon masters the logic of capital necessary to amass his fortune. His downfall, like hers, however, results from his limited rhetorical register. Whereas Lily has empathy and conscience enough—perhaps even too much of both—Sutpen operates at the level of pure logos, never fully grasping that human beings are more than the sum of their economic lives and that one cannot put a price on personal injustice.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, I will examine the ways in which Faulkner implicates logic as the overriding and exclusive rhetorical device available to Thomas Sutpen and demonstrate how this "logic of the ledger" leads to Sutpen's ruin. The only system Sutpen understands is the seemingly straightforward and transparent one of double-entry accounting whereby debits and credits must be balanced at any cost, including making imaginary entries. Any unquantifiable or abstract value--such as pride, honor, or love--is unaccountable in this scheme and Sutpen overlooks these matters to his own detriment. While many critics have focused on *Absalom's* various socioeconomic dimensions, I will address economics as discursive practice, with a particular focus on the language of the law and accounting (including the moral kind) found throughout the novel. I look not only at Sutpen's own linguistic practices but also at how his metaphors and corresponding worldview are taken up by the other characters who attempt to account for his downfall. By employing Sutpen's language, these storytellers, I argue,

fall into the same cognitive trap as Sutpen and thus cannot account fully for his grand failure. I will look primarily at Sutpen's characterization as a man of strict calculation whose undoing is more the result of a limited rhetorical and emotional register than of malice or blind racism.

Chapter four reveals an unnamed protagonist, the narrator of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, who is a gifted speaker, capable of moving large audiences to action. But, like Lily, he is unable to locate himself within a culture that refuses to recognize him. Because he too is blind to subtext, he understands the literal meaning of the words he utters, but their full significance exceeds his grasp. As a black man, he especially can ill afford to misunderstand his surroundings, as this easily could lead to violence or even death. Unlike Lily and Sutpen, Ellison's narrator employs his own means of achieving rhetorical literacy, thereby avoiding their fate. In recovering his "mother-wit," he is also able to reclaim rhetorical invention and a new sense of timing or *kairos*, finding the proper persuasive tools at the proper time, and frees himself from manipulation by the Brotherhood and others who wish to exploit his rhetorical gifts.

All three of these protagonists are mired in the increasingly more specialized and complicated marketplace of twentieth century modernity—a marketplace not just of money and goods, but also of various intangible kinds of capital that are mostly invisible and whose rules are nearly always unspoken. Struggling against systems of exchange that work in mysterious ways to fend off outsiders, these protagonists lack a full repertoire of rhetorical literacy, and thus fail to see and understand themselves or be understood by others. In each case, their inability to decipher these complex codes of entry proves detrimental.

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- ¹ Catherine L. Hobbs and James A. Berlin, "A Century of Writing Instruction in School and College English," in *A Short History of Writing Instruction*, ed. James J. Murphy (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 268.
- ² Stuart Selber, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 145.
- ³ Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 14.
- ⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays On Life, Literature and Method* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968).
- ⁵ Schuster, Charles. "The Ideology of Literacy: A Bakhtinian Perspective." *The Right to Literacy*. Eds. Andrea A. Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin (New York: MLA, 1990), 227.
- ⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd ed (New York: Vintage, 1995), 576.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 381.
- ⁸ Albert Murray, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 42.
- ⁹ Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991)
- ¹⁰ *National Literacy Act of 1991*. 5 Dec. 2006 <www.nifl.gov/public-law.html> <<http://www.nifl.gov/public-law.html>>>.
- ¹¹ See especially *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, ed. James J. Murphy (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), James A. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), and Harvey J. Graff's *The Legacies of Literacy* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1987) and *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).
- ¹² For a broad sampling of approaches to the topic, see *Writing New Media: Theory and Application for Expanding the Teaching of Composition*, by Anne Frances Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004).
- ¹³ For studies of African American literacy practices, see especially Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African-American Women* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000). For studies of Latino/a literacies, see especially Marcia Farr's *Rancheros in Chicagoacan: Language and Identity in a Transnational Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).
- ¹⁴ Deborah Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. Brandt borrows this term from Dorothy Smith.
- ¹⁹ James Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).
- ²⁰ Berlin, 29.
- ²¹ Quoted in Berlin, 86-87.
- ²² David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 17.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ²⁴ For especially rich discussions of the implications of composition's marginalized role, see Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998) and Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).
- ²⁵ Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ²⁶ See especially Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives*; Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; and Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*.
- ²⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 43.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

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- ²⁹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xxii.
- ³⁰ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), xiii.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 395 (emphasis in original).
- ³² M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 428.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 411.
- ³⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed., rev. (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1941] 1973), 67.
- ³⁵ Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification," in *JAC* 20.4, 728.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 729.
- ³⁷ Historian Stuart Bruchey, qtd. In Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 6.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³⁹ Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems in Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, xvi.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, xvii.
- ⁴³ Frederic Jameson, in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, Vol II: Syntax of History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 23.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁴⁵ For a helpful overview of Gramsci's ideas and impact, see the collection of essays in *Gramsci and Global Politics: Hegemony and Resistance*, Mark McNally, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- ⁴⁶ Dussere, 331.
- ⁴⁷ Poovey, 55.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ⁵¹ For an insightful discussion of this development, see Poovey's chapter "Accommodating Merchants" in *A History of the Modern Fact*, 29.91
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁵⁵ So completely did economics apply the "plain" style that the rhetorical moves underpinning economic writing were obscured until economist (and now also rhetorician) Deirdre McCloskey's 1986 book *The Rhetoric of Economics* demonstrated that despite their pretensions to scientism, economists rely as much on figurative language and persuasion, not just numbers or "value-free" discourse to make their arguments. See Dredre N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of Economics* 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).
- ⁵⁶ I am deeply indebted to my colleague Noah Roderick for reminding me of these important origins, particularly as I am far more concerned with recovering these democratizing impulses from contemporary consumerist demands than with denigrating any particular discourse community.
- ⁵⁷ Elizabethada A. Wright and S. Michael Halloran. See their chapter, "From Rhetoric to Composition: The Teaching of Writing in America to 1900, in *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, 2nd ed., James J. Murphy, ed. (Mahwah, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 233.
- ⁵⁸ As I noted in the Introduction, Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* put the lie to this notion of value-free literature or criticism by demonstrating how even non-didactic fiction writers make persuasive claims. See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
- ⁵⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik (New York, 1976), 128.

CHAPTER 2

THE BUSINESS OF LANGUAGE AND THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

The critic and novelist Maureen Howard has called Edith Wharton a “privileged guide” and “the ultimate insider” to fin de siècle New York aristocracy, beginning with what Howard considers (and I agree) to be her masterpiece, *The House of Mirth*.¹ In this and her later novels, Wharton would take Henry James's advice and “do New York,” regularly taking up the theme of high-society “uptown” in conflict and communion with the ascendant business class of “downtown” Wall Street. Wharton herself was both a deeply ambivalent member of this old moneyed class and a sharp critic of the nouveau riche, and she astutely judged how large the public appetite was for “scandal and excess in high places,”² which she would sate by detailing, in each fresh installment in *Scribner's* magazine, the fictional lives of Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden, and the many other inhabitants of *The House of Mirth*.

The title of the novel comes from Ecclesiastes 7:4: “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”³ The merriment and gaiety that “mirth” connotes is certainly relevant to the story. But, as Wayne Westbrook pointed out more than thirty years ago, Wharton was also almost certainly aware of the well-publicized scandal of 1905 involving a New York insurance company that the

popular press dubbed “the house of mirth.”⁴ In giving her novel of that year that name, she may well have intended to capitalize on the notoriety of these events. Westbrook goes on to venture that the novel “could be read as a consciously constructed allegory of Wall Street,” though he offers no such reading himself other than to note that Lily Bart’s social circles “take on the characteristics of an intricate yet impersonal human stock exchange.” Westbrook drops this compelling notion as quickly as he raises it, however, and, as far as I can tell, no other critic has read the novel as financial allegory, nor do I intend to do so here.

I do, however, share Westbrook’s view that Wall Street permeates this novel, and not only in its characters and events but through its language and ideas. It is hard for even a casual reader to miss how completely all social interactions, and particularly marriage, are commodified in the novel. In her Marxist reading of *The House of Mirth*, Wai-chee Dimock offers an especially deft analysis of the marketplace’s power to reproduce itself and “assimilate everything else into its domain.”⁵ Dimock observes that “as a controlling logic, a mode of human conduct and human association, the marketplace is everywhere and nowhere, ubiquitous and invisible.” As Dimock points out, Gus Trenor’s sexual demands of Lily Bart are indeed “steeped in—and legitimated by—the language of the marketplace, the language of traded benefits and reciprocal obligation.” I share Dimock’s view that the true power of money resides in “its ability to define other things in its own image.”⁶ But I cannot share with her the conclusion that Lily’s “feeble” rebellion “attests to the frightening power of the marketplace...as well [as] to Wharton’s own politics [...] and her bleakness of vision in the face of a totalizing system she finds at once detestable and inevitable.”⁷

Capital's influence is insidious indeed, but reproduction, even of capital, generally requires a partner, and Wharton was much too astute an observer of her social class not to recognize its complicity in its own downfall, its willing seduction by the new wealth of Wall Street. Neither high finance nor hereditary wealth comes off sympathetically in Wharton's account, and neither can claim to be the other's unwitting victim.

Nor does Wharton seem to look back nostalgically to an earlier time when marriage and a woman's sexuality were not part of an exchange economy, even if the matter were not then put in such indelicate terms. In fact, Mrs. Penniston's hypocrisy reveals that what most shocked the enclaves of New York society is that the names formerly used to mask these transactions have been stripped bare and the markets opened up to interlopers like Simon Rosedale.

A major part of Lily Bart's struggle, I will argue, is against the web of competing discourses between the soon-to-be-dominant "masters of the universe" on Wall Street and the equally alienating and imprisoning codes of her own society. She is also caught within various kinds of social and financial marketplaces, with their incommensurate, floating currencies and unwritten rules. Undergirding this chaos is the uncertainty of being able to affix a price or value on abstract properties like one's reputation and social worth.⁸ The money Lily unwittingly borrows from Gus Trenor (thinking he was investing her own) is not meant to be "paid in kind," Trenor says. "But there's such a thing as fair play—and interest on one's money—and hang me if I've had as much as a look from you," he complains (188-9). The interest to which he feels entitled is clearly sexual, yet no one, least of all Lily, know how to monetize such an interest or know when one has paid in full. Finally, Lily is hindered by a limited rhetorical register that prevents her from

discerning context or subtext. While she has a gift for conversation and is socially charming, she is blind to the rhetorical contexts that give individual words their meaning. She lacks what Charles Schuster has called "the power to be able to make oneself heard and felt, to signify." The tragic recognition that her life has been meaningless occurs too late for Lily to muster the will to change her course or develop the means to create a real life for herself.

Lily Bart is a beautiful and charming twenty-nine-year-old woman bred only for the purpose of marrying well who, while realizing that her value declines as she ages and grows less rare, nonetheless unknowingly sabotages her every attempt to pursue that end. Jeffrey Meyers describes Lily as "a camp follower in the army of pleasure, [...] both a victim and heroine, she despises the society she's trying to enter."⁹ She lives with her wealthy but austere aunt, Mrs. Penniston, who not only does not understand the current mores or the high cost of living among the very rich—particularly the gambling at cards that is part of the price of admission---but also disinherits her niece, believing the false rumor of her extramarital affair with George Dorset. In reality, Dorset's wife, Bertha, has spread the falsehood to cover her own, most recent affair, with the young Ned Silverton. Although Lily holds the key to her own vindication in the form of love letters formerly exchanged between Bertha and Lawrence Selden, she ultimately cannot bring herself to expose the now-defunct relationship, in part, because of her own feelings for Selden.

A lawyer of moderate means whose prospects for marrying Lily do not bode well, Selden nonetheless toys with the notion of marrying Lily before turning against her like all the others have. He goes to great lengths to remain detached from New York

society, all the while enjoying the spectacle (and certainly the lavish entertainments) his peripheral position allows. Though he services the wealthy by providing legal cover for their indiscretions, he nonetheless regards himself as being of another class, part of a “republic of the spirit” where he can remain, as he puts it, “amphibious” in an atmosphere he disapproves of, able to breathe in this air as well as another and “turn gold back again into something else,” a “reverse alchemy” that he claims most of her friends have lost.¹⁰

Selden regards Lily, at first, as a “specialized” member of her species who “must have cost a great deal to make” (5). Later, he becomes infatuated with her but proves to be both coward and prude by believing so readily in her rumored promiscuity, on the basis of mere innuendo rather than evidence. As an orphan living on the good graces of her narrow-minded aunt, Lily begins the novel from an already precarious social position, and she slips even further by accepting the financial “help” of Gus Trenor, husband of her friend Judy, who offers to invest a small sum on Lily’s behalf. Lily manages to keep him at bay for a while, but after nearly being raped by Gus, she determines that one way or another she will repay her debt to him and have both a clean slate and a clear conscience. She thinks her problems are solved when her aunt dies, but Mrs. Penniston shocks everyone by leaving her a meager \$10,000, which is tied up in probate while Lily’s debts continue to mount.

All the while, the Wall Street wizard and shrewd social climber Simon Rosedale has rendered one offer of marriage after another to Lily, but his coarse manners and plainspoken deal-making (not to mention his being Jewish) repulse Lily, at least initially. Moreover, he seems as capable as Lawrence Selden of flustering Lily and shaking her

confidence. Lily's attitude toward him softens, however, after her social ruin, when she is reduced, at first, to brokering entry into society for the nouveau riche and, later, proves herself useless at doing even basic millinery work sewing spangles onto hats.

By this point in the novel, Lily is taking dangerous quantities of a sedative after countless sleepless nights. Seeing her in such dingy surroundings, Rosedale both pities Lily and retains a strong sense of her value—both as a social asset and, we sense for perhaps the first time, a human being. He makes one last attempt to rescue her through a loan against her inheritance, what he calls “a plain business arrangement, such as one man would make against another” (391). But she doesn't trust it after thinking herself party to just such an arrangement with Gus Trenor. “I can never again be sure,” she avers, “of understanding the plainest business arrangement.” After encountering Nettie Crane, a former beneficiary of her own “spasmodic benevolence” (through the influence of her plain spinster friend, the ever charitable Gerty Farish), Lily feels for the first time “the surprised sense of human fellowship” and takes what proves a lethal dose of sedative, while dreaming that she holds Nettie's infant in her arms (414).

A Sentimental Education

Lily is by training and education unprepared for the new world dominated by Wall Street, and equally unprepared to recognize that the slight tremors beneath her feet—the subtle shifts in language and values--belie a major transformation in the nature of money, power, and social organization. Lawrence Selden sees that she is “so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate” (8), yet his pity for her does not prevent

him from faulting her for clinging to the only purpose for which she is suited: marriage to a wealthy man.

Gazing in the mirror at the lines about her mouth that tell on her attempt to keep up appearances, Lily reflects on the failure of her family's past fortunes, wondering if her mounting debts and diminishing marital prospects were "her own fault or that of destiny" (36). The long "train of association" begins with the memory of "the turbulent element called home":

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was "company"; a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall-table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of a bronze jar; a series of French and English maids giving warning amid a chaos of hurriedly-ransacked wardrobes and dress-closets; an equally changing dynasty of nurses and footmen; quarrels in the pantry, the kitchen and the drawing-room; precipitate trips to Europe, and returns with gorged trunks and days of interminable unpacking; semi-annual discussions as to where the summer should be spent, grey interludes of economy and brilliant reactions of expense--such was the setting of Lily Bart's first memories.

One cannot help but see Lily herself gathering dust within the depths of a bronze jar, like the neglected bills her parents cast aside. These recollections of a life treading water on an ever churning sea of fortunes lost and gained, constantly "tugged at by the undertow of a perpetual need—the need of more money" (37), end with her father's ruin and "slow and difficult dying." After "two years of hungry roaming," her mother finally

succumbs to death as well, dying from "deep disgust" (44) at their pinched circumstances and dingy life.

Lily sees that, with their financial ruin, her father, whom she'd rarely seen by daylight yet was blamed for all manner of woe, "no longer counted" to his wife; "he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfil [sic] his purpose" (41). While her own extinction is not yet at hand, her father's naturalistic fate looms over her attempt to secure a place in the vanishing world for which she has been fitted, or adapt to the one ascending on the horizon. She knows that she comes from careless people who ignore bills at their own expense and continue striving for a life of splendor undimmed by their dwindling means of maintaining it. But she does not know how to have the kind of life her mother wants for her, a marriage of convenience rather than a "love-match" (43), while also finding a modicum of freedom and happiness.

Lily feels acutely that "she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (32). But if she shares her mother's taste for luxury and her weakness for carelessness, Lily is also her father's daughter, and she at least aspires to a life of spiritual substance and emotional independence, arranged within an elegant setting, of course. Other people's opulence no long suffices for her, and "she was beginning to chafe at the obligations" imposed by these trappings, wishing she could secure them for herself (33). "There were even moments when she was conscious of having to pay her way," through her tedious offices to the Trenors and mounting debt to the jewelers and dress-makers. Her ideal is to have the independence of someone like Gerty Farish, but without her "dingy"

surroundings and desire to be "good" (9). What Lily wants instead is to be "happy," to live, as it were, in a house of mirth.

Education for young Lily had been an afterthought, something to be worked into the shuffle from house to country to foreign destinations. Lily's "extensive perusal" of sentimental fiction gave "an idealizing touch to her most prosaic purposes" (44), yet when her father is dying, the "affecting words" that her reading "had led her to connect with such occasions" fail her, and she is left unable to provide any "little services" to comfort him (42). Her reading is both inadequate and too superficial to provide her any moral guidance, and other kinds of literature were likely discouraged, given her mother's scorn for the poetry her husband had "wasted his evenings" reading (43).

Yet Lily is far from unintelligent. She pays close attention to her mother's advice about using responsibly "the last asset in their fortunes," Lily's beauty, to rebuild their lives and family reputation. Mrs. Bart's idea of "responsibility" consists of having Lily wield her beauty to get what she wants (that is, what Mrs. Bart wants: a profitable marriage). Lily must not make the stupid mistake of a "love-match," a point Lily's mother drives home with great force, assuring her that she herself had been "talked into" marriage with Mr. Bart. We are told that

[t]o a less illuminated intelligence Mrs. Bart's counsels might have been dangerous, but Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success, other arts are required. She knew that to betray any sense of superiority was a subtler form of the stupidity her mother denounced, and it did not take her long to learn that a beauty needs more tact than the possessor of an average set of features. (43)

Lily understands clearly that beauty is not enough to "seal the deal," that "other arts" must supplement her beauty, just as a charming setting enhances a gemstone.

In repeatedly snubbing Simon Rosedale, however, Lily violates one rule by reminding him of his social inferiority. In missing church with Percy Gryce and being seen playing cards, she violates another rule: tact. Although Lily hardly relishes the prospect of having "the honour" of being "bored for life," with Percy, she nonetheless knows the rules she has broken in squandering this opportunity (32). Perhaps it is remembering how she was "secretly ashamed of her mother's crude passion for money" (44) that leads Lily unconsciously to sabotage her chances with Percy Gryce. But whatever the cause, Lily's fondness for "pictures and flowers, and of sentimental fiction" allows her to feel "ennobled" in "her desire for worldly advantages," leading her grasp—for both love and financial security—to exceed her reach.

Wharton's own childhood and education parallel Lily's in key ways, but the differences between them are even more revealing. As with Lily, Wharton's family fortunes were in decline, consisting mainly of New York real estate, the value of which dropped sharply following the Civil War.¹¹ The Whartons also spent a number of years abroad, beginning when Edith was four and returning when she was ten, all the while leasing out their Manhattan and Newport properties to finance their travels. Unlike Lily, whose "familiarity with foreign customs" (45) seems the primary legacy of having traveled abroad, Wharton's childhood years in Europe left such a lasting impression that years later she lamented "the curse of having been brought up there," because it contrasted so painfully with what she saw as America's less refined manners and more crassly materialistic culture.¹²

The model for Lily's parents would seem to be Wharton's own as well, but with the important difference that they were not of the "fast set" prone to dancing parties and gambling. In fact, the Barts appear to come from a similarly wealthy but perhaps less prominent lineage than the Whartons. As R.W.B. Lewis puts it in his biography of Wharton, George Frederic Jones, Edith's father, "was a man of leisure, his income fluctuating with the rise and fall of real estate prices," while [a]ny increased affluence was more than matched by [Edith's mother] Lucretia's increased expenditures on clothes."¹³ Like Hudson Bart, Jones seemed to have about him "something repressed, an air of some larger opportunity lost."¹⁴ Known to have a "baffled love of poetry," Edith's father seemed, to his daughter, "lonely, haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained," and she charged these "stifled cravings" to her mother's "matter-of-factness" that "shriveled up any such buds of fancy."

Wharton's mother also stifled Edith's "buds of fancy," judging harshly her first attempt at fiction. The start Edith had made on a novella she would later call *Fast and Loose* began with the lines:

"Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?" said Mrs. Tomkins. "If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room."

When Edith showed her mother this first page, Lucretia Jones coldly replied that "drawing rooms are always tidy."¹⁵

Edith Wharton had one distinct advantage over her character, Lily Bart, however: full access to her father's impressive and wide-ranging library, which included "the chief historians from Plutarch to Parkman and the most illustrious poets from Homer to Dante, Milton and Pope, and the English Romantics."¹⁶ Edith's mother forbade her

reading any contemporary fiction, like the sentimental novels Lily "peruses," but later Wharton would recall this decision as "all to the good," since she could "lose herself in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelations, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, in Keats and Shelley." Compared to the "score or two of dingy volumes [of poetry] which had struggled for existence" on Hudson Bart's shelves (44), Wharton had a wealth of literature at her disposal and made excellent use of it.

Despite these differences, Wharton and her protagonist live among similar people. The frivolity of Lily's social set was mirrored in the society from which Wharton sought solace. Wharton described that society as having "an awe-struck dread of...intellectual effort."¹⁷ The elders around her were, in Lewis's phrase, "distinctly ill at ease in the presence of anyone who openly enjoyed serious reading, even more so of a recognized person of letters." All the more reason for Wharton to retreat to her father's study whenever possible, the one place she could find "a secret ecstasy of communion." Edith Wharton seems to have averted a fate like her protagonist's largely by dint of her relentless curiosity and using these raw materials to fashion for herself a life of the mind.

"Other Arts"

Despite the apparently perfunctory nature of Lily's education, she has been taught the "other arts" that her mother insists will enhance the "raw material" of her beauty in the marriage marketplace. Like most girls of her class and time, and like Wharton herself, Lily is taught by a governess (37). While Wharton's governess, Anna Bahlmann, taught Edith German language and literature and became, in later years, "an indispensable member" of her household, serving as secretary and literary assistant,¹⁸

only one reference is made to the governess in charge of Lily's education, and we learn nothing more about the contents of her instruction. What is clear from the use Lily makes of the "other arts" is that she has been taught, at a minimum, the "social graces," the kind of instruction usually provided by finishing schools. Since the novel makes no reference to such formal training, the likeliest source for this instruction is Lily's mother, who perhaps educated her along these lines during their extensive travels.

Lily shows herself adept at the social graces, at least in the novel's opening chapters. Despite her fumbling the unexpected encounter with Simon Rosedale, Lily recovers well in the scene that follows. Aboard the train to Bellomont, she discovers the "luck" of having to herself the primary object of her intention, the young, shy, and very rich Percy Gryce. She had known that he would be at Bellomont and had set her sights on arousing his interest in her as his possible future bride. Discovering him here, away from her rivals, she finds it "providential that she should be the instrument of his initiation" in what she suspects is "his first journey alone with a pretty woman" (24). If "[s]ome girls would not know how to manage him," Lily knows just the right note to strike, putting him at ease by "impart[ing] a gently domestic air to the scene."

As Lily makes her cautious approach, "which should not appear to be an advance on her part," she feels sure of her abilities, especially her "treasures of indulgence for such idiosyncrasies" as his painful shyness (22). Lily thinks his reticence to her advantage, in fact, since "[s]he had the art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed, but she was not equally sure of being able to embarrass the self-confident." Having drawn him out of his cocoon of embarrassment but now finding the conversation flagging, Lily "was driven to take a fresh measurement of Mr. Gryce's

limitations" (24). She readjusts her strategy and calls upon the knowledge of Americana that she so recently gleaned in Lawrence Selden's flat. This topic is the "one spring that she had only to touch to set his simple machinery in motion" (24-5). Up until now she has considered introducing this painfully boring subject a last resort and "had relied on other arts to stimulate other sensations."

Now that she sees how well fitted Gryce's "machinery" is to her particular expertise, she feels "the pride of a skilful [sic] operator" (25). Lily proceeds to inquire about Percy's growing collection of Americana, "the one subject which enabled him to forget himself, or allowed him, rather, to remember himself without constraint, because he was at home in it, and could assert a superiority that there were few to dispute" (25). She has learned from Selden that few such collectors actually read the books in their holdings; rather, they value them instead for their rarity alone (13). Moreover, those with the means to purchase these rare artifacts are seldom actual historians, who can't afford them, but are wealthy dilettantes like Gryce and the uncle from whom he inherited the collection. Feeling sure that "Mr. Gryce was like a merchant whose warehouses are crammed with an unmarketable inventory," Lily deftly presents herself as a potential buyer (25).

Rightly guessing "that Mr. Gryce's egoism was a thirsty soil," Lily manages to prepare the ground by feigning interest, "following an undercurrent of thought while she appeared to be sailing on the surface of conversation" (27). The "undercurrent" carries her to "a rapid survey of Mr. Percy Gryce's future as combined with her own." Her memory drifts back to his recent arrival from Albany, which "had fluttered the maternal breasts of New York." Percy's widowed mother dominates both Lily's rumination and the

actual Percy Gryce, for she is "a monumental woman with the voice of a pulpit orator and a mind preoccupied with the iniquities of her servants." Knowing that Lily's Aunt, Mrs. Penniston, provided an occasional audience for Mrs. Gryce's complaints and suspicions allows Lily to trust herself to "manage" the young and simple Percy. In fact, his scrupulously conventional upbringing, during which "every form of prudence and suspicion had been grafted on a nature originally reluctant and cautious" (28), provides Lily with a textbook case to which to apply her skills in the social arts. So familiar is Lily with the "machinery" of a man like Percy Gryce, that she "felt herself...completely in command of the situation" (29).

Lily can handle a Percy Gryce for the simple reason that he is very much of the old order now gradually receding from the scene; he is so thoroughly his mother's son that "it would have seemed hardly needful for Mrs. Gryce to extract his promise" to wear his overshoes in the rain...so little likely was he to hazard himself abroad in the rain" (28). Such a person and situation exactly match Lily's training. Fittingly, Percy inherits his fortune from the late Mr. Gryce, who "had made out a patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels." His people are of the sort who aim to keep out fresh air, and fresh ideas, at any cost, and his stolid prudence is strikingly at odds with nearly everyone Lily knows. One exception is her dowdy cousin Evie Van Osburgh, whom Percy marries shortly after Lily has ruined her chances with him.

Evie is "the youngest, dumpyest, dullest of the four dull and dumpy daughters" in the Van Osburgh family (116), just the "quiet stay-at-home kind of girl" suited for the equally dull Percy Gryce. Upon reflection, Lily sees "a kind of family likeness between" them, not in physical appearance but "the deeper affinity was unmistakable":

the two had the same prejudices and ideals, and the same quality of making other standards non-existent by ignoring them. This attribute was common to most of Lily's set: they had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception. Gryce and Miss Van Osburgh were, in short, made for each other by every law of moral and physical correspondence-- "Yet they wouldn't look at each other," Lily mused, "they never do. Each of them wants a creature of a different race, of Jack's race and mine, with all sorts of intuitions, sensations and perceptions that they don't even guess the existence of. And they always get what they want." (61)

If Evie and Percy both enjoy the fantasy of a wilder, more colorful life, as Lily suspects, neither would dare take the risk involved or, for that matter, actually enjoy that life were they to land such an exotic creature. Like Mrs. Penniston, and even Lawrence Selden, they are content to amuse themselves from the periphery and "negate" other people's enjoyment through the narrowness of their own perceptions.

One can hardly fault Lily for lacking enthusiasm for marrying Percy Gryce. But if others in her set are comfortable making sport of Gryce's stodginess, they nonetheless recognize a lost opportunity when they see one, since their view of marriage as a business arrangement is hardly different from Lily's mother's. The careful game by which Lily set the trap for Gryce cost her a good deal of effort to play (not to mention interminable boredom), making her carelessness in securing the deal all the more puzzling to her friends. Carry Fisher, the lively divorcee who has made a cottage industry of midwifing the *nouveau riche* into high society, wonders if Lily's problem is flightiness or because "at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (245). Carry's

suspicion is borne out by the novel, yet Lily can no more admit this to herself than she can to her friends, since marriage remains one of the few options available to her.

In having Percy Gryce within her grasp, however, Lily demonstrates a certain shallow rhetorical skill, for social charm requires an awareness of the full situation at hand and knowing just the right word or gesture to make at just the right moment. Lily pulls it off faultlessly. Closing the deal is another matter, though, and her heart belonging elsewhere certainly contributes to her "failure."

Lily also has what Thorstein Veblen called "a trained incapacity" that prevents her from seeing beyond what she is accustomed to seeing. Veblen applied the term primarily to business culture, arguing that "what men can do easily is what they do habitually, and this decides what they can think and know easily. They feel at home in the range of ideas which is familiar through their everyday line of action.¹⁹ The result is a "point of view from which facts and events are apprehended and reduced to a body of knowledge," and cautions that

It would doubtless appear that a trained inability to apprehend any other than the immediate pecuniary bearing of their manoeuvres accounts for a larger share in the conduct of the businessmen who control industrial affairs than it does in that of their workmen, since the habitual employment of the former holds them more rigorously and consistently to the pecuniary valuation of whatever passes, under their hands; and the like should be true only in a higher degree of those who have to do exclusively with the financial side of business.²⁰

Kenneth Burke drew on Veblen's concept, extending its scope to all human beings in a chapter in *Permanence and Change* devoted to the subject. Burke later called Veblen's

"terminology of motives" limiting, but in this earlier work, he found the phrase useful as a way of describing "that state of affairs whereby one's very abilities can function as blindnesses."²¹ Burke argues that trained incapacity "allows us to discuss 'matters of orientation' without using the terms *escape* and *avoidance*."²² Lily's training in matrimonial persuasion blinds her to her own escape mechanisms, just as it blinds her to the possibility that her changing situation requires new habits of mind.

The Web of Language

Another major obstacle to Lily's success is the barely perceptible change in the (largely unwritten) rules of discourse, a reflection of the vast social or economic change taking place. Percy Gryce seems the last of a dying breed, the kind for which her training had prepared her using an older code. But the pace and texture of life in New York are shifting beneath Lily's feet without her even noticing, and so is the "coin of the realm" by which transactions of all kinds are exchanged. In its courting of Park Avenue, Wall Street expects to do business on its own terms.

In his 1944 study, *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi traces the political and economic origins of market economies.²³ As his title suggests, Polanyi regards the shift, beginning in the late nineteenth century, to an economy that imposed cash value on everything as a profound change from the system of international trade that had helped maintain the West's "hundred years' peace" from 1815 until the First World War.²⁴ Polanyi regards the fall of the gold standard as "the proximate cause of the catastrophe, and calls the self-regulating market "the fount and matrix of the system."²⁵ In place of trade as a means of social and political cohesion within and between nations, in the new market economy everything took on monetary value and became exchangeable as

commodities. Thus, the ties between and within nations weakened, while the new corporate system and its powerbrokers became increasingly powerful. Wharton's novel of 1905 takes place near the end of this long period of peace and, though we hear no echoes of the coming war, we certainly witness the ascendancy of this new form of economic, social, and political power.

The story of Lily Bart is not only about the commodification of all human interaction or even the financial terms in which this domination is rendered. If, in the end, the language of the stock market has become the linguistic grid upon which other discourses are mapped—and from our vantage point in 2010, that seems a reasonable conclusion—it is not merely because the marketplace is too powerful, as Dimock asserts, but also because, as Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrated, all speech is “full of other people’s words.”²⁶ The “metaphors we live by,” in Lakoff and Johnson’s famous phrase,²⁷ undoubtedly result, in part, from the imposition of language by powerful interests with nearly unlimited access to the many public and private institutions through which a culture’s values are mediated.²⁸

Bakhtin demonstrated the process by which this happens linguistically, occurring from the bottom up as well as the top down: “The living utterance, having taken its meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads....[I]t cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.”²⁹ For Bakhtin, language is dialogic and heteroglossic—that is, it is dispersed from many directions at once, subject to both centripetal and centrifugal, centralizing and decentralizing forces—so that any single linguistic code contains within it several distinct varieties of speech. This heteroglossia

of language is on full display in most novels, according to Bakhtin, but I will argue in particular that one of the central concerns of *The House of Mirth* is with the discursive confusion that results when linguistic codes and their underlying values collide.

The metaphors Wharton's characters come to live by are more than just figures of speech; they take on the coloring of the concepts themselves, so that merely thinking and speaking of marriage, for example, in purely transactional terms is but one small step from making it so. That marriage in *The House of Mirth* had long been undertaken to forge financial and social alliances does not alleviate the shock, for Lily, of seeing her society's values so nakedly revealed by the frank language of the marketplace. Linguistic change enables this painful discovery of the true state of things, but language offers Lily few consolations in dealing with its consequences.

The House of Mirth depicts an economic and social order threatened by outsiders, with language a telling index of one's social standing and proximity to the marketplace. The characters generally fall into the categories of old money aristocrats whose estates are well-fortressed; the less well-established wealthy who depend on regular infusions from Wall Street to shore up their dwindling fortunes; new moneyed social climbers; and the pedigreed but relatively penniless who shuttle between the old and new order and serve this economy in myriad ways. Carry Fisher, Lawrence Selden, and, eventually, Lily comprise this third group, with Carry and Lily serving as "finishing schools" for the social climbers, while Selden (pretending to stand aloof) papers over their various legal and moral transgressions and ensures the seamless transfer of property. Rosedale is both the barbarian at the gate and the invaluable source of

regular stock tips that enable his would-be friends to capitalize on his business acumen and allow him to ascend through their ranks.

Generally speaking, the closer one is to the “dirty work” of Wall Street, the looser one’s diction. Carry Fisher’s way of speaking, for example, is repeatedly described as “frank,” while Gus Trenor, a bond trader, can be heard uttering “hang it” and other slang or profane expressions throughout the novel. Following the *tableau vivant* in which Lily steals the show, her patrician cousin Ned Van Alstyne reveals the crass side of the upper crust when complaining that “all these fal-bals” the women wear “cover up their figures when they’ve got ‘em. I never knew til tonight “what an outline Lily has,” he brays (178). (The pun on "outline" only reinforces Ned's focus on Lily's outside to the exclusion of all else.) Tellingly, Lawrence Selden offers no rejoinder to this callow remark, despite his declaration of love to Lily, while Gus Trenor fumes that “It’s not her fault if everybody don’t know it now” and stomps off in disgust that he still hasn’t had a private viewing of the goods she’s revealing in public. These distinctions in language cannot disguise, however, that each of these men regard Lily as property to be admired, displayed, or purchased.

If Van Alstyne can only appreciate Lily’s physical gifts, and Rosedale regards her as a jewel to crown his social “arrival,” Selden’s appreciation of Lily is hardly *much* more than skin-deep, even if it is beyond the merely sexual. He who could recognize that she is “the victim of the civilization which had produced her” (8) is apparently willing to consign her to that cruel fate and, despite the love he comes to confess too late, his contrite words ring with the hollowness of the aesthete who has lost a thing of “highly

specialized" beauty (5), rather than the bitter regret of someone who has truly loved and lost all.

Investment, Speculation, and Gambling

Our first glimpse of Lily is through the eyes of Lawrence Selden, which have been "refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" at a New York train station (3), her "vivid head relieved against the dull tints of the cowed" (4). "She always roused speculation" in Selden, as "her simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions," her "air of irresolution" seeming to mask a "very definite purpose" (3).

As both speculator and spectator, Selden enjoys musing on her value, particularly the purpose for which she was created. Sure that her discretions and indiscretions alike "were part of the same carefully-elaborated plan," Selden makes use of the "argument from design" (5), the teleological supposition of God's existence, though the reverence this phrase connotes is undermined by his inability to decide if she has been fashioned from "fine" materials or "vulgar clay" (6). Regarding her "apart from the crowd" (3) and a "highly specialized" creature set off by the "dingy," "shallow-faced" "average section of womanhood" (5), Selden scrutinizes her every feature with a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her. He was aware that the qualities that distinguished her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external: as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible

that the material was fine, but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape? (6)

The language Selden uses (of which he is acutely conscious, as the "unsatisfactory" analogy indicates) partakes of the discourses of both aestheticism and human breeding, and evokes both Christian and classical mythology, Genesis and Pygmalion. He does not place himself in the role of creator, however, but as an interested spectator witnessing a creature nearly perfect, as least aesthetically. Though he seems inclined to believe a solid moral structure underlies Lily's surface beauty, he leaves the matter open for the time being.

Selden's reference to "the herd of her sex" is a disturbing choice of words, as disturbing as his vague but indifferent awareness of the human costs in making such a creature as Lily, useless and "futile" though she may be. He seems unperturbed by the "mysterious ways" through which so many "dull and ugly" people are sacrificed to keep this precious stock supplied, and otherwise evinces no compunctions about these abstractions or what their sacrifices entail. He later laments that "so much raw human nature is used up in the process" of producing "splendour," that a society like ours wastes such good material in producing its little patch of purple" (90), yet we never witness Selden acting upon these noble beliefs, not even in the company of his indefatigably charitable cousin, Gerty Farish. Like much else in Selden's life, they seem to remain in the realm of his refined but detached mind.

Rosedale likewise comes into view in the opening chapter, but the lens is now Lily's—or rather her consciousness translated through the narrator. Though Rosedale's eye is just as appraising as Selden's, it is *his* features that are probed here, not Lily's.

His "scanning her with interest and approval" is breezily summative (17). Rosedale's "breeding" is now the subject of scrutiny, revealing him as "a plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery, and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac." Typified as a certain kind of Jew, with a proprietary interest in everything he "scans," Rosedale is no more guilty of objectifying or commodifying Lily than is Selden. Nor is Lily innocent of objectifying Rosedale through stale Jewish stereotypes. Being probed by Selden is far more palatable to Lily than by Rosedale, but this seems entirely a function of his aesthetic sensibility that, like a "fine glaze of beauty," disguises the base material of his detached and speculative interest in her.

A third potential suitor appears in the second chapter, the irredeemably dull but conventionally rich Percy Gryce. Unlike Selden and Rosedale, Gryce's interest in Lily seems, like his taste, "impossible to think of...as evolving" on his own (26). Gryce is content to want only those things his mother desires and is barely a participant in his own future. In place of true interest, Gryce views Lily with amazement and wonder "that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train" (23.) Should he (or his mother) take an interest in Lily, it would certainly be to replenish the stock of the Gryce family (through all the traditional means), allowing it to conserve and perpetuate its wealth into the foreseeable future, since the Gryces do not need to trade on Lily's value to further their social or financial aims. She would be, in the words of one of Wharton's original titles, "a moment's ornament" to their secure fortune.³⁰

In his social history of financial speculation, *Devil Take the Hindmost*, Edward Chancellor attempts to unravel the distinctions between speculation, investment, and gambling, beginning with a telling epigraph, from Sir Ernest Cassell, banker to Edward VII: "When I was young, people called me a gambler. As the scale of operations increased, I became known as a speculator. Now I am called a banker. But I have been doing the same thing all the time."³¹ If the names change while the underlying actions do not, one distinction Chancellor offers is that "the first aim of investment is the preservation of capital while the primary aim of speculation was the enhancement of fortune."³² Put another way, "Speculation is an effort, probably unsuccessful, to turn a little money into a lot. Investment is an effort, which should be successful, to prevent a lot of money becoming a little." Gambling, which is equally hard to distinguish from its slightly more respectable cousins, might be described as "a poorly executed speculation." Much depends, it seems, on the outcome of the enterprise as to which label is retroactively applied.

Using the provisional definitions Chancellor provides, Simon Rosedale is a speculator, hoping to enhance his social fortune through Lily, while Percy Gryce is an investor seeking only to preserve what he has. That is, these definitions will suffice to describe the nature of their business and their stance toward marital arrangements in general, not as concerns the "winning" of Lily Bart. Lawrence Selden, on the other hand, is insufficiently wealthy to play in this market, yet he takes a wild gamble at Bellomont, testing the waters of a union with Lily without directly asking her hand.

Finding himself accused of making Lily's life choices seem "hateful" to her, Selden counters that while he has nothing to offer instead, if he had, it surely would be

Lily's for the asking (92). Receiving "this abrupt declaration in a way even stranger than the manner of its making," Lily drops her hands and weeps momentarily, then charges Selden with belittling her as well as her desires and using her as an experiment, to boot. Lily sees clearly his "wavering intentions," finding his proposal tentative and, for that reason, cowardly. So dependent is it upon her affirmation that when Lily asks directly, "Do you want to marry me?" he can muster only the meager and laughing reply, "No, I don't want to—but perhaps I should if you did" (93). He retorts that he is subjecting himself, not her, to experimentation, and says that if marrying her is one of the effects, he is willing to take that risk. She is the coward, he protests, since she is the one unwilling to take the gamble on a potentially happier but vastly more modest life together. The deal seems all but sealed when Lily declares that she "shall look hideous in dowdy clothes" but at least she can economize by trimming her own hats. (She disproves this later, of course, when she tries to rely on this aptitude for her living). Lily's resolute use of the future tense rather than the conditional future is betrayed by her own wavering a moment later. In turning her eye back toward the opulent world of Bellomont, she signals a desire to keep her options open after all, and Selden sees that his gamble has not paid off. As both seek to retain their composure after climbing "to a forbidden height" (94), Lily asks if he had been serious in his proposal, to which he replies dryly, "Why not?...You see I took no risks in being so" (95).

Selden has, of course, taken a rather large emotional risk, despite his words to the contrary. In his "almost puerile wish to let his companion see that, their flight over, he had landed on his feet" (94), Selden betrays just how crestfallen he really is. He had made a genuine, if tentative, offer and had been rebuffed after what we can only regard

as an equally genuine, but equally tentative, acceptance. Lily and Lawrence are both horrible gamblers, each calling the other's bluff and both unwilling to show their cards fully. Lily's unluckiness at cards, a major source of her debts, stems from too much risk-taking, whereas in the game of marriage, she lacks the same enthusiasm or courage. This instance marks perhaps Selden's first entry into this game, and it could well be his last. Since neither can afford to play high-stakes games, naming exactly what it is they hope to win is quite beside the point. Thus their brief game of courtship ends in a draw.

Given the shallow waters in which Lily and Selden swim, it is not surprising that their flirtation with marriage should lack depth. Despite Selden's claim that he "has tried to remain amphibious" and maintain his ability to breathe "in another air" (89), he has not adapted the means to live truly in either environment. He is neither the disinterested spectator nor the avatar of "personal freedom" he pretends to be. He is most convincing and compelling when he explains to Lily the "republic of the spirit" that is his ideal, but his high-mindedness remains abstruse theory, never put to the test of actual living. When Selden argues that the Ned Silvertons of the world should not be "used to refurbish anybody's social shabbiness," Lily agrees, hoping that Ned can "keep his illusions long enough to write some nice poetry about them," but she questions whether "it is only in society that he is likely to lose them" (90). Demonstrating a keen awareness of the shiftiness of language, Selden asks, "Why do we call all our generous ideas illusions, and the mean ones truths?" He adds, "Isn't it a sufficient condemnation of society to find one's self accepting such phraseology?" He too had "very nearly acquired the jargon at Silverton's age" and knows "how names can alter the colours of beliefs."

Selden appears to believe these noble thoughts in earnest, yet he mostly floats on the surface of both the moneyed world and the "republic of the spirit" to which he aspires, diving in only deeply enough, in the former case, for a casual affair with Bertha Dorset, and in the latter, for an arid life of the mind. As for the affair with Bertha, it seems casual enough on his part, but Bertha's passionate (and potentially damaging) letters indicate a stronger, if not deeper, interest. As for the personal freedom that comprises his idea of success, the messiness of that affair has hardly made him free of "all the material accidents" (87), even if he is never to know how narrowly he averted this particular disaster by Lily's surreptitiously burning the evidence in his own fireplace.

Moreover, Selden accepts the terms his society uses to describe a woman's honor and virtue, never questioning the double-standard that allows him dalliances and transgressions, even perpetual bachelorhood, while denying Lily the same choices. Nor does he allow for any alternative definition of what constitutes a woman's reputation. If others have written her off at a loss, discounting her as damaged goods, he accepts their valuation. Despite his sophisticated understanding of the arbitrariness of language, Selden is, as Lily realizes by the novel's—and her life's--end, every bit a captive creature of their society and its parlance as she herself is.

The gambler in Lawrence Selden surfaces only in this brief interlude, but, as the novel progresses, Simon Rosedale subtly shifts from speculator to investor, at least in the terms that Chancellor delineates. While he never loses sight of Lily's potential as a social asset, he alone is willing to restore her to her former social value—and not merely out of pecuniary interest, for Rosedale proves capable of securing his own social ascent and, accordingly, has a marketplace of marriageable women from which to choose.

Rather, Rosedale is willing to risk his own, still precarious, social position by extending his hand to Lily, and in so doing reveals his true value.

Concealing the Machinery

Given Lily's situation as a woman without a place she finds desirable in either the new or old social order, she chafes at the thought of an unhappy marriage to a wealthy bore. Yet she also knows she is unfitted for the pinched, "dingy" life of the "unmarriageable" Gerty Farish. She feels it unfair that she should "have to suffer for having once, for a few hours, borrowed money of an elderly cousin, when a woman like Carry Fisher could make a living unrebuked from the good-nature of her men friends and the tolerance of their wives" (102). Lily decides that, "It all turned on the tiresome distinction between what a married woman might, and a girl might not, do." Although "it was shocking for a married woman to borrow money--and Lily was expertly aware of the implication involved," the shock is in name only, as "it was the mere MALUM PROHIBITUM [wrong because prohibited] which the world decries but condones, and which, though it may be punished by private vengeance, does not provoke the collective disapprobation of society." Lily has ample cause to believe her options as a single woman are limited, for it is an open secret that her society condones far more licentiousness within marriage than without.

With the cost of keeping up appearances mounting, Lily reaches out to her friend Judy's husband, Gus Trenor, knowing he has helped their mutual friend Carry Fisher out of many a financial bind. In enlisting Gus's financial help, however, Lily must avoid appearing like the parasite Carry Fisher has become, in both of the Trenors' eyes. Here, as elsewhere, she relies on her beauty and casual flattery, knowing that "her freshness

and slenderness was as agreeable to him as the sight of a cooling beverage" after his toil and worry in the city (103). Allowing Gus the privilege of being listened to, Lily asks "sympathetically" whether he "had such a lot of tiresome things to do" in his line of work (104), to which he replies that "a man has got to keep his eyes open and pick up all the tips he can" if he is to keep up with Judy's expenditures. While his parents had been able "to live like fighting-cocks on their income" and had put plenty of money aside, "at the pace we go now," he says, "I don't know where I should be if it weren't for taking a flyer now and then." While his wife thinks all he does is "cut off coupons" (a reference to bonds), "the truth is it takes a devilish lot of hard work to keep the machinery running."

Cloaking the "machinery" that powers their lavish lifestyle is an essential part of the spectacle, so this glimpse "back-stage" marks a moment of intimacy between Lily and Trenor. But just as stock tips are never truly free, Gus Trenor's letting her in on this secret is intended to soften Lily toward his proposal that she be more welcoming to Simon Rosedale. But the mention of that "intrusive personality" is an unwelcome interruption in the "train of thought set in motion by Mr. Trenor's first words" (105), for Lily is intrigued by the "vast mysterious Wall Street world of 'tips' and 'deals'" and wonders if she might

find in it the means of escape from her dreary predicament. She had often heard of women making money this way through their friends: she had no more notion than most of her sex of the exact nature of the transaction, and its vagueness seemed to diminish its indelicacy. She could not, indeed, imagine herself, in any extremity, stooping to extract a "tip" from Mr. Rosedale; but at her side was a man in possession of that precious commodity.

This is the first inkling Lily has that perhaps the “luxurious world” on whose periphery Lily has been living masks its financial machinery as carefully as its domestic arrangements. Later in the novel, when Lily muses on the hateful sordid noises of the boarding house where she is forced to live, she “yearned for that other luxurious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed that one scene flows into another without perceptible agency” (394). The very vagueness of these transactions makes them less “indelicate” and allows Lily to trust her fate to the “repugnant” Gus Trenor.

Despite her ignorance of all matters financial, Lily is no stranger to machinations of her own. Knowing she must broach the situation carefully and rely on more than “the fraternal instinct” to arouse Gus's sympathy, she must mask her motives from herself, for her “personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection of her own mind there were certain closed doors she did not open” (105).

In exercising her personal, and particularly sexual, charms, Lily employs what Kenneth Burke calls a “terministic screen,” whereby she shields herself from any unpleasant thoughts that might escape from the door she has resolutely closed to herself. So effectively does she do this that it is only in her “inmost heart” that she knows she is actually using her sexuality, the “fraternal instinct” being a dead end. The strategy she employs “helped to drape [the situation's] crudity,” allowing her to “keep up appearances to herself” (105). The metaphor of drapery to disguise something crude, false, or unpleasant has long been applied to language and used to disparage the field of rhetoric. Lily's use of the term reinforces her self-deception.

Explaining her financial bind to Gus Trenor, Lily works her magic on him as easily as she had with Percy Gryce, framing the matter as a choice between marrying Percy—

whom Gus proclaims a "portentous little ass" (107)—and giving up her lifestyle among the rich and famous, most especially the Trenors. Noting that she will no longer "be as smartly dressed as the other women" if her current situation persists, Lily chooses terms that emphasize the cost both to her sexual attractiveness and her availability to Gus. By including Gus's wife, Judy, in the same breath, she selects one reality--continuing her friendship with Judy—while deflecting the far less pleasant reality that she is signaling her sexual availability to Gus.

Lily allows Gus to feel superior in knowing better than his wife how odious either prospect is, which further flatters his vanity. A "disinterested" marriage to the likes of Percy Gryce particularly inflames Trenor's sympathy, and he resolves to do anything in his power to help "this picture of loveliness in distress, the pathos of which was heightened by the light touch with which it was drawn" (108). So powerful and deft are Lily's rhetorical skills that Gus feels that, "if he could find a way out of such difficulties for a professional sponge like Carry Fisher," surely he could "do as much for a girl who appealed to his highest sympathies, and who brought her troubles to him with the trustfulness of a child."

Lily's charms work to magnificent effect, but later they will prove the riskiest of assets. For if one linguistic effect of the marketplace's ascendancy is its plain-spokenness, Lily finds that the new terminologies and the transactions they represent can be anything but transparent. This is one of the chief reasons Lily is so easily misled into believing Gus Trenor would be investing Lily's money and not supplementing it with his own. Tellingly, the narrator renders the transaction indirectly and impressionistically:

...before it was over he had tried, with some show of success, to prove to her that, if she would only trust him, he could make a handsome sum of money for her without endangering the small amount she possessed. She was too genuinely ignorant of the manipulations of the stock-market to understand his technical explanations, or even perhaps to perceive that certain points in them were slurred; the haziness enveloping the transaction served as a veil for her embarrassment, and through the general blur her hopes dilated like lamps in a fog. She understood only that her modest investments were to be mysteriously multiplied without risk to herself; and the assurance that this miracle would take place within a short time, that there would be no tedious interval for suspense and reaction, relieved her of her lingering scruples. (109)

This passage enacts what it describes: we don't hear Trenor's actual words, and neither does Lily. Her seduction *has been enabled* by the marketplace's ability to reproduce itself and insinuate its logic into every other domain, as Dimock rightly asserts. But her undoing would not be possible without the dulcet tones of her own native tongue, even issuing from the ridiculous mouth of Gus Trenor. Where Rosedale fails repeatedly to make Lily an offer she can't (and perhaps shouldn't) refuse, Trenor succeeds by making Lily an offer she can't understand.

The details themselves are lost in the language allegedly "exchanged" here, but the gist of the transaction is not lost on Lily. She intuits the nature of her obligation to Gus when he places his hand on her knee on the drive back to Bellomont. But, as before, Lily puts this matter aside, her "trained incapacity" enabling her to think it "part of the game to make him feel that her appeal had been an uncalculated impulse, provoked

by the liking he inspired" (109). Her "renewed sense of power in handling men"--so unsettled by Lawrence Selden that "it seemed to be her fate to appear at her worst" to him--"helped also to obscure the thought of the claim at which his manner hinted."

Miscalculations

If Lily has the slightest sense that her financial problems could be compounded by personal ones involving Gus, she manages to rationalize that a "clever girl" such as herself can surely hold "by his vanity" such a "coarse dull man" as Gus Trenor (109). Receiving the first thousand-dollar check only further justifies the transaction for Lily, even to the point of making her feel "really virtuous" as she pays off one creditor after another with the proceeds (110). Massaging his ego by laughing at his jokes and pretending to enjoy his confidences seems all Lily needs to keep "the obligations" on his side, not hers (109). Even Judy's complaint about Carry Fisher, that "perfect vulture" who was "always getting Gus to speculate for her" while expecting Gus to pay for any losses, does not resonate with Lily as having any "personal application to her" (111). In Lily's view, "[t]here could be no question of her not paying when she lost," since Gus had explained that he had made five-thousand from Rosedale's "tip" and that he had put four-thousand "back in the same venture," leaving her to understand that "he was now speculating with her own money." Feeling that she owes Gus no more than "the gratitude which such a trifling service demanded," Lily glosses over the likelihood that he had had to borrow against her own securities in the first place.

Her mind now at ease, Lily continues to spend as she had before, feeling more "disinterest" than usual in what her dresses and jewelry cost. She has not grown complacent enough, however, not to feel the sting at losing Percy Gryce to her homely

cousin, since she knows that her "immediate anxieties" might recur at any time; despite what she has told Gus, she has not—perhaps cannot—abandon the ultimate purpose for which she was made.

Lily learns the disheartening news of Percy's engagement while at the Van Osburgh wedding. Although she begins assuredly enough, this is where her charms begin to fail her. During the ceremony, Lily sets her sights once again on Percy, choosing to view him in the most favorable light instead of the "ridiculous" visage he presents (112). Imagining how she will work her magic, Lily "pictured herself, in the seclusion of the Van Osburgh conservatories, playing skillfully upon sensibilities thus prepared for her touch" (113). In fact, she lets down her guard when she peruses the crowd and sees no serious rival requiring her to apply any "special skill...to repair her [previous] blunder" with Percy.

But the unexpected sight of Lawrence Selden unnerves Lily, leading her into further blunders. It is at this point when Lily's rhetorical illiteracy begins to blind her in serious ways, as she fails to readjust to new situations and loses her ability to read the full social context around her. Instead, what interests Lily are the "precious tints" of Gwen Van Osburgh's jewels, which are "enhanced and deepened by the varied art of their setting" (115). Still hoping for "the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement" that Percy Gryce's money can buy, Lily envisions "the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (116). What stings her most about "dumpy" and "dull" Evie Van Osburgh's rumored engagement to Percy is that she will "be put in possession of powers she would never know how to use" (117). Truly a creature of her culture, Lily has internalized the rule that the just owner of a given property is the one who can

"improve" it the most, and, profligate though she is, she balks at the waste this partnership forebodes.

Gus Trenor also causes Lily to lose her footing, though she is careful not to allow him to betray any special closeness with her in public. Thinking she has placated him with promises of a visit, Lily finds his request of being kinder to Rosedale "an unexpectedly easy way of acquitting her debt," and agrees to invite him on some future occasion (120). But she goes one step too far in suggesting that she might even "get a tip" from Rosedale on her "own account." Trenor's fixed stare and terse reminder that she "please remember he's a blooming bounder" should tell Lily that she has wounded his vanity unnecessarily. Clearly "the tip" in question has quite different meanings for Lily and Trenor, but she merely laughs and moves along. The obvious visual cue that accompanies Trenor's equally obvious words is completely lost on Lily, as she conveniently forgets the sexual innuendos she had used to secure his help in the first place.

Lily's next misstep occurs with Selden, answering his light, impersonal banter about wedding gifts as signs of the "disinterested affection of the contracting parties" with a serious, and deeply personal, retort (121). The joke had been Gerty Farish's, to which Lily replies, "I envy Gerty that power she has of dressing up with romance all our ugly and prosaic arrangements! I have never recovered my self-respect since you showed me how poor and unimportant my ambitions were." She realized the "infelicity" of these words as soon as she spoke them, but she has already betrayed more than she meant to, and her blunder only worsens when Rosedale and Trenor appear on the scene.

The "conjugal familiarity" in Trenor's voice, coupled with the revelation that "she should number Rosedale among her acquaintances," alerts Selden that Lily might just have something embarrassing to hide (122), but again Lily displays a tone-deafness to context. In order to keep up the pretense that she need not "propitiate such a man as Rosedale," Lily makes another costly mistake in ignoring Rosedale altogether, when she has just promised Trenor that she would be more welcoming to him. Rosedale repays this slight by an unobvious reference to the "dress-maker" Lily goes to see at the Benedick, the bachelor's residence where Selden lives. In this miscalculation, Lily's earlier remark while leaving Selden's apartment seems particularly prescient, for she was indeed "not familiar with the moral code of bachelor's flat-houses" (16). Of course, the reference to himself is not lost on Selden, and Lily will soon learn that he has little natural protection against the power of rumor and innuendo in their closed society. The seeds of doubt that his sympathy and affection for Lily had allowed him previously to overlook now find fertile ground.

Returning to her aunt's house, the closest thing Lily has to a home, she braces herself for the sport her friends will make of her losing Percy Gryce. Moreover, she was acutely aware of her own part in this drama of innuendo: she knew the exact quality of the amusement the situation evoked. The crude forms in which her friends took their pleasure included a loud enjoyment of such complications: the zest of surprising destiny in the act of playing a practical joke. Lily knew well enough how to bear herself in difficult situations. She had, to a shade, the exact manner between victory and defeat: every insinuation was shed without an effort by the bright indifference of her manner. But she was beginning to feel the strain

of the attitude; the reaction was more rapid, and she lapsed to a deeper self-disgust (126-7).

The strain of maintaining this "attitude" is beginning to show, but such scenes have played out so many times before that Lily feels up to the challenge of playing her part, pretending to laugh along with them at her own folly in losing yet another "catch."

Clearly, the social scene Lily inhabits is mostly just that: a scene, a stage upon which its players act out dramas that nonetheless have real consequences. Lily has grown adept, if weary, at playing such parts, but she is simply not equipped to do more than "play" at life.

Lily also does not prepare herself for the other, more serious innuendos surrounding Gus Trenor, which begin gathering force over the coming months. When Simon Rosedale comes to call on Lily, inviting her to attend the opera as his guest, she sees no harm in accepting. Although Lily blanches when Rosedale mentions how much Gus Trenor in particular would like to see her there, she overcomes her "distaste" at hearing "her name coupled with Trenor's, and on Rosedale's lips" (146). The latter makes it clear that he is the source of Gus's stock tips, but his lack of adroitness in making this known is more than matched by her mistake of assuming Rosedale to be as dull as most of the other men she knew and ignoring the sexual meaning of her name being "coupled" with Trenor's (148). Feeling secure in her own social knowingness, Lily proceeds to the opera, where she blunders yet again.

If she "had not quite reconciled herself to the necessity of appearing as Rosedale's guest on so conspicuous an occasion," Lily takes comfort in the justifying presence of Judy Trenor as a guest in the same box (149). Judy's presence, like the

language Lily used to solicit Gus's help, provides another terministic screen for Lily, allowing her to pretend innocence. Lily also has taken special pains to dress well for the occasion, and here is where she makes a most surprising miscalculation, for she completely misreads the "general stream of admiring looks of which she felt herself the centre," supposing they signify her youth, radiance, "well-poised lines and happy tints" that lifted her "to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart to genius." Lily's blindness to the context of those "admiring"—more aptly, inquiring—looks reflects the height of her vanity, the hollow center of the house of mirth.

Merged into this stream of ostensible admiration is "the insistency of Trenor's gaze" upon her, yet Lily has not put two and two together, while the "admiring" crowd certainly has. Lily, who usually has an unerring instinct for the language of decoration and dress, completely misses the message her finery, and Gus's proprietary gaze, flash out to friend and foe alike. His attentive glances allow "Lily's poetic enjoyment of the moment" to remain "undisturbed by the base thought that her gown and opera cloak had been indirectly paid for by Gus Trenor," while he "had not sufficient poetry in his composition to lose sight of these prosaic facts." The context of her wearing a dress that Gus's "prosaic" look communicates is his as much as Lily is simply does not register with Lily; she looks radiant, and she knows it, but she does not understand what her dress "says" about her or Gus Trenor.

In the circuit of Lily's world, carelessness of this sort almost always attends disaster, as Lily well knows. In fact, it is just such carelessness--Lawrence Selden's and Bertha Dorset's--that Lily had so recently paid a handsome sum to cover. Although Lily's motives in procuring the damaging love letters between them are mixed and vague

even to her, the instincts of her training and her "blind inherited scruples" prevail upon her to do what is necessary to keep them out of general circulation, where they can do untold damage (134-5). While extramarital affairs are tolerated in their circle as long as the husband either approves or is indifferent, Lily knows "that there is nothing society resents so much as having given its protection to those who have not known how to profit by it; it is for having betrayed its connivance that the body social punishes the offender who is found out" (133-4). Negligence even on the man's part is unpardonable, and for the same reason. Exposing society's complicity in countenancing such arrangements puts Selden in equal danger, and even his bachelor status cannot mitigate in his favor. A society that depends so heavily on propriety in front of outsiders, especially the working class like Mrs. Haffen, simply cannot tolerate the risk to their way of life that such carelessness represents.

Lily can hardly be charged with negligence, however, in losing sight of the multiplying factors at work in her social destruction. She appears, in fact, to leave little to chance, always "calculating" the risks and rewards of her every minute action. But the people of little or no account in her estimation prove capable of doing her harm in direct proportion to their perceived worthlessness. Her training certainly has blinded her to the potential value of "little people," and Grace Stepney is just one "insignificant" person who plays a decisive role in Lily's disinheritance.

One of "the dingy people" in Lily's view, Grace is so hungry to bask in Lily's reflective glory that she could easily be mollified by the "scant civilities Lily accorded to Mr. Rosedale" (157). But Lily cannot "foresee that such a friend was worth cultivating." Small wonder, then, that Lily's continual snubbing of Grace turns her "dull resentment"

to "active animosity" (158), leading Grace to report the rumor to Mrs. Penniston that a scandalous relationship exists between Lily and Gus Trenor. Although Grace retreats from the suggestion of any physical connection beyond flirtation, she nonetheless adds that, given the difference in their ages and personal attractiveness, some "material gain" must lie at root of their being seen together so conspicuously (160), for why else would Lily waste her time? Mrs. Penniston resists hearing these vague accusations, demanding to know at once what people are saying about Lily. "I didn't suppose I should have to put it so plainly," Grace replies, "People say that Gus Trenor pays her bills" (161). If Mrs. Penniston, like her charge, prefers to ignore inconvenient information—especially of such a morally offensive kind—she nonetheless takes mental note of the rumors and builds "in her thoughts a settled deposit of resentment against her niece" (163). She says nothing to Lily, but when her niece is accused yet again of an adulterous affair, this time with George Dorset, the strain of one scandal after another sends her to the grave. That Grace Stepney inherits the lion's share of Mrs. Penniston's estate indicates just how much it has cost Lily to think her of no account.

Fair Play

The other person of "no account" who factors into Lily's fate in unexpected ways is Simon Rosedale. In foolishly lying to him about her being at the Benedick in order to see her dress-maker, Lily had given Rosedale not only the power to damage her reputation but cause for believing she had something to hide. Rosedale uses this power for his own unknown purpose, thus placing her in jeopardy with the volatile Gus Trenor.

Gus has lured Lily to his house under the false pretense that his wife is also there. Informing Lily that he does not appreciate being ignored after all his generosity,

and implying that she appears only too willing to "settle the score" with other men, Trenor betrays knowledge that Rosedale has indeed told Gus about her indiscreet visit to Selden's apartment (188). Trenor tells her that "the man who pays for the dinner is generally allowed to have a seat at the table" (187), and that in denying him any of her attention, she "ain't playing fair; that's dodging the rules of the game" (188).

Lily bristles at this blunt talk as much as she had at Rosedale's, and well she should, for Trenor goes much further than Rosedale in violating her sense of propriety—and nearly violating her womanhood in the process. After Trenor sneers that he doesn't doubt that she has accepted other men's generosity before and "chucked the other chaps as you'd like to chuck me," he says he doesn't care how she "settled" her "score with them," so long as she understands he can't be so easily fooled (189). In response to her shocked stare, he says, "I know I'm not talking the way a man is supposed to talk to a girl," but he feels he must if he is to get her attention, which he will take by force if she won't freely pay what he feels he is owed. Though Lily recoils in horror from his physical touch, it is his words that keep her "frozen to her place": "The words—the words were worse than the touch!" (190). Words, she well knows, have a power to reach far beyond her physical person and poison the reputation on which her only assets—her beauty and charm—depend.

Gus's language partakes equally of Wall Street and Park Avenue, effectively blurring the discursive lines between the two. This helps explain why Lily is quicker to trust him than someone like Simon Rosedale, for "[w]ith all his faults, Trenor had the safeguard of his traditions, and was the less likely to overstep them because they were so purely instinctive" (147). But it also explains, in part, why Lily is so caught off guard

by Gus's sexual aggression, and feels herself (once out of danger) "a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained" (191). Seeing "the familiar alien streets" of her own neighborhood, Lily recalls having read a translation of the *Eumenides* while staying at a guest house, and relates her experience to Orestes's, feeling that while "the Furies might sometimes sleep," they were still "always there in the dark corners," and they have awakened within her now.

The discursive confusion Trenor's talk and action produce further alienates Lily from the world she thought she knew. Although she has displayed a tremendous gift for conversation and, especially, rhetorical skill in understanding and responding to others' emotional needs, her rhetorical powers, such as they are, have truly failed her now. All of her dealings with Gus also show that she is truly at home in neither the language of finance or of a society she increasingly cannot recognize as her own. From her standpoint, her world has been colonized by outsiders who speak a different language and impose alien rules and values. Moreover, Lily has come to recognize previously unnoticed but still inchoate "spiritual and intellectual needs," feeling certain that her desire for beautiful things is more than compensated by her ability to "make better use" of them, and all that money can buy, than most wealthy people do (91). As is so often the case in the novel, two opposing things are juxtaposed, throwing both into relief, and the encroaching world of Wall Street allows Lily to suspect that a deeper sense of values lurks beneath her desire for comfort and beauty. The contrast between material and spiritual values enables her to begin examining them for perhaps the first time.

Wall Street was not a brand-new entity when Wharton wrote *The House of Mirth*, the New York Stock Exchange having been formed out of two markets in 1869.³³ Nor were complex financial transactions new to the Gilded Age. As Edward Chancellor notes, "All manner of financial products and services were traded on the Amsterdam Exchange," going back to the early 1600s. These included "commodities, current exchange, shareholdings, maritime insurance," even those instruments that seem of especially recent vintage, stock options.³⁴ But market madness did not truly reach the United States until around the time of the Civil War, ushered in by the craze for railroad stocks but soon extending to every kind of commodity, both tangible and intangible. Chancellor believes the figure of speculators during the Civil War to far exceed the 20,000 holders of stocks and bonds of the decade prior, and notes the avidity of many "lady speculators" among the throngs awaiting the latest returns.³⁵ What had changed by the time of Wharton's novel was the public's growing fascination with it as spectacle, the stage on which modern business was increasingly enacted.

If Wharton was much shrewder about financial matters than her protagonist---almost to the point of paranoid obsession that her publishers were not dealing with her squarely---she was no stranger to speculation in the stock market. In a recently discovered letter from the mid-1890s, she writes from Paris to her tutor and friend Anna Bahlmann that "we have made \$5000 'in sugar', & as we have been successful I will confide in you that in going into the speculation we risked a small amount for you & your winnings are \$200 for which I will shortly send you a cheque."³⁶ How much Wharton ultimately invested in stocks and whether she directly invested her own money or had others act on her own behalf is unclear, but she felt the impact of the crash of 1929

primarily through the falling values of her real estate holdings and the diminished condition of the publishing market, not from stocks themselves.³⁷

Straight Talk

If Lily has recoiled from Rosedale's directness, and barely escaped the sexual demands of Gus Trenor, she has been equally put off by the torturous circumlocutions engaged in by those distinctly of her own class. She is bothered especially by such indirection on the part of Lawrence Selden, the person from whom she most needs honesty and direct dealing.

One of the first things Lily asks of Selden is that he be "a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable things" to her when she needs to hear them (10). "Don't you see," she implores, "that there are men enough to say pleasant things to me." But she believes Selden to be the kind of friend she "shouldn't have to pretend with" or be on her guard against, as he is "neither a prig nor a bounder"—that is, neither smugly proper nor a crass social-climber. By the end of *The House of Mirth*, it becomes clear that Lily has woefully misjudged Selden and given him far more credit than he deserves, but she misreads his apparent directness and lofty pronouncements about "personal freedom" as signs of depth and unconventionality that he ultimately lacks. In her last encounter with Selden, when Lily wants nothing more from Selden than direct honesty and "a passionate desire to be understood," Selden gives her only lightness and indirection. Feeling herself "already at the heart of the situation," and especially lucid from too little sleep and too much sedative, Lily finds it "incredible that any one should think it necessary to linger in the unconventional outskirts of word-play and evasion" (401). She has come a long way from such games and now, especially, she needs straight talk.

In the opening chapters of the novel, and despite her apparently earnest plea for directness, Lily had seemed to prefer that Selden “tell the truth but tell it slant”—at least if we are to judge by most of her responses to the far more straightforward speaker, Simon Rosedale. It is one of the novel’s many ironies that the repugnant and ineloquent Rosedale proves to be the only friend who isn’t “afraid to say disagreeable things” to Lily, but she discovers this truth too late to parlay it into her social rehabilitation, and after she’s lost the desire to be rehabilitated on her society’s terms.

We first encounter Lily’s rude shock at Rosedale’s plain speech in the novel’s opening chapter. Lily reddens at being caught in an unnecessary lie to Rosedale about her coming from Lawrence Selden’s apartment, where she has just taken an innocent tea with him. Rosedale not only owns the bachelor’s building where Selden lives, as he informs her, but sees through her lie and almost revels in catching her off-guard. To Lily and her set, Rosedale is a pushy and uncouth social climber—and a Jew at that--whose artless words are perhaps his most loathsome quality; this early encounter only strengthens Lily’s prejudices against him.

To Lily, whose ears are sensitively attuned to the finest distinctions of speech and manner and the social station they convey but deaf to the contexts that endow speech with meaning, Rosedale’s every word strikes her as taking unwonted intimacy, his tone possessing “the familiarity of a touch” (17). Although she generally had “been undisturbed by scruples” when it had suited her purposes, she finds it nearly impossible to expend her charms on Rosedale or grant him even the slightest courtesy. “Training and experience had taught her to be hospitable to newcomers,” as they might prove useful at a later date, but “some intuitive repugnance, getting the better of years of

social discipline, had made her push Mr. Rosedale into his *oubliette* without a trial" (20). Judy Trenor is the primary gatekeeper of this group, and while she and Lily take comfort in declaring "that he was the same little Jew who had been served up and rejected at the social board a dozen times within her memory" (21), Rosedale refuses to be forgotten or pushed aside, and with each passing chapter we see how vital and valuable he has made himself to Lily's social circle, as their traditional fortunes wane and their appetite for speculation grows.

Rosedale's turning up at the least opportune times presents a particular problem for Lily, since despite his lack of social standing, he seems especially suited to entrap Lily into one blunder after another, which only fuels her disdain for him. She manages to regain her balance the first time around, by capitalizing on her "luck" at finding her prey, Percy Gryce, on the train to Bellomont. In fact, the improvident impulse that had led her to take tea in Selden's apartment proves crucial to her success with Gryce, since she is able to turn the knowledge she gained from Selden about Americana to profitable use in her conversation with Gryce. But this brief period of recovery is clouded by her awareness that, in telling him a foolish and unnecessary lie, she had put herself in Rosedale's power, the one "factor to be feared" (21). As Rosedale is "a man who made it his business" to know other people's business, she knows that he can leverage this power by displaying "an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate" (20).

Rosedale will use this power against her later, but in the meantime he has managed to capitalize on a major downturn in the stock market. In a season in which "everybody 'felt poor' except the Welly Brys [other newcomers] and Mr. Simon

Rosedale, the latter had managed to double his fortune playing "Fairy Godmother" to Park Avenue, stemming the blood-flow for his preferred clients and "performing the miracle" of turning "the shrunken pumpkin back into a golden coach" (155).

Referring most likely to the panic of 1901, the narrator informs us that [i]t had been a bad autumn in Wall Street, where prices fell in accordance with that particular law which proves railway stocks and bales of cotton to be more sensitive to the allotment of executive power than many estimable citizens trained to all the advantages of self-government" (155). In this environment, Rosedale has become more valuable, buying his way into society in living among them in the "newly-finished house" he has bought from one of the crash's victims. More importantly, he is able to fill his picture-gallery with old masters" and thereby provide suitable cover for those who had formerly snubbed him to dine openly at his table, "just to see the pictures." Just when Rosedale seems least to need Lily Bart, however, is precisely the moment that "it was becoming more and more clear to him that Miss Bart herself possessed precisely the complementary qualities needed to round off his social personality" (156).

Comparatively speaking, Gus Trenor is a far more odious creature than Rosedale, as earlier incidents make clear. But Lily is slow to recognize the true distinctions between them because she has relied on training in an older social code—an intensely rule-governed code of breeding---that prevents her from seeing that the rules have begun to change. This training has also disguised from her the baseness underlying that code of breeding and all that had passed as respectability. If gossip, adultery, and indebtedness are not new quantities, the marketplace Lily finds herself in is far more fluid and confusing than the one where she had been trained to trade her

gifts, and the ostensibly more transparent language of market exchange strips the aesthetic veneer from concepts like love and marriage. Properties that had seemed easy to evaluate---a man like Rosedale, for instance---prove far more difficult to assess under the new rules. While Lily is at first repelled by the *quid pro quo* Rosedale makes only too plain in his first offer of marriage, she eventually comes to respect and appreciate the straightforward “business-like” talk of this most unsuitable of suitors. Despite his inartful manner of speaking, Rosedale's terms are, in reality, completely *pro forma* and precisely what she has been taught to seek: marriage as mutually beneficial social arrangement, love being both optional and negotiable.

Rosedale offers information that is agreeable enough in substance—an offer to make her his wife and the envy of all of her friends by outshining them in the splendor only he can afford to lavish. But he renders his proposal in a most disagreeable way. Lily is indignant that Rosedale should make such a crassly commercial offer as to provide her the high life she most craves in exchange for becoming his wife, even though Lily has made it abundantly clear to everyone her only reasonable chance at maintaining her current lifestyle (and the only one she has ever known or been groomed for) is to marry a wealthy man. Every other woman Lily knows has struck the same exact bargain, marrying men who grant them the financial and social stability through which to pursue quite openly their extramarital affairs. What bothers Lily, however, is the nakedness of Rosedale's offer: he puts things too plainly. What she could formerly pretend to believe about marriage (as represented, for example, in the social pieties fetishized by Lily's aunt) fall before the weight of Rosedale's cold hard facts. It is only much later, when Lily sees little hope left of ever repaying her debts and no longer pines

for the lavishness of her former life that she comes to appreciate Rosedale's plainspoken manner.

This thawing of Lily's attitude toward Rosedale is made possible, in part, by her recognition that Rosedale is capable of genuine human kindness, even as her old friends have dropped her without a word. Lily initially thinks he is reaching out to her because he still wishes to marry her. Instead of marriage, which he says is now impossible only because her "situation has changed" and not that he believes a word of the gossip or Bertha Dorset's claim, Rosedale informs Lily that he loves her more than ever. Ostensibly out of love for her, he informs Lily that he also knows she possesses the means of restoring her reputation: the letters the cleaning woman at the Benedick had sold to Lily some months before. The resentment Lily had felt toward Rosedale fades in his brutal honesty, putting the matter of his private appraisal of her worth so starkly against his renewed vow of love: "After the tissue of social falsehoods in which she had so long moved it was refreshing to step into the open daylight of an avowed expediency" (335).

The plan Rosedale lays out to leverage Bertha's letters and force her to retract her vicious story is likewise refreshing to Lily, who "found herself held fast in the grasp of his argument by the mere cold strength of its presentation" (337). He answers her reservations about having to inflict "an open injury," reducing the "transaction to a private understanding" (338). Rosedale's terms of "business-like give and take" offer Lily's "tired mind" an "escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures." The "cold strength" of his arguments also, for the moment, soothes her burning conscience. But the spell is broken when he reveals some concern

about Lily cheating him "out of his share of the spoils. This glimpse of his inner mind seemed to present the whole transaction in a new aspect, and she saw that the essential baseness of the act lay in its freedom from risk" (339).³⁸

Despite their parting "with scorn on her side and anger on his," the next meeting between Lily and Rosedale fares much better, as her troubles have multiplied in the interim, while his fortunes have advanced (377). Lily also witnesses his ever-so-gradual refinement as he ascends the social ladder. Always the careful student, Rosedale has learned from his "social betters" to be more circumspect in the way he speaks. Though he still lacks the refinement that a lifetime of hereditary privilege has instilled in his elite peers, Rosedale has learned well the snobbery underlying the superficial appearance of grace, and the indirect ways by which it remains under disguise.

We find one example in the way Rosedale reacts to Lily's boarding house. Although he's careful not to speak unkindly about Lily's new dwelling at the time of their last meeting, Lily nonetheless senses that Rosedale "was taking contemptuous note of the neighborhood...and looked up with an air of incredulous disgust" (383). Despite his judging eye, Lily recognizes "the heroism" in his offer to come and see her when nearly all others have abandoned her, and she was "frankly touched by it," and answers "Thank you—I shall be very glad...in the only sincere words she had ever spoken to him" (383-4).

Rosedale is Lily's best hope of getting a straight answer and "the fitting person to receive and transmit her version of the facts" about her transaction with Gus Trenor, which might grant her admission back into society. After first having denied knowledge of the letters, she now tells Rosedale her version in the clearest terms possible: "She

made the statement clearly, deliberately, with pauses between the sentences, so that each should have time to sink deeply into her hearer's mind" (382). Rosedale's liminal position between the business world and the fashionable set makes him an ideal conduit for information she has, until now, been unable or unwilling to communicate, even to save her own skin. The facts of her case have not changed, nor her guilt or innocence, but as Rosedale had made perfectly clear to her much earlier, facts don't necessarily influence one's value in the social marketplace where both of them do their bidding.

Lily, too, has been a liminal figure in this world, yet she has what would appear to be a significant advantage over Rosedale: an ostensibly much fuller command of the semiotics of fashionable society. At turns, she has shown herself to be an astute rhetor capable of persuading even the colorless Percy Gryce to believe himself interesting, if not charming, but these gifts are limited to the nearly obsolete "machinery" she has been taught to operate and constitute a rhetoric only in the shallowest sense. Rosedale, of course, has the advantage of manipulating money in all its various guises--- knowledge that, despite its scientific patina, can be every bit as arcane and mysterious as the unspoken rules of Park Avenue and requires rhetorical skills of its own. Rosedale's ascent apparently has been as swift as Lily's descent, enabled in large part by his enormous wealth and financial savvy but also by his mastering a second language, which is Lily's first. But it is not in the hybrid language formed from these that Rosedale issues his final proposal, nor in plain business-speak. Simon Rosedale speaks to Lily like a friend.

Unlike the man Lily knew would never "waste his time in an ineffectual sentimental dalliance" (390), Rosedale proves more emotionally committed to her than she had ever guessed. Seeing Lily in such squalid surroundings, and now out of a job as well, Rosedale is outraged that she should have to work at all or live in a place so unsuited to a person of her worth. So outraged is he, in fact, that he "can't talk of it calmly," a striking show of emotion that Lily can hardly fathom: "She had in truth never seen him so shaken out of his usual glibness; and there was something almost moving to her in his inarticulate struggle with his emotions" (391).

Having so recently been denied the opportunity to intervene on her behalf, Rosedale now offers a "plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another." She declines this as well, however, not only because she can never again quite trust such talk, but also because the world from which she has been banished has become alien to her new sense of honor. She sees that this quality only enhances her value in Rosedale's eyes, valuing her for the "unexplained scruples and resistance" that made her rare indeed (392). Rosedale's estimation of her rarity among her kind is nearly all Lily has by this time, but she refuses to revel in the comparison. She becomes almost resigned to her poverty and longs only for rest now, taking more sedative with each passing night.

Even Selden recedes from her desires, as it is now clear that there can be no true understanding between them, at least not in a language either of them knows. She tries, however, passing "beyond the phase of well-bred reciprocity, in which every demonstration must be scrupulously proportioned to the emotion it elicits, and generosity of feeling is the only ostentation condemned" (402). As she departs from

Selden for the last time, she "understood now that she could not go forth and leave her old self with him: that self must indeed live on in his presence, but it must still continue to be hers" (405). Even after the check from her inheritance arrives to relieve her from "material poverty," Lily considers the far worse "inner destination" that cannot be repaired. The flood of years pass in her memory and, "as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life" (417).

Moreover, "all the men and women she knew were like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance" (418). Only the continuity of life represented by Nettie Struthers's maternal kitchen seemed real to her now, but that is not accessible to Lily, nor had it ever been. At any rate, this life "had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff" (418).

Le mot juste

A great deal is made of language in *The House of Mirth*. The right word, accompanied by the right gesture, and made to or on behalf of the right people can effect one's migration from Park Avenue parvenu to final "arrival" in the established houses of New York. It takes money too, of course, and lots of it, but all the money in the world cannot carry one to the hallowed halls of the Trenors, Van Osburghs, and Dorsets unless one knows the password primeval for each hidden door. Lily's great facility with every nuance of this language allows her entry into these doors, and to broker entry for those with enough money, but unless and until she's willing to accept the "obligations" of marriage (as one male character puts it), she can do little more than enjoy the view as spectator and entertainer, provided she can continue to pay the price of admission. More importantly, her fluency extends only to the superficial aspects of

discourse, the niceties that demonstrate one's "good breeding," while blinding Lily to the contexts that make true signification, and true understanding, possible.

Words also carry the power to bring Lily's tenuous foothold in these houses to an abrupt halt. Gossip, rumor, and innuendo, however indirectly rendered (and they are *always* rendered indirectly), achieve greater accumulated force than any tangible proof of innocence—except for the tangible, quite legible truth of Bertha Dorset's own words of love to Selden, the incriminating letters that Lily cannot and will not bring herself to use. In the new marketplace where Lily finds herself, even love can be leveraged like any other commodity, to raise one party's fortunes while ruining another's.

Language can also bridge the gap of misunderstanding between Lily and Selden, or so each of them believes. As Lily lay in her bed, waiting for the soporific to take effect and not realizing that she has taken too much, "she said to herself that there was something she must tell Selden, some word she had found that should make life clear between them. She tried to repeat the word, which lingered vague and luminous on the far edge of thought—she was afraid of not remembering it when she woke; and if she could only remember it and say it to him, she felt that everything would be well" (423). Lawrence Selden has had a similar "epiphany" and, ignoring conventional prohibitions against early morning social calls, rushes to see Lily because "he had found the word he meant to say to her, and it could not wait another moment to be said" (425). He is too late, however, as they both are, and one doubts in any case that even as strong a word as love (if that *were* the word) would be enough to overcome the cowardice he betrays even as he recognizes its tragic cost. "The word which made all clear" passes in silence between the living Lawrence Selden and the dead Lily Bart.

Words fail Lily, despite her natural but shallow gifts of language. The discursive web that *The House of Mirth* reveals provides a safety net to the likes of Simon Rosedale, while strangling Lily Bart. As Lily admits to herself, late in the novel, "Inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (394). Moreover, she "had learned by experience that she had neither the aptitude nor the moral constancy to remake her life on new lines" (393). Whereas Rosedale seizes every opportunity to learn the language of those he hopes to conquer, and then become, Lily cannot or will not adjust in the right measure to the new circumstances she finds herself in. By the time she begins acquiring a language enabling her to see her own situation truly—one that recognizes the constitutive contexts of communication--she has lost the desire to re-enter that world and dies with "some word" still on her tongue. As to what "that word" was, Edith Wharton forever stayed mum.

In the next chapter, I will discuss a character far less endowed with Lily's persuasive skills or social graces, Thomas Sutpen, in William Faulkner's 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!* Whereas Lily is articulate yet impotent, Sutpen is inarticulate but powerful. He is, in many respects, Lily's opposite, yet he thrives in the antebellum economy of Mississippi, primarily because he has mastered the logic underlying that system, using it to construct a "design" for his life that will ensure he is never again made to enter through the back door. But in pursuing this design with monomaniacal zeal, Sutpen is blind to the important rhetorical counterparts to *logos*, or reason: *ethos*

and *pathos*. Because he fails to register the human need for emotion and follows a morality based strictly on the values of the accounting ledger, he and his design are both destroyed.

¹ Maureen Howard, "On the House of Mirth" in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 15.3 (Winter 1996), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Holy Bible*, The New King James Version. Other translations substitute "pleasure" for "mirth."

⁴ Wayne Westbrook, "The House of Mirth and the Insurance Scandal of 1905," in *Notes and Queries* (May 1976), 134.

⁵ Wai-Chee Dimock, "Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton's House of Mirth," in *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth*, Shari Benstock, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994), 375.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁸ Margot Norris regards the novel as insuring that the "historical discourses of science and art directing the novel's philosophy collapse from their own internal contradictions, and reveal themselves to be governed by a hidden regime of economy that allows the discourse of business, in the end, to achieve a Pyrrhic philosophical victory" (434). See her deconstructionist reading of the novel in "Death by Speculation: Deconstructing *The House of Mirth*," in *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: Edith Wharton, The House of Mirth*, Shari Benstock, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994), 431-46.

⁹ Jeffrey Meyers, "Introduction" to *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), xxxiii.

¹⁰ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1984), 89. All references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Fromm Publishing, 1985), 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship and the Industrial Arts* (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 195. Quoted in Eris Wais, "Trained Incapacity: Thorstein Veblen and Kenneth Burke," in *KB Journal* (<http://www.kbjournal.org>).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 347-8.

²¹ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: California UP, [1934] 1984), 7. Qtd. in Wais.

²² *Ibid.*, 9.

²³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944).

²⁴ Polanyi qualifies this claim by noting that "Apart from the Crimean War—a more or less colonial event—England, France, Prussia, Austria, Italy, and Russia were engaged in war among each other for altogether about eighteen months. A computation of comparable figures for the two preceding centuries gives an average of sixty to seventy years of major wars in each" (5).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), 338.

²⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²⁸ Alan Trachtenberg's cultural history, *The Incorporation of America*, shows this process and its effects in detail. See especially chapter five, "The Politics of Culture," for a discussion of how corporate methods and values,

particularly the drive for both efficiency and social cohesion through the arts, became dominant in non-profit cultural enterprises.

²⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik (New York, 1976), 128.

³⁰ See Shari Benstock's Introduction to *The House of Mirth* in the *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* series, 17.

³¹ Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (New York: Penguin, 2000), ix.

³² *Ibid.*, xi.

³³ Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost*, 168.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-7. These "lady speculators" included Cornelius Vanderbilt's former mistress and the Quaker heiress Hetty Green, who "dressed from head to foot in black crepe," "bought shrewdly during panics, succeeded in cornering the noted operator Addison Cammack, once threatened the railroad baron Collis Huntington with a revolver, and even brought about a minor stock market panic when the withdrawal of her account caused her brokers to fail" (166-7)

³⁶ See Rebecca Mead's article, "The Age of Innocence: Early Letters from Edith Wharton," in the *New Yorker*, June 29, 2009, 32-8.

³⁷ Shari Benstock, 21.

³⁸ Interestingly, the principle Lily so astutely describes is precisely what economists mean by the term "moral hazard": the careless behavior that results when one party is insulated from risk. The term has been used quite often in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008.

CHAPTER 3

LEDGERS, LOGIC, AND LEGAL FICTIONS IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

In his introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations of William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* Harold Bloom remarks that despite the voluminous praise heaped on the novel he finds *Absalom* lacking because Thomas Sutpen's "design" is simply not grand enough to warrant the other characters' obsession with it.¹ Bloom does not identify what he takes to *be* Sutpen's design nor does he contribute an interpretation of his own that elaborates on this perceived failure, but the essays he collected and edited for this volume, as well as the more than two-hundred others written on the subject, indicate a vigorous and continuous concern with identifying the exact nature of Sutpen's design. Some of the more notable interpretations are those that regard Sutpen as an agent of Judeo-Christian patriarchy, dynastic descent, racial division, slavery, the self-made man, the New South, oedipal revenge, and imperialism.² Bloom is likely untroubled by his minority view that Sutpen's design is inconsequential, but few readers have been able to resist asking what it is exactly that Sutpen represents. That *Absalom* so insists on this question, in numerous ways by various narrators, while resolutely resisting an answer to it accounts in part for the novel's enduring interest.

It seems that Sutpen is indeed too big to be seen all at once--by critics, readers, or the other characters in the novel--because he represents (or seems vastly capable of representing) too many overlapping and interpenetrating schemes for one particular

design to be teased from another. Sutpen foolishly attempts to implement a design that is independent and self-perpetuating and is unable or unwilling to recognize his own interconnectedness to others and the necessity of their cooperation in fulfilling his design. Faulkner implicates us as readers in this conundrum, as well, by enmeshing us in ontological and epistemological questions that resist any totalizing explanation. Though the novel certainly rewards those readers most comfortable with ambiguity and irresolution, we nonetheless risk becoming ensnared by the need for things to “add up,” to lament along with Mr. Compson that “[i]t just does not explain ... you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens.”³

Miscalculations abound in *Absalom, Absalom!*, not only in Sutpen's design but also in the competing and conflicting narrative accounts of the Sutpen saga, yet critics have largely glossed over the discourse of calculation and the many other economic terms that saturate the novel. That is, while many scholars have examined the novel's various socioeconomic dimensions, few have focused on economics as a discursive practice in *Absalom*. What Sutpen calls his "innocence," I will argue, is true in the strictest sense, for he is wholly ignorant of the existence of values that cannot be quantified, whether ethical or emotional. Of the three elements Aristotle identified as the basic modes of persuasion (which are endemic to all communication), Sutpen seems capable of operating only at the level of *logos*, or reason; *ethos* and *pathos* are completely alien concepts, thus making him functionally illiterate in two of the three primary realms of rhetoric.

Logos, Ethos, Pathos

Although Heraclitus appears to have been the first Greek philosopher to devote special attention to *logos*, which he regarded as providing the link between rational understanding and the world's rational structure, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was perhaps the first truly systematic study of rhetoric and the place where *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* were established as the three basic appeals of persuasion. Of these, Aristotle clearly privileges reason over the others, at times appearing to convey the idea that "he would prefer to conduct persuasion by reason alone."⁴ Despite this preference, however, Aristotle recognized the need also to appeal to an audience's emotions and shared values, when relevant to the question at hand, and understood the three modes to be interrelated and often at play simultaneously. For example, an appeal to authority from received wisdom, or *doxa*, employs both *logos* and *ethos*, since the audience would need to respect the premise and its cultural source to be persuaded of its rational merit. Only then can the speaker or writer gain their audience's assent, which "must only be provisional or probable, not certain, such truths being the usual domain of rhetoric."

While Aristotle's scheme remains foundational for most contemporary students of rhetoric, it is worth noting Heraclitus's apprehensions about the effectiveness, even the availability, of rational appeals. Positing *logos* as an ever-present but elusive phenomenon in the cosmos, Heraclitus notes

This LOGOS holds always but humans always prove unable to understand it, both before hearing it and when they have first heard it. For though all things come to be in accordance with this LOGOS, humans are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each in

accordance with its nature and saying how it is. But other people fail to notice what they do when awake, just as they forget what they do while asleep.⁵

Because of humans' inability to grasp *logos* fully, Heraclitus says "it is necessary to follow what is common [that is, *doxa*, or social convention]. But although the LOGOS is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding."

The sense of the word "*logos*" as Heraclitus uses it here is of the ineffable, and it is quite the opposite from the *logos* used in rational argumentation. It is akin to the magic word used to open the Gospel according to John in the New Testament: "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was God."⁶ In its secular sense, *logos* fills the void that Lacan describes as humanity's primal "lack," and its inaccessibility accounts for much of the pervasive loneliness felt by the central characters in each of these novels. Lily Bart's search for a word that would "make life clear" strongly suggests the Heraclitean sense of *logos*.

Thomas Sutpen also searches in vain for words, especially those that might account for the tragic flaw in his design. Using Charles Schuster's definition of rhetorical literacy, Sutpen lacks the power to make himself "heard and felt, to signify," either to himself or to others. Lacking this kind of *logos*, Sutpen achieves considerable success with the other, though he operates with a far less sophisticated understanding of *logos* than Aristotle prescribed, one stripped of its social embeddedness and unproblematic in its clarity. Completely absent from his "design," of course, is any sense that humans have emotional needs, that injuries to their honor, pride, or vanity cannot be financially compensated. After all, he attempts to salve his own social wounds by erecting the largest estate in the county and marrying into social respectability. Curiously, however,

the impetus for Sutpen's design is to "fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead" (178). He understands *doxa* in a limited sense, since his urge to "fix things right" with the dead and the living necessarily involves a tacit appeal to community values. Yet he shows remarkable obtuseness about the social realities of Jefferson and frustrates that community's attempt to divine his motives and origins. He seems incapable of applying knowledge from one setting to another, an adaptability that is essential to effective persuasion.

Sutpen nonetheless feels a responsibility to vindicate some unknown others in order to live with himself, for he could "never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on." Whether these men and women consist only of his family or others of his class is unclear—his lack of any historical awareness or curiosity about his own beginnings, even his own birthday, suggest the former--but his loyalties do not extend to anyone else in Jefferson or Yoknapatawpha County, not even the man whose origins his most closely resemble, Wash Jones. That Wash becomes the agent of Sutpen's death is one of the richest ironies of a novel replete with them.

Sutpen is also unaware that it will take more than money and the veneer of respectability to acquire the social standing he so craves. As Quentin's father reports, Sutpen's refusal to indulge the community's natural curiosity about his origins or the source of his newfound wealth stirred "public opinion in an acute state of indigestion" (35). He becomes a source of endless speculation and suspicion, leading to his arraignment before the justice, presumably on charges that he had acquired the finery

for Sutpen's Hundred through armed robbery of a New Orleans steamship. Compson speculates that "the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it" (33). That an entire town can be complicit with the nefarious deeds of one of its citizens seems entirely lost on Sutpen; at any rate, he seems unfazed by the episode, as we learn nothing more about it except the report that Quentin's grandfather and Goodhue Coldfield had put up the bond to release him. Sutpen wastes no time before securing the hand of Ellen Coldhue in marriage, a choice the town finds puzzling since her father is neither wealthy nor like Sutpen in any discernible way. The choice of Ellen from among the marriageable women in Jefferson, like many other decisions he makes, seems a matter of Sutpen's own private calculation, and its peculiarity only spurs the town of Jefferson in its resentment of its largest landowner.

Sutpen is characterized repeatedly as a man of strict calculation, most insistently by his closest and perhaps only friend, General Compson, whose account (along with Rosa's) forms the primary basis upon which Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve construct their own narratives. "His trouble was innocence," says General Compson, echoing the term Sutpen uses repeatedly to describe himself (178), yet the stories he tells about Sutpen's life reveal a peculiar kind of innocence indeed.

Sutpen's Innocence

The innocence Sutpen claims he "had not yet discovered he possessed" (185) is that men are divided by difference, between black and white but also "between white men and white men" and not on the basis of luck or "where you were spawned" (as he

at first believes) but something else that he never quite seems to grasp. Sutpen seems to have been "spawned" in a prelapsarian world, or certainly before the Industrial Revolution, yet we "know" he was born in 1808 in the remote mountains of western Virginia. (Quentin and Shreve assert this and Sutpen's age when he arrived in Jefferson as facts, despite Sutpen's telling Quentin's grandfather that he could never be sure of his actual age.) As Sutpen tells it, he believes he was almost fourteen before he realized that

there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices such as pouring the very whiskey from the jug and putting the glass into his hand... (180)

Not only was the young Sutpen unaware of such divisions, he had no use for the "vague and cloudy tales of Tidewater splendor that penetrated even his mountains because he could not understand what the people meant." Because he had "nothing in sight to compare and gauge the tales by and so give the words life and meaning," he ignores much of what he hears. Because he lacks any context in which to situate this information, Sutpen is rendered unable to comprehend these stories even if he is able to decode the words themselves. Not only is Sutpen illiterate in not being able to read or write, he remains rhetorically illiterate long after acquiring both skills.

What young Thomas eventually comes to know is his abject status among other white men, the kind who jeer at "mountain men" like his drunken father and make them

enter through the back door. (Sutpen seems to be a case of arrested development, as someone trapped in the Lacanian mirror stage much longer than is typical and only belatedly becoming aware of the Other, a conclusion supported by the Lacanian terms he uses to describe his discovery of difference.) Despite this dawning awareness, he retains the belief for some time that the difference between men was only a matter of "luck" and that the lucky ones "would feel if anything more tender toward the unlucky would ever need to feel toward them" (183). The "luck" that seemed to fall haphazardly on some but not on others was, to his mind, nothing to envy, though he does covet the shoes of a wealthy white man, much as he would have coveted the rifle of a fellow mountain man. "He would have coveted the rifle," reports General Compson, "but he would himself have supported and confirmed the owner's pride and pleasure in its ownership because he could not have conceived of the owner taking such crass advantage of the luck which gave the rifle to him rather than to another as to say to other men" (185). There could be no boasting of one's success as a badge of superiority, since all was a matter of luck or fate that one was powerless to change. This, of course, he believes while still unaware of his "innocence."

But young Sutpen is disabused of this vague sense of the basic equality of men when he himself is turned away at the front door and made to go around back, by none other than a "monkey nigger," even though he, a white boy, "had actually come on business, in the good faith of business which he had believed that all men accepted" (188). The content of the message his father had him deliver to the big house is never revealed and was likely unimportant, but Sutpen's awareness of yet another kind of Other and another means of division, by skin color, instantiates the realization of his

"innocence." In the midst of being turned away by a black slave who was "housebred in Richmond, maybe" or perhaps Charleston, Sutpen "seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years he had lived there" (186). His feeling of "dissolution" occurs at precisely the moment he senses himself as a coherent being apart from other humans, as if he is blown apart and reconstituted at the same time.

Suddenly having to reckon with a pecking order he hadn't known existed, and feeling acutely his place at the bottom, gives him, finally, a framework in which to read past scenes from his life, "like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and you turn and go back through the room again and look at all the objects from the other side and you find out you had never seen them before." The racial and class antagonism he had been "innocent" of before he now perceives with surreal clarity, which stirs within him confusion and shame. "Because he was not mad. He insisted on that to Grandfather. He was just thinking, because he knew that something would have to be done about it" if he is to live with himself (189). He knows, however, that even though

you could hit them...and they would not hit back or even resist...you did not want to, because they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit; that when you hit them you would just be hitting a child's toy balloon with a face painted on it, a face slick and smooth and distended and about to burst into laughing and so you did not dare strike it because it would merely burst and you would rather let it walk on out of your sight than to have stood there in the loud laughing. (186)

Sutpen knows that the object of his fury is not the "monkey nigger" himself, which he realizes is an abstraction and not "it" at all, but the people who put such a system in place, for their own benefit and apparently for the purpose of ridiculing the Sutpens of the world.

For the first time, Sutpen is able to see himself through the eyes of the white plantation owner and others of his class.⁷ What his father and brothers and sisters must have been talking about all this time but "had never once mentioned by name, like when people talk about privation without mentioning the siege" (186) had lain dormant until now. Now having, if not a name then at least a context, Sutpen realizes that the plantation owner regards people like him

as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cut-down and patched and made-over garments bought on exorbitant credit because they were white people, from stores where niggers were given the garments free, with for sole heritage that expression on a balloon face bursting with laughter which had looked out at some unremembered and nameless progenitor who had knocked on a door when he was a little boy and had been told by a nigger to go around the back.

(190)

This Hobbesian description of his "race," which comes as close to historical awareness as anything we witness from Sutpen, sees a system rigged against men of his kind in perpetuity, and he imagines each iteration of such slights as a kind of "double treble and

compound" of the original crime—or, given his problem of "innocence," what might be called original sin. Like Adam, who has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, Sutpen feels himself born into a world cursed with a human stain that he and everyone else is powerless to change.⁸ Despite his claim of innocence, however, which he proclaims he still possesses, Sutpen is not a prelapsarian Adam but more like a non-musical King David, whose son Absalom rebels against him and kills his other son Absalom.

Sutpen puzzles over what is to be done, feeling divided in two and debating with each self, "seeking among what little he had to call experience for something to measure it by" (188). The metaphor of measuring is a telling index of Sutpen's calculating mind, but it also suggests how at sea he is in the world of language, how unable he is to situate other people's words within any meaningful context. Using the rifle analogy, the only one at hand and, he admits, not a very good one, he reasons that the only way to beat "them"—the ones who set up this system of division and social hierarchy--is to "have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (192).

Since "the nigger" at the door hadn't even given him the chance to state his business, Sutpen places his faith in some cosmic justice that will ensure that "he [the plantation owner] will get paid back that much for what he sat that nigger to do" (191-2). Bothering himself no more about the underlying reasons for social division, Sutpen resolves to alter the balance by going to the West Indies to make his fortune and become one of "them."

Sutpen's Education

The story of how Sutpen decides on the West Indies offers the novel's only glimpse into his educational background. Leaving out any details about the actual journey, or for that matter the marriage that he later "had" to renounce, Sutpen tells Quentin's grandfather that for some unknown reason, his father saw fit to send him for a few months of formal schooling when he was "a boy of thirteen or fourteen in a room full of children three or four years younger than he and three or four years further advanced" in their knowledge (194). Towering over the schoolteacher, "a smallish man who always looked dusty," Sutpen listens intently to the stories he hears read aloud and, since he cannot yet read himself even after three months of schooling, he resorts to laying hands on the teacher, demanding to know if it were true "about the men who got rich in the West Indies" (196). "How do I know," he asks, "that what you read was in the book?" At school he learns "little save that most of the deeds, good and bad both, incurring opprobrium or plaudits or reward either, within the scope of man's abilities, had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books" (195). His own deeds in the world would be decidedly free of moral categories like "good" or "bad" and heedless of either opprobrium or plaudits.

Sutpen tells this story, of course, in retrospect to General Compson, armed at this later telling with a vocabulary full of "forensic verbiage" (198) and a repertoire of stiffly formal movements like the "florid, swaggering gesture to the hat" that Compson says showed "in all his formal contacts with people. He was like John L. Sullivan having taught himself painfully and tediously to do the schottische, having drilled himself in secret until he now believed it no longer necessary to count the music's beat, say" (34-

5). Moreover, Sutpen "may have believed" that men like Compson or Judge Benbow "might have done it a little more effortlessly than he, but he would not have believed that anyone could have beat him in knowing when to do it and how." He does things strictly by the book and no doubt had studied every flourish in detail. Such rigid formality is yet another indication that he is blind to nuance or context, for he seems oblivious to the effect these gestures have on those around him, that they betray his low origins rather than exemplify the status he feels he has earned.

How Sutpen came to acquire literacy is a mystery, as is the source of the elaborate gestures General Compson describes him using frequently. As with other details of the story Sutpen tells, he elides the journey and tells only of the arrival. But since he left home as an adolescent and arrived in Jefferson at about the age of twenty-five, he likely learned both while in the West Indies. Barely conversational in English at the outset of his journey, Sutpen must have learned to speak it in Haiti along with the local patois and the French he needed, "maybe not to be able to get engaged to be married, but which he would certainly need to be able to repudiate the wife after he had already got her" (200).⁹ He tells Compson that once he realized that "shrewdness would not be enough"--by which he must have meant "unscrupulousness," Compson asserts, "only he didn't know that word because it would not have been in the book from which the school teacher read" (201)—he "was sorry...that he had not taken the schooling along with the West Indian lore when he discovered that all people did not speak the same tongue." Seeing the practical value of an education, "else that design to which he had dedicated himself would die still-born," Sutpen likely pursued this end with gusto.

His "faintly forensic anecdotal manner" (201) and elaborate system of gestures strongly suggest that, through whatever source, Sutpen learned at least the rudiments of public speaking, an important part of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century education. The elocution movement, which focused on the rhetorical canon of delivery, began in the early eighteenth century and lasted through the nineteenth, and stressed correct pronunciation "in an era obsessed with correctness."¹⁰ But, as Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg note, "correctness in pronunciation, as in diction and usage, is not an absolute" but are "properties of the ruling class."¹¹ For someone who aspires to that station, this is precisely the reason to acquire "proper" English, and little else matters.

In addition to teaching pronunciation, elocution also stresses the use of postures and gestures to amplify one's message. Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* (1896) was the most notable textbook on the subject, which included "an elaborate system of notation for posture, gesture, facial expression, and movement."¹² Although Sutpen generally is described as a man of action and few words, and certainly not one inclined to give public speeches, he nonetheless employs rhetorical gestures of the kind found in elocution manuals. Whereas these devices are designed to amplify speech, Sutpen seems to use them in place of speech, as markers of the class which he has attained. Thomas Sheridan, the Irish actor who championed elocution in the late eighteenth century, regarded expressions and gestures as "more primitive than words, more natural where words are artificial, more universal where words are national, and more expressive of emotion than is the sophisticated language of words."¹³ While he goes so far as to call gestures "the natural language of the passions," however, Sutpen shows

no signs of using them in this way. On the contrary, for him they appear to be empty gestures, signifying only his status rather than magnifying his words.

Having achieved the means (by whatever means) to acquire one hundred square miles of the richest land in Jefferson, Sutpen never questions the system that created the social divisions of which he had been innocent, how they came to be or for what purpose. In fact, he continues to insist that his innocence is still intact so many years after learning about social distinctions. But by looking at the constitutive parts of this system of division, Sutpen soon divines and masters the logic on which it depends. As General Compson puts it, Sutpen's "innocence" believed that "the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (211-2). All of the ingredients of morality are those things that can be measured; whatever cannot be accounted for must be left out of the mix. Having been painfully initiated into "a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own" (179), Sutpen is determined at all cost to reproduce this arrangement for himself, accepting this system's logic at face value and insisting that he must do so "or he could never live with himself for the rest of his life" (189).

The Logic of the Ledger

Sutpen's logic, like his recipe for morality, depends on measurement and balance, accounting only for what can be made rational or quantified. As Erik Dussere demonstrates, "this balance is the powerful and necessary fiction of the ledger" because at the end of the year a merchant must force the books to balance by entering an

imaginary sum of money, either a debit or credit, whichever is lacking.¹⁴ “The desirability of balance only begins to make sense once one recognizes [double-entry bookkeeping] as a closed system, operating according to a set of internal rules and with its own internally consistent logic,” which is central to the creation of “natural laws” and the “modern fact” because “the ledger asserts its language to be both objective and transparent.” A representational system that obscures the sleight-of-hand necessary to turn unlike phenomena into commensurable quantities allows “self-evident” facts like racial difference to appear, and where such markers cannot be confirmed by sight--such as when a “black” person appears to be “white”--a ledger can always be located to offer up its incontrovertible truth. Such a system makes it possible for “all men to be created equal” and for certain of these “men” to be 3/5ths of a person at the same time.

Numbers are no more transparent, impartial, or value-free than are figures of speech, as Mary Poovey has demonstrated, since their creation obscures the selecting hand and the necessary fictions required to balance the books. But because of the veracity conferred on numbers, Sutpen can believe himself “innocent,” even morally upright in renouncing his first marriage (and, by extension, in denying Charles Bon as his son, though he withholds this key detail and the matter of his wife's race from Compson) because he follows all the rules of bookkeeping and “honest trade.” He does not “fudge the numbers” or “cook the books,” which would be completely unnecessary, at any rate. Sutpen tells Quentin's grandfather that he could have simply deserted his first wife, but he had acted “above-board,” that “he had what Grandfather would have to admit was a good and valid claim” against his wife and father-in-law for violating “the marriage settlement which he had entered in good faith” (211). He had “accepted [the

Bons] at their own valuation while insisting on [his] own part upon explaining" his lowly origins (212). Because he had "voluntarily relinquished" all but the twenty slaves he takes with him to Mississippi, "moral and legal sanction" ("even if not the delicate one of conscience") support his claim. Quentin's father says that "a man who could believe that a scorned and outraged and angry woman could be bought off with formal logic would believe that she could be placated with money too, and it didn't work" (216). But Sutpen cannot fathom the outrage his actions cause because emotions cannot be captured on a ledger. Feeling vindicated that he has followed all the rules while the Bons violated them, he is mystified to explain the flaw that destroyed his design.

The imaginary ledgers in *Absalom*, those created by Quentin and Shreve to make Sutpen's story "add up," deserve closer scrutiny than critics have given them. Far more attention has been focused, instead, on the numerous physical ledgers in "The Bear" in *Go Down, Moses*. While Ike McCaslin deals extensively and directly with the actual ledger books of his slaveholding forbears in "The Bear," Quentin and Shreve merely imagine the ledger of a scheming lawyer in New Orleans whom they also imagine as an agent of Charles Bon's outraged Haitian mother, the two of them plotting together to exact revenge from Sutpen for abandoning her and their infant son, Charles, after learning they had the taint of "Negro" blood.

The seed for this imaginary lawyer likely comes from General Compson's various references to Sutpen's own "forensic" mind (198, 220, 221). "Sure, that's who it would be," Shreve offers, "the lawyer, that lawyer with his private mad female millionaire to farm, who probably wasn't interested enough in the money [presumably sent by Sutpen as recompense] to see whether the checks had any other writing on them when she

signed them" (241). Shreve and Quentin imagine their fictitious lawyer charting all of Sutpen's movements since that day "with colored pins...like generals have in campaigns, and all the notations in code." To complete the scene, Shreve adds the tragic-comic touch of a ledger detailing the following:

Today he finished robbing a drunken Indian of a hundred miles of virgin land, val. 25,000. At 2:32 today came up out of a swamp with final plank for house. val. in conj. with land 40,000. 7:52 p.m. today married. Bigamy threat val. minus nil. unless quick buyer. Not probable. Doubtless conjoined with wife same day. Say 1 year and then with maybe the date and the hour too: Son. Intrinsic val. possible though not probable forced sale of house & land plus val. crop minus child's one quarter. Emotional val. plus 100% times nil. plus val. crop. Say 10 years, one or more children. Intrinsic val. forced sale house & improved land plus liquid assets minus children's share. Emotional val. 100% times increase yearly for each child plus intrinsic val. plus liquid assets plus working acquired credit and maybe here with the date too: Daughter and you could maybe even have seen the question mark after it and the other words even: daughter? daughter? daughter? trailing off not because thinking trailed off, but on the contrary thinking stopping right still then, backing up then and spreading like when you lay a stick across a trickle of water, spreading and rising slow all around him in whatever place it was that he could lock the door to and sit quiet and subtract the money that Bon was spending on his whores and his champagne from what his mother had... (241, italics in original)

Here, Shreve imagines that someone as large as Sutpen could have been brought down only by an adversary of equal cunning, someone with a mind as "forensic" as his own.

Aside from the ledger's obvious parodic tone, critics have had little to say about it. In his otherwise compelling investigation of Faulkner's use of narrative, Peter Brooks touches only lightly on this ledger, asserting that the "lawyer's calculations here devastatingly lay bare the plot of the nineteenth-century social and familial novel, with its equations of consanguinity, property, ambition, and eros, that is ever the backdrop for the plotting of *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹⁵ Brooks returns briefly to the subject to note that Shreve's comment that it takes "two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen," which is fine because "it clears the whole ledger" (302), is "a parodic summing-up of" what he calls the "nigger/brother conundrum" that imperils Sutpen's grand design.¹⁶ Brooks astutely adds that the "narrative ledger" that records all the elements of Faulkner's novel "cannot be cleared by a neat calculation; the tale can never be plotted to the final, thorough, Dickensian accounting," but he otherwise leaves alone the question of what role the ledger plays in this novel.

In his "Accounting for Slavery: Economic Narratives in Morrison and Faulkner," Erik Dussere also pays only glancing attention to the ledgers in *Absalom*, arguing that "[r]eferences to subjects such as the 'drunken Indian' or the 'Bigamy threat' let us know that Faulkner is working in a parodic register, asserting the absurdity of representing or mediating human passions and relationships in terms of monetary value and accounting."¹⁷ But while this work is admirably thorough and rigorous in analyzing what Dussere calls "the discourse of the ledger" (16), it is confined primarily to the system of

chattel slavery, one admittedly enormous and indispensable part of Sutpen's design but by no means the only one operating on the kind of logic the ledger represents.

Sally Wolff recently uncovered actual ledgers owned by Dr. Edgar Wiggin Francisco III, whose father was Faulkner's childhood friend and whose great-great-grandfather owned plantations in Mississippi and Arkansas. In her 2009 essay "William Faulkner and the Ledgers of History" (recently expanded into a book), Wolff details the contents of the seven-volume account diaries that Francisco says "fascinated" Faulkner and made their way into much of his fiction.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, Wolff finds far more parallels between these real ledgers and those in "The Bear" than in *Absalom*. Most of the details that correspond to the latter involve details of construction of the Sutpen house and most of the characters' names. For example, slave names in the original include Old Rose, Henry, Charles, Ellen, and Milly, as well as a white Holly Springs physician named Charles Bonner.¹⁹ The plantation owner's son, who dies in infancy, is named Henry. The most telling correspondence, however, is Wolff's comment that "the legalistic manner of expression show him [the plantation owner and diarist] to have been a shrewd lawyer and businessman,"²⁰ much like Thomas Sutpen. Wolff's discovery is a remarkable contribution to Faulkner scholarship but substantially new interpretations of its contents will have to wait until scholars have full access to them.

Part of Faulkner's fascination with ledgers and account books perhaps stems from modern attempts to quantify more precisely what before had eluded precision: sin, injustice, nonmonetary indebtedness. The principles of balance, debt, justice, retribution and similar concepts have been a part of human existence longer than can be

accurately traced. While the scholar Marc Shell has illuminated the long connection between money and language as means of exchange and establishing worth,²¹ the novelist Margaret Atwood more recently has explored the ancient origins of debt in order to understand our present debt crisis and the attendant shift in attitudes toward this age-old concept. Going back to Hammurabi's Code and the Egyptian Halls of Ma'ati, where a "dead person's heart would be weighed on a two-armed scale," Atwood traces the origins of the Christian (and Heraclitean) sense of *logos*, which is "both a god and a word at the same time: one that comprises the true, just, and moral foundation of all that exists."²² Mary Poovey's history of "the modern fact" as an outgrowth of double-entry accounting and the rising merchant class does not ignore these ancient origins. Rather, it charts the unintended consequences of appropriating for other purposes a system that was devised to establish accuracy and creditworthiness within its own closed system. The sense of *logos* that underwrites "modern," positivistic pretenses to rational truth is quite at odds with the kind described above, even if some wielders of statistics regard their numbers as gospel. Thomas Sutpen takes this statistical view of justice and accounting to the extreme, rendering him rhetorically illiterate in reading contexts that might shed light on the numbers.

All of the interpretations of Sutpen's design noted above critique particular systems--rational self-contained schemes devised by man to create order out of chaos--rather than the underlying logic that drives them all. None adequately addresses the implication of logic itself in Sutpen's "design." Perhaps Bloom is right in saying that Sutpen's design lacks grandeur (a point with which Shreve certainly agrees), but my primary interest here is to demonstrate that Sutpen himself lacks something far more

critical: any sense of *ethos* or *pathos*, basic components of rhetorical persuasion. Because he operates at the level of pure *logos*, he is just in claiming that "his problem was innocence," a refrain voiced repeatedly in the novel. For all his determination to found a family, Sutpen is ignorant of both the emotional requirements of such an endeavor and the concessions to community values needed to sustain it.

Perhaps Cleanth Brooks has come closest to implicating reason in Sutpen's downfall, in his landmark essay "History and the Sense of the Tragic." Brooks examines Sutpen's dispassionate rationality at great length, calling him "a 'planner' who works by blueprint and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious."²³ But Brooks draws out these characteristics merely to show that Sutpen is a "modern American" and not a particularly Southern one. Moreover, Brooks says Sutpen's "innocence" is "about the nature of reality that persists," what Brooks calls "the innocence of modern man" whose morality is unmoored from traditional sources of wisdom. Brooks does not elaborate on what exactly "the nature of reality that persists" is but seems to blame Sutpen's fall on modernity's divorce from history. But as even Brooks admits, *Absalom* reveals that "much of 'history' is really a kind of imaginative construction" which we can only begin to understand if we "project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures."²⁴ If history is constructed and there is no way of ascertaining historical authority, Quentin's extreme anguish and Shreve's grossly reductive summation about the South in the closing pages would seem to belie Brooks's suggestion that an imaginative engagement with history is a viable path to wisdom and a possible antidote to modernity's overrationality.

The Language of the Ledger

Thomas Sutpen is not the only character in the novel whose language is inflected with the mercantile. All the narrators borrow economic discourse and the cognitive structure of accounting to some degree, even if only to better understand Thomas Sutpen. The third-person narrator informs us, for example, that Sutpen drank sparingly among the men of Jefferson in his first years there because he was not yet able to afford to buy it for himself or others. "His guests would bring whiskey out with them but he drank of this with a sort of sparing calculation as though keeping mentally, General Compson said, a sort of balance of spiritual solvency between the amount of whiskey he accepted and the amount of running meat which he supplied to the guns" (30). This example could be said to merely echo Sutpen's own kind of moral calculus, as Mr. Compson does when he describes Sutpen's "alertness for measuring and weighing event against eventuality" (41); Compson simply borrows Sutpen's terms to explain the man himself.

Even nature is evoked in distinctly economic terms, as when Quentin's grandfather meditates on the Haitian countryside groaning from the blood spilled during the slave rebellion from which Sutpen and his future wife and family barricade themselves. General Compson describes the natural beauty and bounty of the island as a recompense for slavery, a way of the land's avenging the blood that "manures" its soil. Even the winds blowing over the island are "burdened still with the weary voices of murdered women and children homeless and graveless about the isolating and solitary sea" (204). Haiti is a spot of earth that "might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself... as a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic

lusts of human greed and cruelty,” and “a little lost island” floating halfway between “what we call the jungle and what we call civilization.” (202).

Quentin (through his grandfather) notes that “civilization” is simply a term used to distinguish between “the dark inscrutable continent” and “the cold known land to which it was doomed, the civilized land and people which had expelled some of its own blood and thinking and desires that had become too crass to be faced and borne any longer” (202). Quentin recognizes that these are merely terms of convenience and not reflective of an objective reality. The referent to the pronoun “its” is unclear but suggests that the land itself expelled the people whose “blood and thinking and desires” have become too crass to bear, which makes sense given the agency attributed to nature in the passage that follows:

...a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size...as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered a recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not.

Nature acts to restore its own balance but does not, however, efface the ledger of the men planted here alongside the sugar cane, as “the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance.” Nature may attempt to pay back human outrage, but its “peaceful greenery” can only conceal the violence buried and waiting to erupt below the surface. This “incredible paradox” allows Sutpen to “oversee” this land without “knowing that what he rode upon was a volcano.”

Other characters employ a similar sort of calculus in order to render themselves spiritually or morally “solvent,” particularly Goodhue Coldfield. Mr. Compson describes Coldfield as keeping a running moral ledger, perhaps in order to explain how two such apparently different men as Sutpen and Coldfield could become business partners, since both sides of Compson's account also must balance for things to “add up.”

Compson claims that Coldfield used the church for Sutpen and Ellen's wedding

exactly as he might or would have used any other object, concrete or abstract, to which he had given a certain amount of his time. He seems to have 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. (38)

Coldfield's labor and sacrifice entitles him to extract a certain “use value” from the church while remaining spiritually solvent. His prior sacrifices “dissolve” whatever debt he accrues through his dubious dealings with Sutpen, the details of which remain nebulous throughout the novel.

But even here a reckoning must be made for, as Compson notes, Coldfield withdrew from his business affair with Sutpen once he reached “a point where his conscience refused to sanction it” (38). Though we never learn the reason for his parting ways with Sutpen, his conscience sends him in retreat to his attic once the war begins, so as “not to be present on that day when the South would realize that it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage (209).

Presumably, Sutpen is emblematic to him of the South's corruption, for his conscience

will not allow him to take any of the profits or be reimbursed for his losses in his business with Sutpen. Yet it does not interfere with his allowing this man he finds morally suspect to marry his daughter Ellen. Mr. Compson says “[t]his was the second time he did something like that,” suggesting that this business arrangement and Coldfield's earlier compromise (which is likewise unexplained) alter the moral balance between the two men. In this way he can account for the congruity he makes between Coldfield, “a man of uncompromising moral strength” (65), and the amoral Thomas Sutpen.

Mr. Compson also explains Coldfield's locking himself in the attic for the duration of the war as an act of peculiarly Puritan economy, not of cowardice. Just as Coldfield had managed to support five people comfortably out of his meager store of goods by “close trading,” not dishonesty, this same Puritan sense of economy lay behind his objections to the war: “the idea of waste: of wearing out and eating up and shooting away material in any cause whatever” (65). The same could be said for Coldfield's attitude toward slavery. Whatever moral objections he may have had against the holding of slaves, if indeed he did object on moral grounds, he made sure that when he freed the “two negresses” he had acquired as payment of debt, he put them “on a weekly wage which he held back in full against the discharge of the current market value at which he had assumed them on the debt.” Objecting to slavery but without questioning how the slaves became “indebted” to him in the first place, Coldfield decrees them “free” (with documents the women cannot read)--no doubt to his moral “credit”--while extracting their “current market value” as slaves from their labor. The material conditions of the women's lives does not change, at least not discernibly for the

better, but Coldfield can claim to have acted in accordance with both his conscience and the law.

The entire transaction is scrupulously legal, meticulously documented, and by his calculation even morally upright because Coldfield, like Sutpen, is merely playing by the rules of the ledger. Everything in the system has been accounted for and Coldfield can die, as Mr. Compson informs us, with his accounts balanced:

So when he died, he had nothing, not only saved but kept. Doubtless the only pleasure which he had ever had was not in the meagre spartan hoard which he had accumulated before his path crossed that of his future son-in-law; --not in the money but in its representation of a balance in whatever spiritual counting-house he believed would some day pay his sight drafts on self-denial and fortitude. And doubtless what hurt him most in the whole business with Sutpen was not the loss of the money but the fact that he 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. It was as if he had had to pay the same note twice because of some trifling oversight of date or signature.

(66)

According to Mr. Compson, sacrifice is the sole source of pleasure for Goodhue Coldfield, who becomes dissatisfied only when success entails giving up his lifelong habit of hoarding. Having stored up vast reserves of "self-denial and fortitude," the success he achieves with Sutpen disturbs his moral balance, requiring him to give up the "hoarding" of sacrifice, end the business deal, and begin reacquiring sacrifice to pay himself (or his spiritual creditor) back.

Despite his attempts to render sacrifice in quantifiable terms, however, Coldfield's own ledger logic eventually conflicts with Sutpen's. Quentin tells Shreve that whatever the nature of the business was between Coldfield and Sutpen, it was undone by its own success because Coldfield could no longer bear "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, which could do nothing but decline" (209). The circular logic enacted in this passage—the socially-constructed conscience that both affords him opportunity to succeed and requires that any such success be morally repugnant to him--reveals the closed value system of the ledger and its irreconcilability with unquantifiable notions like sacrifice or any of the "old virtues." Coldfield has a sense that things "don't add up" but, just as Sutpen "had nothing to compare and gauge" his innocence by but his inadequate rifle analogy (189), Coldfield also lacks the means of accounting for his unease.

Charles Bon, however, at least allows for the possibility that things do not always add up, nor need to. In explaining his morganatic marriage to the New Orleans quadroon and the child they have together, Charles insists to Henry that a marriage to Judith would not constitute bigamy because a marriage is merely "a formula, a shibboleth meaningless as a child's game, performed by someone created by the situation whose need it answered" (93). Henry, too, is willing, to some extent, to suspend the need for balance, responding, "I know. I know. You give me two and two and you tell me it makes five and it does make five" (94). "There is still the marriage," however, that troubles Henry." Suppose," he offers, "I assume an obligation to a man who cannot speak my language, the obligation stated to him in his own and I agree to it:

am I any the less obligated because I did not happen to know the tongue in which he accepted me in good faith?" Bon agrees that he is all the more obligated, but insists that Henry is forgetting that "this woman, this child, are niggers," a fact that, presumably, changes the calculus. This exchange reveals what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls a *differend*, an unresolved conflict that results when parties operate under different rules of judgment.²⁵ Lyotard says

I would like to call a *differend* the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. If the addressor, the addressee, and the sense of the testimony are neutralized, everything takes place as if there were no damages. A case of *differend* between two parties takes place when the regulation of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.²⁶

Sutpen, the father to both Henry and Charles, expresses no awareness of operating under the same incommensurate form of justice Lyotard describes. There can be "no damages," in his view, if one party operates under a different principle of justice. Charles Bon, his mother and even his morganatic wife become, in this case, like mathematical remainders, the amount left over when the division of two integers cannot be expressed with an integer quotient. As the term "integer" suggests, they cannot be made whole within this system of justice. Apparently, Bon and Henry hold a view of justice similar to Sutpen's. But whereas he follows the letter of the law, Henry and Bon look for loopholes.

Philosophies of Language

All of the systems by which Sutpen's world is organized fit together so seamlessly that cracking the code becomes nearly impossible, since doing so requires the ability to stand outside of a logical ordering that has become naturalized. Because the interlocking systems of commerce, Judeo-Christian morality, patriarchy, and so on share similar metaphors and cognitive structures, the tool of language by which humans reason becomes, in General Compson's phrase

that meager and fragile thread...by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then 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. (202)

Compson relates this theory of language while relating Sutpen's story of learning French while ranging over the Haitian plantation he oversees and putting down a slave insurrection, interweaving it with his musings on the Haitian land "manured with black blood."

General Compson's theory stands in stark contrast to Sutpen's apparently unproblematic view of language, as purely utilitarian, the means to an end. For Compson, words nearly always fail to communicate what lies in "men's secret and solitary lives," and when they succeed it is only at "the little surface corners and edges," never penetrating to the human core. His description of language is strikingly postmodern, aligning as it does with contemporary poststructuralism, which itself is philosophically aligned with the pre-Socratic Sophist Gorgias.

Plato's nemesis and straw-man, Gorgias eschewed the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between word and thing. Instead, he espoused a tragic view of knowledge and language. First, he said, nothing exists. Or, if it does exist, we cannot know it. Finally, even if we can know it, we cannot fully communicate it. This epistemology led Gorgias to liken language to magic, or a drug, or a powerful lord that can captivate or abduct an audience. If General Compson's statement attributes no drug-like powers to language, he nonetheless shares with the Sophists and poststructuralists a skepticism of language's power to communicate meaning except on the rarest of occasions.

Judith, Sutpen's daughter, also departs markedly from her father's uses for language. In one of the few places in the novel where Judith speaks, it is to give Quentin's grandmother a letter from Bon that is, practically speaking, of no value; its contents yield no new understanding. The more pressing reason for her speaking is to relate her need for communication itself. In the process we get yet another view of language in the novel:

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 same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet

it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to... (100-1)

In this remarkable passage, Judith describes language as both agonistic exchange between people all trying to weave their own pattern of meaning on the rug and a psychically necessary but inexplicable human need, even if the only message communicated is the desire to communicate something. Peter Brooks astutely notes that Judith's statement concedes "the evanescence or even the impossibility of the 'referential' and 'metalinguistic' functions of language (in Roman Jakobson's sense)," while acknowledging the need for 'phatic' discourse: "the way we use language to test the communicative circuit, to confirm the conductive properties of the medium of words."²⁷

Judith also employs the ancient trope of weaving words into a pattern of meaning, as the phrase "figure of speech" suggests. What are figures of speech, or figures on a ledger, but an attempt to create a woven pattern of meaning? For Judith, weaving is an integral part of life itself, and the loom just as mysterious as what happens when one "gets born." The loom of language that "must matter," even though it "cant matter" or "the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, is as essential to life as whatever occurs in the womb and the tomb."²⁸

Judith's father, though a man of relatively few words, appears to share her need for phatic communication by telling his story to the one friend he has, Quentin's grandfather. But he also "wants it told," much as Quentin insists Miss Rosa wants her

version of the story told and thus summons him to her house shortly before departing for Harvard. Both involve the Compson family in trying to weave their pattern on the rug, and both contribute voices to the tale Quentin and Shreve construct from these and other characters' narratives. Whereas Judith seems to share General Compson's skepticism about the possibilities of "true" communication, Sutpen is not content merely to communicate for its own sake but to relay a message to a recipient and in so doing establish a "truth."

An instant much like the one General Compson describes as occurring only rarely seems to join together Quentin and Shreve, enabling the "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (253) between them that begets its own narrative from the remainders in other accounts. Despite its elaborate inventions, the narrator says their account is "probably true enough" (268). The narrator repeatedly calls into question the authority of everything attempting to pass as "fact"--in one instance even suggesting that Quentin "had not even been listening when Mr. Compson related (recreated?) it" (268). Unlike the ledger that hides its imaginative accounting, Faulkner heightens our awareness of the story's artifice and undermines any objective claims it makes to truth through the narrator's repeated interjections that "perhaps" this was true or was "probably true enough." The language of accounting, then, stands in stark contrast to the narrative unfolding of the novel.

Accounts of Calculation

Sutpen's calculating nature is one of the few parts of the story that remain unchanged in successive retellings, and a significant portion of Shreve and Quentin's tale embellishes quite imaginatively on the theme of calculation. In fact, they concoct a

brand-new character, the New Orleans lawyer with a “design” of his own (265), apparently in order to provide a suitably scheming foil for Sutpen.

That the “demon” should meet his match in the form of a lawyer seems appropriate indeed, given that Quentin's father and grandfather had already planted seeds for this idea. The shady lawyer Quentin and Shreve contrive fills in Mr. Compson's vague description of Bon's murky origins as “apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents” (58). Quentin's grandfather also implies that Sutpen thinks like a lawyer when he refers to the “forensic” nature of his mind (198, 201, 221). His stories elaborate further on this description, as General Compson repeatedly notes Sutpen's fixation on legality. For example, in explaining why Sutpen ended his first marriage thirty years earlier and how a wife “incidentally” figured into his “design,” Sutpen insists that his conscience had finally assured him that “if I had done an injustice, I had done what I could to rectify it” by resigning “all right and claim” to his wife's dowry, which was “agreed to between two parties” (213-4).

Despite his ability to account for his rights and responsibilities using the best of forensic logic, Sutpen is left mystified as to why “fate” would punish a man who had so strictly followed the rules. After explaining his dilemma to General Compson, Sutpen returns to the war without his usual swagger “as though even while riding he was still bemused in that state in which he struggled to hold clear and free above a maelstrom of unpredictable and unreasonable human beings ... his code of logic and morality, his formula and recipe of fact and deduction whose balanced sum and product declined, refused to swim or even float” (221). Of course, he does not tell General Compson “the

one fact” withheld from him by his wife's family that caused him to annul the marriage--her “tainted” blood--nor does he indicate what now threatened his design--the product of that marriage, Charles Bon. These details, which Quentin and Shreve deduce or fabricate, are no doubt as “incidental” to Sutpen as a wife was to his plan. (The devil, as it were, really is in the details.) Sutpen's conscience is “free and clear” because according to his logic he has more than satisfied his obligation and paid all debts.

Even without knowing the details of the marriage and divorce, however, General Compson can see that his friend's design is doomed to fail, if only because Sutpen lacks the “dread and fear of females” that might have allowed him to avert this disaster. Regardless of “the one fact” Sutpen withholds that might explain his undoing, General Compson can see that what is missing from Sutpen's logical equation is something that cannot be quantified: the wrath of a scorned woman. “What kind of abysmal and purblind innocence could that have been,” he asks, “which someone told you to call virginity? what conscience to trade with which would have warranted you in the belief that you could have bought immunity from her for no other coin but justice?” (213). General Compson perceives the fundamental problem to be the difference between male and female systems of justice, each with its own currency and using scales of value that can never balance against each other.

In Quentin and Shreve's “marriage” of storytelling, however, the battle is strictly between men. While Sutpen's first wife does figure into the story they create, she is not the agent of revenge nor does her “corrupt blood” lead inexorably to Sutpen's downfall. Instead Shreve and Quentin imagine another equally calculating man as the instrument of destruction, a man cunning enough to engineer Bon's meeting Sutpen face to face

and demanding recompense. Apparently, coincidence or cosmic justice are insufficient or unreliable tools with which to battle a man like Sutpen, and “the Sabine” (as Shreve calls Eulalia Bon) lacks the cunning to formulate and execute a plan of revenge suitable for Sutpen, though Shreve imagines Bon viewing the lawyer as “almost as dangerous as the unknown quantity which was his mother” (250). Perhaps because he cannot fathom the exact depth or nature of this woman (or any other, it seems), Shreve must create a male lawyer who acts on his own “design” (265), for nothing more than his own material gain, to balance the account.

The ledger exists in the story not merely to allow for a moment of wry parody, but to provide Sutpen with a suitable opponent and allow Shreve and Quentin to balance their narrative account of his downfall. Just as Sutpen fought his myriad and ill-defined enemies using their own devices, Quentin and Shreve's lawyer employs the same ledger logic Sutpen uses. A male lawyer, with “known masculine limitations” (250) and an equally “logical” design of his own, allows Quentin and Shreve literally to cut Sutpen down to size, for no one in the story as it has been passed to them has been able to equal Sutpen in stature. If the lawyer is little more than a bald opportunist, he nonetheless beats Sutpen by his own rules.

Moreover, the attorney wears an expression similar to Sutpen's “which you were not supposed to see past” (249) and speaks the same language he does. When he reaches the entry in his ledger indicating a daughter, Judith, he finds his notation puzzling, not because he has any moral reservations about using her but because he has not yet figured out an angle by which to calculate her potential value to his design.

Once he determines that "*Incest threat: Credible Yes,*" then "*Certain*" (248), he is "willing to use that too as he would have used courage and pride" (251).

The language the lawyer uses completely exposes the logic behind the ledger only because Faulkner renders it in a parodic style. Sutpen also lays bare the utter rationality of his calculations, but without his realizing his own absurdity. Thus he is far more sympathetic than Shreve's scheming lawyer. Sutpen is truly at a loss to explain why his design is crumbling because he cannot understand that human beings operate on more than just cool logic. He does not knowingly manipulate the emotions of others; he simply has no means of accounting for their emotions. Ironically, his entire design emerged from his own psychic wounding, yet he is utterly cut off from the emotions of others. Despite the worthy foe Shreve and Quentin concoct to match him, Sutpen is in a sense undone by his own bare logic. To the extent that he cannot imagine Rosa's outrage at his bald proposal—to mate and, if the issue is a boy, marry and perpetuate the design--he repeats this, ultimately fatal, mistake with Wash Jones's granddaughter, Milly. Another man, perhaps a truly cruel demon, would attempt to finesse his intention to mate for the sole purpose of creating a male heir, but Sutpen does not even seem to understand the value of illusion, let alone any sort of "real" virtue. Use-value is all he knows because it is all the ledger reveals. Perhaps Bloom does not go far enough in suggesting the smallness of Sutpen's design, but should have included Sutpen himself in this assessment. Sutpen's larger-than-life stature to the other characters in the novel seems undeserved, for he is not the "ogre" Rosa believes him to be nor the "demon" Shreve imagines, but merely a mortal man unable to bear the prolific signification imposed on him by others.

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

Faulkner's language throughout the novel is the opposite of the ledger's rational, balanced, and symmetrical account, and it is by juxtaposing his own elaborate polyphonic voice against the cold, impersonal tone of the ledger that he reveals the latter's necessary fiction. Too much has been written about Faulkner's style to be dealt with adequately here, though in the present context it should be noted that his grammar actively resists containment and often does not "add up" -- frequent parentheses open without closing, sentences and paragraphs begin *in media res* without capitalization or with inexplicable punctuation, pronouns have unclear or potentially multiple referents.

Richard Gray finds Faulkner's "mature" style (including *Absalom*) moving toward Kristeva's notion of the semiotic: "its slipperiness permits it to seep through conceptual boundaries ; its random, discontinuous nature enables it to expose gaps in, or actively puncture, seamless figures of division."²⁹ James Snead regards Faulkner's style as being of a different kind than his contemporaries because, in his view, it deals with more than just the "aesthetic quandary" of "the estrangement of signifier from signified."³⁰ Snead argues that "by making orthography strange, and by showing orthography to be constructed like a narrative," Faulkner exposes the "economic factors that underpin semiotic discrimination." That is, he calls attention to the strangeness of language in order to show its artificial relation to some "objective" reality.

The "new" writing that Poovey describes demanded a more diagrammatic form of representation, even in fields far removed from accounting. As I noted in the introduction, early nineteenth-century champions of statistics relied on numbers and the "plain style" of discourse to argue that their mode of representation was free of the

"ornamental excesses associated with rhetoric." By the nineteenth century, and certainly by the 1930s, when Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!*, the compact style of composition derived from bookkeeping was the kind primarily taught in schools, and New Criticism was the ascendant mode of literary interpretation.

Most Modernist literature lent itself well to the New Critical approach, especially its lack of didacticism, heavy use of irony and paradox, and an often condensed, economical use of language. Though Modernism has been so variously defined as to cover almost any artistic expression over the last century or more, my own definition is indebted to Jackson Lears and Clement Greenberg. In *No Place of Grace*, his study of what he calls antimodernism, Lears describes the period of 1880-1920 as a time when "internalized morality of self-control and autonomous achievement ... seemed at the end of its tether." He argues that "antimodernism" resulted from the fear of lost cultural authority and "a revulsion against the processes of rationalization."³¹ Greenberg's last essay on Modernism defined the movement in similar terms, as "an attitude and orientation to standards and levels: standards and levels of aesthetic quality in the first and also the last place."³² Greenberg calls Modernism "a holding operation, a continuing endeavor to maintain aesthetic standards in the face of threats-- not just as a reaction against romanticism. As the response, in effect, to an ongoing emergency." What separates Modernists from previous artists is their "response to a heightened sense of threats to aesthetic value: threats from the social and material ambience, from the temper of the times, all conveyed through the demands of a new and open cultural market, middlebrow demands" that came to dominate Western culture to an unprecedented degree.

The fear of the loss of aesthetic standards is manifest in much (but certainly not all) Modernist writing. Perhaps the most famous example of this heightened concern is found in the Imagist Manifesto issued by Ezra Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington, which had as two of its three precepts, "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective; and "to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation."³³ Although the movement was short-lived, what lingered on was a heightened concern for concreteness in and economy of language that was broadly shared by many writers of the period. (William Faulkner and James Joyce are two of the more obvious and notable exceptions to the latter concern, but they were hardly alone.)

We find in double-entry accounting many parallels to Modernist criticism and literature, both in their underlying anxieties about the need to fix value within a turbulent market economy (including fluctuating linguistic "currencies") and in the systematic methods used to address them. The perceived loss of cultural authority that Lears describes also has an analogue in the origins of the formal system of bookkeeping, as Poovey makes clear in her discussion of the establishment of "creditworthiness."

What Lears describes as a reaction against "the processes of rationalization" is evident in much of Faulkner's fiction, including *Absalom, Absalom!*, as I have tried to demonstrate. But what cultural authority, if any, Faulkner might have wished to uphold is not easily discernible, nor is a single, coherent philosophy of language. Faulkner used the phrase "By Southern Rhetoric out of Solitude" to describe the nature of his writing, by which he meant that his style, a necessarily artificial construct, had emerged from a primal solitude. Solitude is also Sutpen's primal condition, though he clearly lacks the articulateness of his creator and remains in a state of pervasive loneliness. His

rhetorical illiteracy only contributes to his sense of isolation, preventing him from devising any means to make sense of his life or divine the motives or needs of those around him.

Faulkner's style "was further complicated by an inherited regional or geographical (Hawthorne would say, racial) curse."³⁴ He considered his private voice always inflected by the community, perhaps not unlike the voice of Quentin Compson, who felt himself "a commonwealth," "an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names," and "a barracks filled with stubborn backward-looking ghosts" (7). On the one hand he, like Judith, felt acutely the need for talk (or to let his books speak for him); on the other, he associated speech with the fall into history, claiming "[a]ll evil and grief of this world stems from the fact that mankind talks," and declaring that "speech is mankind's curse...just too goddam many of the human race...talk too much."³⁵ He wryly noted that "the last sound on the worthless earth will be two human beings trying to launch a homemade space ship and already quarreling about where they are going next."³⁶

I will leave to others to determine whether Faulkner is more truly a Modernist writer--anxious to "fix" language--or a Postmodern writer--at ease with or at least resigned to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Perhaps Faulkner would not have been able to place himself in this scheme, or more likely he would not have cared enough to do so. Numerous biographies have made clear, however, that his stance was generally skeptical, if not oppositional, to modernity. (It should be noted, however, that Modernists are not alone in this stance; Frederick Jameson particularly comes to mind as a theorist who *describes* rather than revels in the postmodern condition he has in large part helped define.) While Faulkner believed himself to be living during a time of peculiar

crisis and struggle, he also saw great possibility in modern life.³⁷ As Richard Gray asserts in his biography of Faulkner, one possibility that modernity offered was "a greater sense of displacement, more chance to see the discontinuities inherent in culture and to operate in the gap between those discontinuities: to apprehend the conflicts between different social formations and interests rather than simply experience it." As Gray notes, Faulkner

had the privilege of being born at a moment when his society, his particular locality, offered him two peculiar advantages: a complex code, a dominant culture with its own elaborate blueprint or vocabulary for mediating experience—and a sense of rapture, sufficient critical distance from that code or culture to allow him to position and explore it.

The "complex code" and Faulkner's ability to observe and deconstruct it from a distance evoke Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*, whose narrator guides the uninitiated through the elaborate linguistic and nonverbal systems that upheld the patrician class of New York and kept outsiders at bay. In a similar way, Faulkner allows us access to the codes of accounting and especially the peculiar codes of the antebellum south that maintained the "peculiar institution" of slavery.

Faulkner's use of ledgers and the logic of accounting serve to unmask numerous aspects of the code whereby the dominant culture could uphold and extend its influence without appearing to do so overtly. As *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates, the mechanisms are so well hidden from view that even those exerting this power are usually unaware of wielding it, a phenomenon Antonio Gramsci called hegemony. In their book *Commonwealth*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri extend Gramsci's

argument into contemporary global economics. They show, for example, that in the early twentieth century, the hegemonic modes of production were mechanical and industrial, representing a small segment of economic activity, even though most people still worked in agriculture. This means that agricultural production tacitly operated according to factory logic, a shift that was profound yet largely invisible to those toiling in or even managing farming operations.³⁸

In the same way, the modes of industrial production became, after the Civil War, the dominant means of structuring American life, as Alan Trachtenberg has amply demonstrated.³⁹ The patterns of change he describes are the effects of "the changing forms and methods of industry and business" that were more broadly applied to numerous aspects of American culture, including cultural production itself--from museums and opera companies, to, later in the twentieth century, schools, colleges and universities—all areas of public life previously held apart from the "sordid" business of commerce. Not only were institutions of various kinds now managed by a coterie of directors modeled on the corporation's board of directors, but the language of business and the social beliefs and values underlying it wrought profound change in how Americans came to view themselves and their place in the social order—increasingly not only as citizens, but as employees and consumers, whose economic lives were inextricably—and inexplicably--linked to others in ways far too complex to understand through traditional literacy. As the linguistic codes themselves became more complex, the simple ability to decode words or numbers would not suffice to explain. As Quentin's father says of the story of Sutpen's ruined design, "you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring,

making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens” (80).

Absalom, Absalom! reflects, through Thomas Sutpen's rhetorical illiteracy, the confusion arising from the myriad new discourses of the own nineteenth century and culminating in Faulkner's own 1930s. For Sutpen, the rhetorical function of the ledger--to assert a truth based on particular inputs and outputs accountable only to itself--is so well masked that only one rhetorical device remains in view for him: *logos*, or reason. Thus Sutpen remains “innocent” of the other, equally important devices, *pathos* and *ethos*, and can believe himself truly innocent because he has followed “the logical steps” and all the rules as he understood them. “Where did I make the mistake in it,” he wonders, “what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate” (212) . The penalty demanded of him—the ruin of his design--is out of proportion to whatever offense he has committed, since all injuries have been duly compensated. Damage to one's emotional well-being or character or honor cannot be assigned a value in this scheme because they cannot be measured or recorded on the ledger.

Perhaps Harold Bloom is right to say that Sutpen's design is insufficiently grand to merit the critical attention lavished upon it. Perhaps we can take Faulkner at his word (always a dangerous thing to do) and accept that “the story is of a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many of them and they destroyed him.”⁴⁰ There is truth to both of these statements, but not the whole truth. In its way, *Absalom, Absalom!* is very much about the complicated destruction of a very simple design: to achieve wealth and social advancement by playing by the rules of American justice (especially as

concerns property law), and following the tradition of primogeniture to ensure that a "clean" title is passed down to "a rightful heir." But whatever might be lacking in the design itself, the mechanisms by which it is erected, executed, and—especially--destroyed are grand indeed. For in laying bare the logic of the ledger, Faulkner exposes the logical flaw in the grand edifice of the American way of life.

In the chapter that follows, I will explore another literary character who struggles both to understand himself and be understood-- despite an enormous gift for public speaking-- the unnamed protagonist of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. As with Thomas Sutpen and Lily Bart, Ellison's narrator lacks the ability to read context or subtext; unlike both of them, however, he discovers the means of achieving rhetorical literacy, thereby cracking the myriad discursive codes that threaten his physical and existential well-being. Ellison, like Faulkner (whom he considered a "literary father") contends with the positivism at the root of much of twentieth-century American culture. His focus, however, is not on accounting proper, but on various reductive views deriving their cultural authority from that source and leading to what he called a merely "statistical interpretation" of human lives.

¹ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations of William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.), 8.

² See particularly Deborah Clarke's edited collection and her essay "Fantastic Women and Notmothers: Absalom, Absalom!" in *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994); Minrose Gwin, "The Silencing of Rosa Coldfield." *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*. Ed. Fred Hobson (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 151-187; and Sara Gerend's "'My Son, My Son': Paternalism, Haiti, and Early Twentieth Century American Imperialism in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!" in *Southern Literary Journal* 42.1 (Fall 2009), 17-31, where she analyzes the novel through the lenses of both slavery and the paternalism underwriting it in the U.S. and Haiti. For a dynastic reading, see Dirk Kuyk's essay "Sutpen's Design" in *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*, where Kuyk offers an interesting though ultimately unconvincing case that Sutpen builds a dynasty in order to "turn it against dynastic society itself" (p.204). While does Sutpen does claim that his design was to "forever free from brutehood" the "boy-symbol" he once was, Sutpen shows an utter lack of awareness

that Wash Jones was also once such a boy, yet he does not hesitate to treat him identically as he himself had been treated, albeit without apparent malice. Much has been written about the racial dimensions of the novel, but see especially Thadious Davis's chapter on Absalom in her *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983). On slavery, see Sean Latham's "Denaturalizing the Logic of Slavery in Absalom, Absalom!" in *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 51.3 (Summer 1998), 453-64, and Peter Ramos, "Beyond Silence and Realism: Trauma and the Function of Ghosts in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Beloved*," in *Faulkner Journal* 23.2 (Spring 2008), 47-66. For a reading of Sutpen as a self-made man, see J. Christopher Cunningham, "Sutpen's Designs: Masculine Reproduction and the Unmaking of the Self-Made Man in *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 49.3 (Summer 1996), 563-89. As a self-made man in the New South, see Rebecca Saunders, "On Lamentation and Redistribution of Possessions: Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and the New South" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.4 (Winter 1996), 730-62. Many oedipal readings of the novel can be found, but see especially Carolyn Porter's "Absalom, Absalom!: (Un)Making the Father" in *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, ed. Philip Weinstein (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 168-96; Joseph A. Boone, "Creation by the Father's Fiat: Paternal Narrative, Sexual Anxiety, and the Deauthoring Designs of *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, ed. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowalesky-Wallace (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 209-37; and George B. Handley, "Oedipal and Prodigal Returns in Alejo Carpentier and William Faulkner" in *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 52.3 (Summer 1999), 421-58. Excellent readings of the novel's imperial dimensions can be found in Maritza Stanchich's "The Hidden Caribbean 'Other' in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*: An ideological Ancestry of U.S. Imperialism" in *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture* 49.3 (Summer 1996), 603-17, and Sara Gerend's article noted above.

³ Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 80. All references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴ In *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 31.

⁵ Quoted in *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. and ed. Richard D. McKirahan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 30.

⁶ John 1:1. *King James Bible*.

⁷ In her essay "Disturbing the Calculation," Melanie R. Benson regards Sutpen as an example of the "white southern narcissist" (638), a definition she borrows from Ann Douglas as "not exaggerated self-esteem but as a refusal to judge the self by alien, objective means, a willed inability to allow the world to play its customary role in the business of self-evaluation" (637-8). This scene in the novel belies her definition of narcissism, as does Sutpen's belief that the "luck" in where one was spawned signifies nothing about the lucky one's inherent worth. Sutpen is certainly monomaniacal in pursuit of his design, but the charge of narcissism, at least by this definition does not hold up to the text. See "Disturbing the Calculation: The Narcissistic Arithmetic of Three Southern Writers" in *Mississippi Quarterly* 56.4 (Fall 2003), 633-45.

⁸ Perhaps this philosophy is what prompted Harold Bloom to declare that "Faulkner's ironies were biblical" or, rather, "that only the ironies were biblical. What Faulkner's people lack," he says, "is the blessing; they cannot be content for a time without boundaries. Yahweh will make no covenant with them. Their agon is neither the Greek one for the foremost place nor the Hebrew one for the blessing, which honors the father and the mother. Their agon is the hopeless one of waiting for their doom to lift." *Modern Critical Interpretations*, 5.

⁹ When General Compson asks Sutpen why he "didn't get himself a girl to live with and learn [language] the easy way, Sutpen surprises him by answering that he was still a virgin then and that this too was part of his design (200). Not that he was not tempted or lacked opportunities, he assures him, just that it was important that he remain a virgin until marriage. This statement is puzzling for many reasons, not least because of the presence of Clytie, his mixed-race, out-of-wedlock progeny, born three years after Bon (305). Perhaps Sutpen simply forgets this part of the design when it suits him, or gives up on it after inadvertently (and under false pretenses, he feels) fathering the mixed-race Charles Bon. Regardless of this inconsistency, Compson believes Sutpen's claim of virginity, which is only too believable given his singled-minded pursuit of the "design." Perhaps, like the nation, and particularly the region, whose methods he seems to replicate, Sutpen needs the "forgetting [of past deeds]—the signification of a

minus in the origin—that constitutes the beginning of the nation's narrative," in Homi Bhabha's phrase. In merely repeating and perpetuating, in textbook fashion, the system of division by race and class he has inherited, Sutpen must necessarily be forward-looking at all times. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 160.

¹⁰ *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 792.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 802.

¹² *Ibid.*, 804.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 803.

¹⁴ Erik Dussere, "Accounting for Slavery: Economic Narratives in Morrison and Faulkner," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.2 (Summer 2001), 331.

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, "Incredulous Narration: Absalom, Absalom!," in his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 302.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁸ Sally Wolff, "William Faulkner and the Ledgers of History" in *Southern Literary Journal* 42.1 (Fall 2009), 1-16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ See especially *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

²² Margaret Atwood, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (Toronto: O.W. Toad, 2008), 32-3.

²³ Cleanth Brooks, "History and the Sense of the Tragic." *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook*. Ed. Fred Hobson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.), 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* [1983]. tr. Georges Van Den Abbele. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Peter Brooks, 311.

²⁸ I am indebted to Douglas Anderson for calling my attention to the conceptual punning in this passage.

²⁹ Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 126.

³⁰ James A. Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 135.

³¹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³² Clement Greenberg, William Dobell Memorial Lecture, Sydney, Australia, Oct 31, 1979, in *Arts* 54, No.6 (February 1980).

³³ "Imagisme," in *Poetry* 1:4, Harriet Monroe, ed. (Chicago, January 1913).

³⁴ Gray, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ See especially Richard Gray's biography, *The Life of William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 15.

³⁸ I am deeply grateful, once again, to Noah Roderick for drawing attention to this argument. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009).

³⁹ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 4.

⁴⁰ Letter to Harrison Smith, August 1934, in *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, Joseph Blotner, ed. (New York: Random House, 1977), 84.

CHAPTER 4

RECLAIMING MOTHER-WIT, INVENTION, AND *KAIROS* IN *INVISIBLE MAN*

Like Faulkner's character Thomas Sutpen, the narrator of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* lacks the ability to read people and social situations and thus fails to discern the subtext that lurks, replete with meaning, below the surface of words, symbols, and actions that in themselves convey little useful information. Ellison's narrator does gradually learn to do so, however, thereby saving himself from a fate like Sutpen's, but this knowledge comes at a price, moving him underground to await the right moment to re-emerge. *Invisible Man* is, among other things, the Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman of a young man learning to look beneath the surface of words and place them in their surrounding context, in order to resurrect from invisibility what has slipped between the lines of traditional history and literature.

Despite the narrator's intelligence and oratorical gifts, which earn him a college scholarship and, later, a public role with the Brotherhood, he is told by a number of other black characters that his "mother-wit" has abandoned him. More than simple common sense, "mother-wit" for Ellison's protagonist suggests a racially in-born literacy about all manner of things he is expected to know implicitly, since his very survival depends upon it. Somewhere along the way, he has either forgotten or has never been taught the ability to read between the lines of white speech—or even black speech--and respond accordingly.

In the course of his dawning awareness of himself as a man made invisible “simply because people refuse to see me,”¹ the narrator unmask the inner logic of racism and reductive views of humanity simultaneously. If he is a slow learner and naïve perhaps beyond plausibility, he reveals how anyone can become invisible within a society structured so as not to see what it refuses to confront. The narrator himself, after all, initially refuses to confront his own invisibility, stubbornly insisting through most of the novel that the world conform to the lofty ideals he has imbibed with literal-minded earnestness--whether the moral precepts taught every American child or the supposedly radical, “scientific” principles espoused by the Brotherhood. An essential step in rendering himself and others like him visible is to recognize his own abjectness in the larger, white-dominated culture and take his grandfather’s (to him) cryptic advice, which he struggles to understand: “Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction; let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (13-14).

Surprisingly few critics have seized upon the narrator's literal-mindedness, or what, in a novel so saturated with musicality, we might call his tone-deafness. Either of these terms constitutes a kind of literacy, since they indicate a quite limited rhetorical awareness. Robert O'Meally claims that the narrator is merely "dumb, or more accurately, he is exaggeratedly naïve, hilariously so."² H. William Rice asserts that "understanding the role of language, in terms of speech and writing, plays a major role in understanding Ellison's work as a whole," but he explores language in the novel primarily through the contrast between speech and writing.³ Gerald T. Gordon considers the rhetorical strategies of the novel but without exploring the narrator's own rhetorical

lacunae.⁴ Christopher Hanlon also focuses on the protagonist's quest for eloquence, calling *Invisible Man* "a novel that measures the self-reliance of its nameless protagonist through his growing acumen as a public speaker."⁵ Hanlon, however, is far more engaged with Ellison's use of Emersonian philosophy about eloquence, and defending Emerson against other critics, than he is with the narrator's rhetorical shortcomings.⁶

Two of Ellison's more perceptive critics are John F. Callahan and Robert Stepto. Their analyses of *Invisible Man* warrant considerable attention here, as their insightful readings of the novel inform my own, even as mine deviates from theirs in significant ways. Callahan has written as much as anyone has on Ellison, editing his essays and letters, as well as publishing Ellison's unfinished manuscript under two different titles, *Juneteenth* and, more recently, *Three Days Before the Shooting...* In his article "Frequencies of Eloquence," Callahan correctly identifies the protagonist as a "failed orator...unable to communicate directly with those he meets in American society,"⁷ the main factor in this failure being, for Callahan, that he "misjudges the explosiveness of language"⁸ in his bid for eloquence. Whereas Callahan focuses on the effect of his explosive language on the audience—or the emotional call-and-response between them—I am more concerned with their effect on the narrator himself and his growing awareness of the multivalence of words.

Robert Stepto also identifies the narrator's failings as a problem of literacy or of rhetorical obtuseness but in significantly different ways than I attempt here. He positions the protagonist within two expressions of the "Afro-American pregeneric myth of the quest for freedom and literacy": those of ascent and immersion.⁹ In the former narrative type, the "enslaved" and semiliterate figure journeys to a real or symbolic North and

becomes increasingly free to the extent that he learns to read the signs around him, finally achieving the status of "articulate survivor," albeit within a state of solitude, at best, or at worst, alienation. Stepto describes the "immersion" narrative as resulting from the first, launching the figure to a literal or symbolic South in order to acquire or relearn certain aspects of "tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude." Though the "questing figure" typically lands in the most oppressive social conditions, he is well equipped to "assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman," although part of his individual freedom is constrained by his newfound group identity.¹⁰

In Stepto's view, Ellison transcends both of these narrative strategies, creating an entirely new category, particularly through the framing device of the prologue and epilogue with which he "formalize[s] in the art the 'fiction' of history expounded primarily in its [the story's] frame."¹¹ The narrator writes the tale from this framing "hole, allowing him to achieve "expressions of group consciousness and self-consciousness that respectively transcend tribal literacy and resist the infecting germs of heroic self-portraiture." Writing his story/history has taught the invisible man "that his personal tale is but an arc of the parabola of human history, and that his personal tale is only a finite particle in the infinity of tale-telling."¹² Thus, Ellison solves narratively, at least, the perpetual struggle between self-representation and group-representation and the narrator can at last declare, "The hibernation is over" (580).

As with the other critics mentioned, however, Stepto seems far more concerned with Ellison's rhetorical strategies than with his protagonist's—or the narrator's earlier self whose story he tells. Rhetorical literacy entails understanding the surrounding

contexts of symbolic action, as well as the literal meanings of symbols. Stepto notes the narrator's growing historical awareness and astutely shows how the narrator, through the framing of his story, arrives at a kind of literacy that is historically situated and at once tribal and individual. In focusing primarily on *Ellison's* rhetorical strategies, however, he leaves relatively unexplored the rhetorical gaps the narrator must overcome before arriving at this potentially triumphant stage.

True to the time period in which Ellison writes, the narrator's schooling seems to have provided him with a stunted version of rhetoric, leaving out the critical canon of invention and the concept of *kairos*, a sense of discovering the correct means at the proper moment in time. In *Rhetoric at the Margins*, David Gold uncovers three different kinds of college writing and rhetoric instruction overlooked by previous histories: a black liberal arts college in rural East Texas; a public women's college; and an independent teacher training school, much like the Tuskegee Institute that Ellison attended. Examining the period from 1873 to 1947, Gold discovered a much richer and more politically engaged curriculum at black liberal arts colleges, while places like Tuskegee (with its narrower, training-based mission) tended to follow the trend set by white Eastern schools, moving oratory and civic engagement “to the periphery.”¹³ Although *Invisible Man* bears witness to Ellison’s considerable knowledge of rhetoric, it is unlikely he acquired much of this at Tuskegee. Despite the title of the essay underpinning its 1933 program, “Transforming Calibans into Ciceros,” the school focused much more intensely on “accurate grammar” and “precise vocabulary”—that is, on earning respectability--than on rhetoric, Ciceronian or otherwise.¹⁴ A more likely source for

Ellison's formal understanding of rhetoric is Kenneth Burke, whom Ellison claimed as his major prime theoretical influence as he was writing *Invisible Man*.¹⁵

According to Donald Pease, it was primarily Burke's theory of symbolic action that became Ellison's "framework for analyzing the social problems" in his fiction and essays.¹⁶ Ellison first encountered Burke at a talk the latter gave at Carnegie Hall in 1935 titled "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle." The theoretical structure Burke used to explain Hitler's rhetorical strategies within the context of scapegoat rituals Ellison found "better attuned to social conditions than the Marxian orientation of the Popular Front."¹⁷ Ellison applied Burke's theory of scapegoating to "the psychological dynamics underpinning American racism,"¹⁸ while Burke's theory of symbolic action "provided instructions to readers in how they might transform these into symbolic solutions."¹⁹ Perhaps most importantly, Burke's "dramatistic pentad" of agent, act, agency, scene, and purpose could elucidate symbolic actions, "endow[ing] seemingly every verbal transaction with the potential for verbal inventiveness and rhetorical improvisation that Ellison associated with the Negro folk tradition of 'signifying.'"²⁰

Ellison's narrator eventually learns to "signify" through the recovery of his "mother-wit," and achieves rhetorical literacy by reclaiming rhetorical invention and a new sense of timing or *kairos*, finding the proper persuasive tools at the proper time. The generation of knowledge through invention (*inventio*), or discovery of arguments, is the first of the five canons of classical rhetoric, followed by arrangement (*dispositio*), style (*elocutio*), memory (*memoria*), and delivery (*pronunciatio*). By the twentieth century, however, other disciplines (theology, philosophy, and the sciences) wrested invention from the realm of rhetoric, claiming it for themselves and leaving only style,

arrangement, and, to a lesser extent, memory (delivery was relevant only in the case of oratory, not written composition).

Only in the mid-twentieth century was invention restored to the study of rhetoric, potentially engaging students in the production of knowledge rather than the mere consumption or recitation of it. According to Richard Young and Alton Becker, "The strength and worth of rhetoric seem [...] to be tied to the art of invention; rhetoric tends to become a superficial and marginal concern when it is separated from systematic methods of inquiry and problems of content."²¹

Kairos, or selecting the proper persuasive means at the proper time, is another crucial component of rhetoric. Eric Charles Wright explores the etymology of *kairos* as follows:

Kairos is an ancient Greek word that means "the right moment" or "the opportune." The two meanings of the word apparently come from two different sources. In archery, it refers to an opening, or "opportunity" or, more precisely, a long tunnel-like aperture through which the archer's arrow has to pass. Successful passage of a *kairos* requires, therefore, that the archer's arrow be fired not only accurately but with enough power for it to penetrate. The second meaning of *kairos* traces to the art of weaving. There it is "the critical time" when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being woven. Putting the two meanings together, one might understand *kairos* to refer to a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved.²²

White's exploration of the term reinforces the fleeting quality of *kairos* as well as its potential to bind together rhetor and audience, as suggested by the terms's association with weaving.

Kairos and invention both rely heavily on memory, or the ability to call on commonplaces and *topoi* that resonate with one's audience. Memory and invention are closely connected in classical rhetoric, as indicated in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which describes memory as "the treasury of things invented," or the ability to extemporize or improvise. As Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee have noted, memory and *kairos* are also closely related:

First, both require a kind of 'attunement' in that the rhetor who is gathering items for reserve in the memory must be thinking simultaneously about what's available now that might be useful later. Secondly, memory requires an attunement during the moment of speaking or composing, a recognition of the right time for recalling an illustrative example, an argument, and so on.²³

I would add that in reclaiming his "mother-wit," Ellison's narrator also enhances his rhetorical memory, and that the commonplaces that emerge almost spontaneously from his mouth arouse within him a fuller understanding of the signifying power of language. Most importantly, he learns to seize the power of invention from those who would put *their* words in *his* mouth and becomes the "thinker-tinker" he proclaims himself to be (7).

Along the way, the narrator of *Invisible Man* also realizes that he can never excavate a single, unified self or voice from beneath the multiple layers of other voices he hears and possible identities that comprise his life. Rather, he finds his voice inflected by others around him and those who came before him, though his voice is

nonetheless unique in the particular composite of his own experiences and the collective past that remains, like a watermark, on the present. As the narrator relates in the novel's closing pages, reflecting on the futility of the Brotherhood's effort to "describe the world":

And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me. (507-508)

Although this passage refers to "me" rather than "we," the "past humiliations" include those inflicted on his race generally, particularly as his own humiliations are so inextricably tied to his racial identity. His reference to the ability suddenly "to look around corners" reinforces the historical dimensions of this realization, since all instances of this phrase in the novel refer to the temporal. "Invisibility...gives one a slightly different sense of time," he informs us in the prologue, "you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind" (8). This preternatural awareness of "the nodes" of time allows one "to slip into the breaks and look around."

Marc Singer compellingly argues that Ellison uses the palimpsest as a model of time and history: "a synchronous conflation or superimposition of multiple historical periods upon the present."²⁴ To be able to "look around corners" the narrator works through a number of different conceptions of time and history imposed by other

characters—linear, cyclical, spiral—before discovering "a nondeterministic mode of temporality in the form of the palimpsest."²⁵ This palimpsest is figured also in the ability to step inside of time, as when he listens to Louis Armstrong, or outside of time, as he describes the zoot-suiters and Tod Clifton doing. Ellison offered a similar take on time in his essay "Harlem in Nowhere," noting that

American Negroes are caught in a vast process of change that has swept them from slavery to the condition of industrial man in a space of time so telescoped (a bare eighty-five years) that it is possible literally for them to step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon line.²⁶

To "step" from feudalism to industrialism is thus to experience multiple levels of time simultaneously and to participate in multiple generations' experiences.

In the long journey toward a more complex realization of history and his own place within it, however, the narrator of *Invisible Man* must first shed his literal-minded ways of reading the world around him by recovering his "mother-wit." A series of false or, at best, partial epiphanies culminate, finally, in this self-recognition, as the veil begins to lift from his eyes.

Shit, Grit, and Mother-Wit

The first instance of the term "mother-wit" occurs when the protagonist faces Dr. Bledsoe, who expels him from the school for showing the incestuous Trueblood family to the wealthy white patron, Mr. Norton. After the narrator recounts the events of the day leading up to Norton's illness, noting that the benefactor was interested in seeing the cabins, Bledsoe exclaims "My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?" (139). Even "the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows

that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie.” After upbraiding him for threatening to bring down in half an hour an institution it had taken a half-century to build (140), Bledsoe bellows, “Boy, you *are* a fool” (141, italics in original). “Your white folk didn’t teach you anything and your mother-wit has left you cold. What has happened to you young Negroes?” he asks, implying that the problem is, to some degree, generational (142-3). “I thought you had caught on to how things are done down here. But you don’t even know the difference between the way things are and the way they’re supposed to be.”

In this exchange, Bledsoe all but admits that such things are not explicitly taught and perhaps cannot be taught, as “young Negroes” are expected to just “catch on” to how things are done and know that there is a gaping chasm between “the way things are and the way they’re supposed to be.” (The narrator will later note that this is equally true of whites: “...white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they’d done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing” (315).) Bledsoe goes on to inform the young man, in Machiavellian terms, that *he* controls what white people see and think about black people around there and that without men like him making sure of that, “there’d be no South. Nor North either. No and there’d be no country—not as it is today.” Furthermore, he tells this “black educated fool,” he will “have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying” at the helm (143) of the institution and maintaining the status quo.

As the narrator returns to his room to pack his bags, he puzzles over how all of this could have happened but takes responsibility all the same: “Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment” (147).

Ironically, just an hour or so earlier, while awaiting his meeting with Bledsoe, he had silently mocked a female student who asked him to pass along a secret message—"the grass is green"--to her boyfriend (105). As he walks away, wanting to curse for being asked such a request at a time so fraught with anxiety, he complains, "Here she was playing with some silly secret code at the very minute my fate for the rest of my life was being decided." While the lovers' code pales in significance to the unspoken racial code he has unknowingly violated, this exchange reveals the narrator's general obliviousness to there being codes at all. For in his musings just after this conversation, he asks himself how Dr. Bledsoe could be so duplicitous, how he could advocate lying to people like Mr. Norton even as he bowed and scraped before them and preached humility to his students. "And wasn't his favorite spiritual 'Live-a-Humble'? And in the chapel on Sunday evenings upon the platform, hadn't he always taught us to live content in our place in a thousand unambiguous words? He had and I had believed him" (106). The narrator's use of the word "unambiguous" reflects his naïve view that language possesses purely denotative meaning, even as he rightly accuses Bledsoe of blatant hypocrisy.

Soon after the narrator's arrival in Harlem, the term "mother-wit" reappears when he meets a man calling himself Peter Wheatstraw, who pushes a cart full of discarded blueprints of past plans for "cities, towns, country clubs...building and houses," now revised or discarded (175). Borrowing his name from a frequently recurring character in African American folklore and singing the blues, Wheatstraw seems to embody both black urban culture and the rural South, or "down home," as he refers to it. He repeatedly asks the narrator "is you got the dog?" (173). When the narrator shows no

understanding of his meaning, he replies, “Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain’t nobody out here this morning but us colored—Why you trying to deny me?” Wheatstraw takes offense at the narrator, believing he is trying to deny his race, since he cannot believe anyone could have lived in the South without knowing who or what “the dog” is. Marc Singer offers a convincing explanation of the narrator’s confusion, suggesting that he “interprets Wheatstraw’s language as if it were an exercise in literary modernism, reading the song as Yeatsian or Eliotian classicism rather than the blues humor of Count Basie or Jimmy Rushing.”²⁷ Certainly, the narrator seems as deaf to slang of any variety, but especially African American slang, as he is to other kinds of coded speech.

When Wheatstraw begins to understand that the young man’s unknowingness is not a ruse or a slight but is actually a kind of ignorance of his own supposedly shared culture, he suggests that “[m]aybe he [the dog] got holt to you” (174). Suddenly warming to the narrator, he offers a bit of advice. “All it takes to get along in this here man’s town is a little shit, grit and mother-wit,” he says. “And man, I was bawn with all three. I’maseventhsonofaseventhsonbawnwithacauloverbotheyesandraisedonblackcatbones highjohntheconquerorandgreasygreens” (176), stringing together a long series of folk references to conjure and prophecy,²⁸ while evoking W.E.B. DuBois’s description of “double-consciousness.”²⁹

The narrator has warmed to Wheatstraw, too, “grinning despite myself. I liked his words though I didn’t know the answer. I’d known the stuff from childhood, but had forgotten it; had learned it back of school...”—yet another instance of knowledge

passed down through unofficial channels. Wheatstraw, “the Devil’s only son-in-law,” moves on, singing a blues lyric:

She’s got feet like a monkeeee
Legs
Legs, Legs like a maaad
Bulldog... (italics in original, 176-7)

As the narrator muses on the possible meaning of Wheatstraw’s song, trying to piece together his memories, what stands out to him is the strangeness of those words as he begins to parse them. “Was it about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal?” he wonders. He immediately tries to make logical sense of a nonsensical song: “Certainly his woman, *no* woman, fitted that description. And why describe anyone in such contradictory words?” (italics in original). He continues questioning in this literal vein until finally concluding, that “God damn... they’re a hell of a people!” Clearly, “they” are a different kind of people from the narrator, who struggles with whether to feel “pride” or “disgust.”

In the next scene, depicting his first experience in a New York diner, he questions whether “one of *us* tips one of *them*” (179, my italics), referring to the black serving staff. He tries his best “not to speak too much like a northern Negro,” deciding that “they wouldn’t like that.” Resisting any food that might mark him as Southern, and modeling himself after Bledsoe--whose “secret of leadership,” he concludes, was to impress himself upon the memory even of those who hated him (179)--the narrator sets out to perform a knowingness he does not yet really possess, as his frequent missteps in the remaining chapters reveal. Here in the diner, however, the “thing to do, [he] thought with a smile, was to give them hints that whatever you did or said was weighted with broad and mysterious meanings that lay just beneath the surface” (178).

Performing a mystery is a substitute for, or the precursor to, actually having hidden meanings that others can only guess at through your cryptic words. Clearly, the narrator is beginning to understand and is even awed by the cloak-and-dagger possibilities of language, pretending to mask secrets he does not yet possess and therefore need not hide.

The narrator seems poised to recover something of his “mother-wit” after an accident at Liberty Paints lands him in the factory’s hospital, coming in and out of consciousness and experiencing amnesia. As doctors discuss the possibility of shock treatment, the narrator hears

familiar words to which I could assign no meaning. I listened intensely, aware of the form and movement of sentences and grasping the now subtle rhythmical differences between progressions of sound that questioned and those that made a statement. But still their meanings were lost in the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost. (238)

Although he’s in a semi-conscious state, the description of his confusion is an apt metaphor for his waking state as well, and it is not incidental that he is “lost in the vast whiteness,” not only of the glaring hospital lights but of the surrounding culture whose meaning he often cannot fathom even when fully awake.

When the hospital staff asks the narrator his name, he realizes that he cannot recall it. When asked his mother’s name and he can’t remember, he is truly alarmed. It is only when the phrase “WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT” appears on the card in front of him that the stirrings of recognition begin. As he remembers this character from his childhood, he becomes “giddy with the delight of self-discovery” (241), but soon is

annoyed that “he [the doctor] had hit upon an old identity,” tapping into his collective consciousness rather than his personal memory bank. His anger grows with the next card--“BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT?”--which could just as easily be imaginary as real, given the past associations that wash over him and the “boy” being addressed. “He was your mother’s back-door man,” he thinks, alluding to the game of dozens, of one-upmanship of insults that he had previously denied ever playing (241). He is pained to be awakened to a far more ancient identity than his Christian name, particularly at the hands of what we can presume to be white doctors, rehearsing equally outdated stereotypes and getting the desired reaction.

Interestingly, it is through the anger evoked by the appeal to his group identity that the narrator begins to recover his “mother-wit.” Insults about one’s mother have always been both a potent weapon, when used interracially, and a humorous trope, when used intra-racially, as when “playing the dozens.” While the term is not particular to African Americans—for example, Ellison’s namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson frequently used “mother-wit” to describe common sense—it nonetheless has additional resonances within black folk tradition, perhaps in part because the condition of a child born of a slave woman followed that of the mother. Thus, white paternity of a slave child was immaterial to his status, and in fact could materially worsen his treatment under slavery. Alan Dundes notes the prevalence of the term “mother-wit” in African American folklore, with “its connotation of collective wisdom acquired by the experience of living and from generations past.”³⁰ For African Americans, then, “mother-wit” is more than one’s individual common sense, as it carries with it all the connotations of a highly racialized past. References to Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit reinforce this

connection for the protagonist, arousing as they do the cunning necessary for survival even in a post-emancipation, post-Reconstructed world.

As numerous critics have pointed out, the two chapters comprising the narrator's accident in the paint factory and his stay in the hospital enact a ritual death and rebirth.³¹ At the close of chapter ten, when the narrator fails to turn the proper valve in the factory ("The white one, fool, the white one!" cries Lucius Brockaway), he experiences the "wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness" (230) and falls into the huge wheel that Marc Singer astutely identifies as a potent symbol of time itself.³²

The language describing the scene following his electroshock treatment unmistakably evokes birth, as the narrator lies "experiencing the vague processes" of his body and losing the sense of where his body ended and "the crystal and white world" began (238). The "indefinite limits" of his flesh and his temporary reversion to a preverbal state also call to mind Lacan's stage of the "real," before the subject can differentiate between self and other. As he struggles to understand all these "mouths working with soundless fury," he suddenly thinks, "But we are all human...., wondering what I meant" (182). These mouths signify nothing to the narrator except for the vague notion that "we" share a common humanity.

Signifying to himself beyond his own comprehension is a step toward learning what these automatically spoken words mean, as when he leaves the hospital with the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me. Like the servant about whom I'd read in psychology class who, during

a trance, had recited pages of Greek philosophy which she had overheard one day while she worked. It was as though I were acting out a scene from a crazy movie. Or perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed. (249)

His attempt to understand himself using his limited exposure to classroom psychology yields one important insight: that he is no longer afraid of important men because "there was nothing I could expect from them."

Yet he also regards his speaking as a form of "acting," what J. L. Austin identified as "performative utterances" that "constate" or describe neither truth nor falsity.³³ His realization in the epilogue that "we...were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world" suggests a reading of the above scene as performative in Austin's sense of the term. The narrator's inability to decide if these words issue from an "alien personality lodged deep within" him and are contrary to his own attitudes, or if they express his own previously repressed beliefs, indicates the kind of distance he must travel if he is to "catch up" with himself.

The protagonist takes another step toward recovering his mother-wit when he lands in the nurturing hands of Mary Rambo, a woman his mother's age who, finding him in a state of delirium following the hospital, takes him into her modest but loving home. As Kenneth Burke noted in a letter to Ellison, Mary is a "vernacular Virgin Mary" who "nurses the newborn journeyman" through yet another rebirth.³⁴

As the only maternal figure in the narrator's life, Mary—and the "mother" culture she represents, which has lain dormant within his psyche—stands in stark contrast to the many fathers he has looked for in vain. In addition to the "Great White Fathers" he

has tried to follow, the narrator has found equal disappointment in the many black paternal figures he has sought after, such as Bledsoe and the Founder, whose statue stands as “the cold Father symbol”(28). Clearly protégés of Booker T. Washington-- whose own “autobiography,” *Up From Slavery*, was ghostwritten--the Founder, Bledsoe, and the like are woefully inadequate models of life and literacy, let alone artistry. As the allegedly crazy vet tells him on the bus bound north, the narrator must learn to be his own father (156). Before he can do that, however, he must discover his "mother-wit," and Mary is one important stop along the way.

The Speechifying Urge

The scene in the hospital is only the first of a series of incidents in which the narrator erupts with unbidden speech signifying beyond his own comprehension. Shortly after his release from the hospital, for example, after he finds a safe abode with the matronly Mary, he "wanted peace and quiet, tranquility, but was too much aboil inside" with anger that threatened to melt the "emotion-freezing ice which [his] life had conditioned [his] brain to produce (259)." Finally ridding himself of the illusion that he could ever go back to the school but unsure of what to do next, he now faces

the problem of forgetting it. If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. But there was no relief. I was wild with resentment but too much under "self-control," that frozen virtue, that freezing vice. And the more resentful I became, the more my old urge to make speeches returned. While

walking along the streets words would spill from my lips in a mumble over which I had little control. (259-260)

By the end of his journey, he has of course learned not only to live with that dissonance but to revel in the diversity of humankind. "Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health," he says (576). "Hence again I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern." His placing "self-control" in quotation marks alerts us to the dubiousness of that concept for him now and its connection to a "frozen virtue" and a "freezing vice." If it was this very "self-control" that had led him to become a speechmaker in the first place—to achieve upward mobility through a college scholarship and earn prestige on campus--now his speech controls him.

When the narrator encounters the first situation calling for his public voice, the eviction of the elderly couple, his words initially refuse to come: "only a bitter spurt of gall filled my mouth and splattered the old folks' possessions" (273). Moreover, he can no longer see the actual possessions he has just enumerated in his narrative, but instead looks "inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home." The Provos' belongings stand for far more than the couple's lifetime of accumulated items, possessing totemic value for all African Americans, in all times and places. Looking "around corners" once again signifies multiple layers of time, looking inward and outward, forward and backward, just as the old couple's mementos resemble an archaeological site of the lives just upended. The narrator's temporal disorientation seems to result from the communal memories the

scene evokes, just as the doctor's placard asking about Brer Rabbit had tapped into a similar kind of racial memory.

When he is finally able to speak, it is to quell his own fear "of what the sight of violence might release" in him (275). What erupts is not the anger and outrage he feels—he has already swallowed the "gall" produced by this scene—but "all the shock-absorbing phrases" he had "learned all [his] life." As he had done in the hospital, he performs this speech in the unconscious hope that it will make his words true: that they are in fact "law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people." The impulse toward violence and the fear of what it will "release" battle within him as he "totter[s] on the edge of a great dark hole." The speech he gives is driven purely by emotion, he tells us, "without thought." His stammering conforms to what cognitive scientists call "spontaneous speech," which is "filled with disfluencies—unwanted pauses, elongated segments, fillers (such as uh and um), editing expressions (such as I mean and you know), word fragments, self corrections, and repeated words."³⁵

Despite his shaky start, however, soon he regains sufficient composure to extend his initially emotional call for non-violence into a logical appeal. Though this still seems to fall flat with a crowd inclined to riot, and in any case is "[p]oor technique and not at all what [he] intended (276)," he pushes onward, eventually pouring forth with an impassioned and lengthy speech about their common "dispossession" and apparently talking himself into fomenting the riot he initially spoke up to prevent. Having urged the crowd to move all the Provos' furniture back up to their apartment—under the pretext of allowing them to pray—he tropes on the various ways to be "law abiding," deciding to favor the law against dumping debris on the street over that of complying with the

eviction order (281). Feeling caught up as both a participant in this angry protest and its ad hoc leader, he charges upstairs, "no longer struggling against or thinking about the nature of my action." As he flees from the police, he begins to feel overwhelmed, thinking the "whole thing had gotten out of hand and wondering what he had said to bring all this on" (284).

In this scene, the narrator is clearly effective at public speaking, though he admits that he did not know what he was going to say before the words came (290). Though he doesn't realize it yet, he has stumbled upon invention, from the Latin *invenire*, meaning "to find" or "to come upon," which is further derived from the Greek *heuriskein*, from which "heuristic" comes. (The inventor's typical exclamation "Eureka! I have found it!" is echoed in the invisible man's euphoria at his own rhetorical discovery, despite his not knowing the source of his words.) The narrator's "attunement" (to use Crowley's and Hawhee's term) between the occasion and what surfaces from his memory is not quite there, however, leaving a gap between the words and their best use. The narrator's intent likewise is veiled, both from him and from us. Had he meant to recall all the "shock-absorbing phrases" he had known his whole life to prevent violence, or had he meant to move the people to action, as others believe he has done and quite effectively?

When he meets Brother Jack for the first time, right after fleeing the riot, he even disavows having given a speech. "What speech?" he asks. "I made no speech" (288), much as Frederick Douglass had demurred to speak at the Nantucket meeting where the Massachusetts abolitionist movement recruited him.³⁶ Jack presses Ellison's narrator again on his training as a speaker, but he once again denies having any,

saying his words stemmed from his being "simply angry" (290). "There was a crowd waiting," he explains, "so I said a few words. You might not believe it, but I didn't know what I was going to say..." He admits that he had been moved emotionally to speak, to which Jack replies that he should not "waste [his] emotions on individuals, they don't count" (291). Speaking like a true eugenicist, he pronounces old people like the Provos "already dead, defunct. History has passed them by...They're like dead limbs that *must be pruned away* so that the tree may bear young fruit...Better the storms should hit them" (my emphasis). Not content to simply *allow* such people to pass into history, Jack suggests action to hasten that end.

If the narrator is moved to speak from his anger and fellow feeling with the Provos, his indignation at Jack's callousness does not provoke much of a retort. He effectively cedes control of the conversation by allowing Jack to finish making his case, only occasionally averring that he likes old people like the Provos, who remind him of the people in the South with whom he has so recently come to identify. In the end, Jack's flattery of the narrator's oratorical gifts overrides his newly discovered sense of racial belonging, as does the allure of making sixty dollars a week (310). In trading brotherhood for the Brotherhood, he takes one giant step back from the mother-wit he was so close to reclaiming.

The Brotherhood

Brother Jack convinces the narrator to channel his individual anger into collective action partly by appealing to his newly discovered desire to be "a spokesman" for his "people" (293). Jack explains that "the difference between individual and organized indignation is the difference between criminal and political action." One could agitate on

behalf of an individual and be charged with a crime, or marshal a whole community's anger for a larger political cause. Although the narrator remains dubious of Jack's intentions in hiring him as a speaker—saying, "He only wanted to use me for something. Everybody wanted to use you for some purpose" (294)—he cannot deny the excitement of feeling himself "present at the creation of important events, as though a curtain had been parted and I was being allowed to glimpse how the country operated" (306).

Now that the narrator has learned that the world's workings were far more mysterious than he had initially thought, he craves the opportunity to learn all "the codes." Moreover, and perhaps contradictorily, the narrator is drawn to the ostensible clarity of the Brotherhood's way of speaking, noting that "they all seemed able to say just what they felt and meant in hard, clear terms" (317). At the same time, he senses that all is not right with the Brotherhood, as when Brother Jack suggests that the Provos represented a kind of "dead-in-living ... a unity of opposites," prompting the narrator to ask himself, "What kind of double talk was this?" (290). Despite his gut feelings, however, he still clings to a traditional notion of success and thinks the Brotherhood will make this possible. Wishing to learn this new way of speaking, he devotes all his energies to mastering the new language and the theories it represents.

He has to hit the ground running with only one night to read the brochures before giving his first speech, to a huge crowd in Harlem. The excitement of standing before such a large audience that seems to "have become one, its breathing and articulation synchronized (340), enables him to feel "somehow attuned to it all, could feel it physically." (His use of the word "attuned" anticipates his achieving the proper fusion between memory and *kairos* that Crowley and Hawhee describe.) Although he listens

closely to the speakers that precede him, "trying to snatch a phrase here, a word there, from the arsenal of hard, precise terms," he abandons "trying to memorize phrases and simply allowed the excitement to carry [him] along" (341). He finds the microphone "strange and unnerving" and "approached it incorrectly, my voice sounding raspy and full of air, and after a few words I halted, embarrassed," for which he apologizes to the audience and makes a joke about having been "kept so far away from these shiny electric gadgets."

The narrator's first speech for the Brotherhood evokes Frederick Douglass's first speech before another kind of brotherhood, the anti-slavery convention in Nantucket in 1841. (Douglass, in fact, is nearly as ghostly a presence in *Invisible Man* as the narrator's grandfather and appears almost as often.) In his introduction to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, William Lloyd Garrison recalls "the extraordinary emotion [Douglass's speech] excited...the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise."³⁷ Douglass "came forward to the platform with a hesitancy and embarrassment, necessarily the attendants of a sensitive mind in such a novel position. After apologizing for his ignorance, and reminding the audience that slavery was a poor school for the intellect and heart," he narrated some of the facts of his life as a slave, giving "utterance to many noble thoughts and thrilling reflections." Besides the uncanny similarities in their speaking debuts, their mutual hesitancy and embarrassment, Douglass and Ellison's speaker both need white men introduce them and "authenticate" their presence if either is to have a truly public voice.

Ellison's narrator finds his voice soon enough, with the audience helping to shore up his confidence. His initial embarrassment at navigating the microphone gives way to the embarrassment of his own tears as his words overpower his emotions and lead the crowd to an impassioned crescendo (346). Having forgotten "the correct words and phrases from the pamphlets," he "had to fall back upon tradition," selecting one of the "political techniques" he remembers from his youth: "The old down-to-earth, I'm-sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they've-been-treating-us approach" (342). Although he reverts to an older script from the new one he has not yet fully learned, the automatic speech flowing from his "native" tongue resonates emotionally with his largely black audience, eliciting the call-and-response refrains of African American religious tradition and earning him accolades far beyond those accorded the other speakers.

The speaker stumbles along the way, however, feeling himself at the mercy of "the flow of words" that stop without warning. "What would I do when they started to listen again," he wonders (344). "They were mine, out there," and he knows he must keep them, yet he "suddenly felt naked, sensing that the words were returning and that something was about to be said that [he] shouldn't reveal" (345). Just as he is about to confess something to the crowd, however, Brother Jack interjects with a warning, under the pretext of adjusting the microphone: "Careful now...Don't end your usefulness before you've begun." But the protagonist charges ahead anyway, feeling "the words form themselves, slowly falling into place," confessing that he feels he has "become *more human*," come home" to his "new family," his "true people," his "true country" (346, emphasis in original).

Upon reaching home after the excitement of his speech and the Brothers' condemnation of it, the narrator still struggles to understand what he had meant by the words "more than human." He feels certain that everything he had said was "uncalculated, as though another self within [him] had taken over and held forth" (353), but even if his expression was his and his alone, he cannot trace the words he used back to anything he recognized. "Was it a phrase that I had picked up from some preceding speaker," he asks himself, "or a slip of the tongue?" (354)—perhaps reminiscent of his slip at the battle royal that nearly cost him his scholarship (31). He briefly considers his grandfather as a possible source before quickly dismissing it: "What had an old slave to do with humanity?" He plays back in his head various teachings of an arrogant Professor Wooldridge, from back at the college, but decides this too is a dead end. Finally he asks if he meant that he had become "less of what I was, a Negro, or that I was less a being apart; less an exile from down home, the South?" But it remains a mystery, just like the eviction where he "had uttered words that had possessed" him.

The narrator recognizes that the words were both his own and not, that he had picked up the phrase or the idea from somewhere and that it had "possessed" him without any conscious "calculation." This phrase would appear to be one of the "thousands of dialogic threads" that Bakhtin described as running through any particular utterance.³⁸ That the protagonist is beginning to recognize the strangeness of language and its mysterious power represents real progress, even if he still has a long way to go.

Earlier, he had missed the significance of a similar experience where his own utterance had "brushed up against" another's: the tune he began whistling

unconsciously on the bus after leaving Emerson's office. In his stupor upon learning of Bledsoe's treachery, the narrator had boarded a bus, sitting behind "a dark man in a panama hat" who whistled a tune the narrator soon finds himself humming. The words to the tune—"O well they picked poor Robin clean"—come back to him in a rush and produce such an effect on him, he half expects the man on the bus to follow him, "whistling the old forgotten jingle about a bare-rumped robin" (193).

The tune itself, and not the man, pursues him back to the Men's House, where he once again attempts in vain to make sense of the words of the song. "It was for a laugh," he realizes without amusement, as his thoughts of poor Robin's humiliation remind him of his own at the hands of Bledsoe. Wondering if the young Mr. Emerson, "out of some ulterior motive of his own," might have lied to him about the contents of the letter, he concludes that "[e]veryone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson's plan—and why should it have included me?" (194). A blues tune he had heard as a child is suddenly, painfully, his own story, and if he doesn't yet feel kinship with those of his race whose incessant blues and signifying remind him of these ties, he at least recognizes the dark laughter, the utter absurdity, of his condition.

From Chaos to Kairos

The train of associations the tune elicits does not yield much new knowledge, but the recognition that "his" words in Harlem had spoken *him* begins to awaken him to the possibilities of rhetoric and the reactions his words can produce. The narrator's reversion to the traditional political speeches he had heard all his life, however, suggests a script that is just as performative as any that might have been prepared by

the Brotherhood or composed using its terms and formulations. That is, he relies on long established *topoi* or commonplaces ("set-pieces," in John Callahan's phrase), rather than the canon of invention (*inventio*) in which one discovers the appropriate *topoi* to one's argument. He can find the words well enough, mostly, but lacks the ability to find his own arguments—thus making him a perfect tool for an organization like the Brotherhood.

In fact, Brother Jack tells him, late in the novel, "We furnish all ideas. We have some acute ones. Ideas are part of our apparatus. Only the correct ideas for the correct occasion" (470). (That the narrator needs this point spelled out for him underscores his inability to "read" his social situation.) The Brotherhood's division of rhetorical labor is especially ironic given its Marxian pretensions, and this "alienation of labor" is borne out by the narrator's automatic speech. Moreover, the Committee seems to be just another stop on the assembly line itself, taking its orders from remote powers that we (and the narrator) never meet. An empty mouthpiece for a shadowy organization, the narrator is, in many ways, a rhetor without a cause.

This scene also is eerily reminiscent of Douglass's struggle within the abolitionist movement. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass relates an incident during his first few months on the lecture circuit when John A. Collins, George Foster, and others in the Massachusetts Antislavery Society cautioned him to just "Give us the facts...we will take care of the philosophy"³⁹ Having grown tired of the same recitation of facts, "it was impossible for [Douglass] to repeat the same old story month after month" and maintain his interest in it. "It was new to the people, it is true," but was "too mechanical" for Douglass's nature, and he bristled against reciting

the same old script while new ideas and “new subjects” forever formed in his mind. “It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs,” Douglass insists. “I felt like *denouncing* them. I could not always curb my moral indignation for the perpetrators of slaveholding villainy, long enough for a circumstantial statement of the facts which I felt almost everybody must know. Besides, I was growing, and needed room.”⁴⁰ The encouragement of Douglass’s “friends” to “have a little of the plantation manner of speech” is also echoed in Ellison’s protagonist overhearing one of his white “friends” suggest that he “should he should be a little blacker” (303).

Despite his being a mere “spokesman” for people he will never meet, the emotionalism of the narrator’s words sends him spinning deliriously out of control. Perhaps this truly is an instance of “catching up” with himself, putting into words “feelings...[he] had hitherto suppressed” (249). At the end of the evening, after hearing his speech described among the Brothers as “backward and reactionary” and “wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous” (349), he realizes that regardless, he had “meant everything” he had said, “even though [he] hadn’t known that [he] was going to say those things” (353).

No matter how heartfelt his words, however, he certainly is not in control of them, making somewhat legitimate many of the Brothers’ concerns about his speech. Ellison expressed a similar worry about his own public speaking. In a letter to Albert Murray following a 1953 address he gave at Bennett College, Ellison hears his own voice coming back to him and says he “knew then why even the most sincere preacher must depend upon rhetoric, raw communications between the shaman and the group to which he’s spiritually committed is just too overpowering. Without the art the emotion

would split him apart."⁴¹ Art, whether writing or speaking, provides a critical distance protecting the artist from his own potentially explosive feelings, as Ellison understood but his protagonist must learn the hard way.

The Brotherhood doesn't offer art as protection from pathos, however. Instead it offers science. Jack is dismayed by the Brotherhood's almost universal disapproval of the protagonist's first speech on the grounds that it was "the antithesis of the scientific approach" (350). Although Jack had attempted to bring down the temperature of the arena by his stunt at the microphone, he nonetheless seems pleased at the energy waiting to be "organized," exclaiming, "Listen to them...Just waiting to be told what to do!" (348). When others demur that they "must strive to reach the people through their intelligence" and worry that the speech "destroys everything that has been said before," Jack reminds them that this is "a mob *for* us," asking "how do our muscle-bound scientists answer that?" (350, emphasis in original). Jack regards the whole affair as an "experiment," the "initial step" of which is "the release of energy." Angry that his Brothers are "timid...afraid of carrying through to the next step," Jack insists, "Our new brother has succeed by instinct where for two years your 'science' has failed" (351). Before relenting that the "new brother" will indeed be trained to "speak scientifically," he calls the Brothers "a bunch of sideline theoreticians arguing in a vacuum," leaving it to others to lead the people.

From this exchange, it is clear that Jack has brought in the protagonist primarily to energize the Brotherhood and prepare "the mob" to act at its behest; he is nearly ready for action even if the others are not. He is also astute enough to realize that rhetoric includes not only logos but also pathos and ethos and that "science isn't a

game of chess, although chess may be played scientifically" (352). A long line of scientists going back to Plato considered science apart from and superior to the art of rhetoric, though Plato and many subsequent scientists have denounced rhetoric while using its devices. (After all, Plato's attacks on rhetoric in the *Phaedras* and the *Gorgias* both employ considerable eloquence to denounce eloquence.) Brother Jack seems to be slightly more forward thinking than his counterparts, if only in his understanding that science requires all the canons and devices that rhetoric has to offer.

If Brother Jack is ready for action, or nearly so, it seems the Brotherhood committee is not, making the narrator especially impatient. While he waits for something new to develop, he is forbidden from giving speeches while he undergoes "training." Although he is "introduced as a kind of hero" everywhere he goes, he longs for the excitement of a live audience and a chance to move ever upward by proving his rhetorical skills (358). In the meantime, he absorbs all he can of the Brotherhood's literature and learns their arguments well, those he doubts as well as those he believes.

The narrator seems to believe far more than he doubts, however, enjoying these "days of certainty" (380) for the clarity they bring to his formerly chaotic anger. Even though he comes to believe in the "magic in spoken words" despite "all the talk of science" around him, it is worth noting that this statement follows immediately after the narrator calls the Brotherhood "the one organization in the whole country in which I could reach the very top and I meant to get there."⁴²

While the narrator's goals seem primarily pragmatic at this point, he nonetheless recognizes the "magic in spoken words" that Wheatstraw had brought to life for him. Musing that "[p]erhaps the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations" (381),

the narrator remembers his grandfather's words: "You start Saul, and end up Paul." But he seems not to take into account the words his grandfather said next: "When you're a youngun, you Saul, but let life whup your head a bit and you starts to trying to be Paul—though you still Sauls around on the side." The narrator agrees that "you could never tell where you were going," and muses that his present position as a "leader" with the Brotherhood was a far cry from the "place with Bledsoe" for which he had trained as an orator. His grandfather's biblical example of Saul becoming Paul suggests that one carries some new gospel into the world not out of a new core conviction or a true conversion, but as a concession to life's knocking you around bit. Mary Rambo expressed a similar sentiment, telling the narrator "I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted (255). But the narrator is not one to still "Saul" around on the side, keeping his own counsel, and instead takes the words of the Brotherhood at face value: "The world was strange if you stopped to think about it; still it was a world that could be controlled by science, and the Brotherhood had both science and history under control" (381). The power he sees in language, though promising, is similar to Jack's at this early point: it resides in manipulating the will of the people while telling them what they want to hear (359, 473).

It is only when things begin to sour for him at the Brotherhood—the threatening anonymous letter cautioning him to go slow (383), the accusation that he's an opportunist using the Brotherhood to "advance his own selfish interests" (400)—that the narrator, out of self-protection, takes one tepid step back away from the Brotherhood. In between these two episodes, he receives a gift from the long-suffering Brother Tarp: the leg chain he had worn for nineteen years in the South and broke while escaping his

unjust imprisonment (387). While the narrator is clearly moved by this highly symbolic gift, the irony of its juxtaposition with, and superimposition on, the threatening letter is clearly lost on him. He is "compelled to respect" it, but "neither wanted it nor knew what to do with it" (389).

Nor does the narrator know quite what to do with Tarp's other gift, the portrait of Frederick Douglass that Tarp hangs on his office wall. When Tarp asks him if he knows much about Douglass, the narrator admits he remembers only a little from what his grandfather used to tell about him. Looking at the portrait, however, he feels "a sudden piety, remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of [his] grandfather's voice" (379). The connection in the narrator's memory between Douglass and his grandfather is important, for his willful refusals to learn from Douglass and take heed of his grandfather's deathbed advice (which haunts him even as he wills the memories away) retard his progress toward discovering his own voice.

The Gift of Frederick Douglass

When the narrator thanks Brother Tarp for the portrait of Douglass, Tarp replies, "Don't thank me, son...He belongs to us all" (378). Despite the strong hint that Douglass's gift to "us all" is far more important than the gift of his portrait, the narrator misreads the full meaning of Douglass's example, remaining only dimly aware of his relevance as a model. He has much to learn from Douglass, whose struggles so closely mirror his own, as noted earlier. The "brotherhood" Douglass struggled both with and against was the abolitionist movement, but it was no less rigid in its program and tolerated no more deviation from its script than does Ellison's shadowy Brotherhood.

Douglass had armed himself, however, with a rigorous program of self-education that he deftly applied to other situations. He also was an avid listener, and even as a young child perceived that his Aunt Hester's screams at the hands of their master were very much tied to her physical attractiveness and the master's sexual jealousy, not any moral outrage at her consorting with a young black slave.⁴³ Douglass informs us that he himself had overheard Captain Anthony while he tied Hester to a hoist and whipped her naked back. Knowing more than a very young child probably should, he concludes that this punishment was administered not because the master was "interested in protecting the innocence" of his aunt; her "chief offence" lay in disobeying his order not to go out at night or be seen in the company of a certain young man.

Douglass also pays close attention to the songs sung by slaves bound for the great house farm who "would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild notes."⁴⁴ Although he reports that he "did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs," as he was himself "within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear," he explains how the slaves would compose and perform a single song bearing two different messages--one to "flatter the pride" of Col. Lloyd and other whites within hearing, the other encrypted for their bonded brethren. "This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves."⁴⁵ The "unmeaning jargon" of the slave songs are echoed in Ellison's narrative by Wheatstraw's seemingly nonsensical blues lyrics.

Douglass used song to great effect himself, refusing to add his voice to the "slave-breaker" Covey's when it suited him, reveling in the confusion his erratic participation occasioned. Covey's religious pretensions involved "exercises of his family devotions" that began with music and,

as he was a very poor singer himself, the duty of raising the hymn generally came upon me. He would read his hymn, and nod at me to commence. I would at times do so; at others, I would not. My non-compliance would almost always produce much confusion. To show himself independent of me, he would start and stagger through with his hymn in the most discordant manner.⁴⁶

Knowing that Covey would not dare display his explosive temper on the Sabbath, in front of his wife, Douglass takes advantage of these slim moments to throw Covey off-balance and his voice off-key.

Master Thomas sent Douglass to Covey for a year in order to be "broken," much like the oxen in Douglass's charge who prove as recalcitrant as he does. The oxen are not whipped as he is, though, and Douglass's spirit is all but fully broken when, with the help of two other slaves who refuse to aid Covey in his beating, he endeavors to overmaster the slave-breaker and discourage him from ever laying hand on him again.⁴⁷ The parallel between Douglass's being sent to Covey for "breaking" and the invisible man's discipline within the Brotherhood is unmistakable. If Ellison's narrator is not physically punished by the Brotherhood, he certainly has his own ideas metaphorically beaten out of him, as his occasional exiles for "retraining" indicate. As yet, however, he has not willfully disobeyed the Brotherhood or really tested its bounds.

The narrator is not yet adept at "reading" others' words either, though he is slowly awakening to the power of language. In contrast, Douglass had seen from an early age that reading and writing would be the "pathway from slavery to freedom,"⁴⁸ which he deduces from his master's rage at the idea of his mistress teaching him these apparently valuable skills. He understands that the slaveholder's power lay not so much in restraining him physically but intellectually, by depriving him of the means to know truly his own condition. Being denied the legal right to acquire these means, he exerts his natural right to them, exchanging bread with "the hungry little urchins"—white neighbor boys—for the "bread of knowledge"—reading and writing—they gave in return.⁴⁹

In addition to his voracious reading, particularly of the *Columbian Orator*, where he learns the art of argumentation, Douglass was also "a ready listener." He would occasionally overhear talk of the abolitionists, though he struggled at first to understand what the word meant. He notes, however, the various contexts in which he hears this word. Runaway slaves and acts of slave rebellion were always

spoken of as the fruit of ABOLITION. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was "the act of abolishing;" but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about.⁵⁰

Douglass already sees the limitations of denotative, dictionary definitions of words, since they simply refer to other words he does not understand. Instead, he seeks out all of the possible meanings from a variety of contexts and is "satisfied" that any word that

could frighten slaveholders and their abettors into keeping slaves from knowing it must indeed be worth knowing.

Douglass understood language rhetorically, as having intrinsic power to signify many things, depending on its context and the use to which a writer or speaker puts it. His own oratory and writing after escaping slavery demonstrate clearly just how astute a learner Douglass was and how he did "speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word to be spoken *by me*."⁵¹ Douglass's imaginative retelling of his own life over three autobiographies also shows his deep understanding of the ways memories can assume new contours over the course of a lifetime and as new rhetorical circumstances emerge. The narrator of *Invisible Man*, in recognizing "the magic" of words, has taken merely the first step toward this fuller understanding of the power that resides in language.

Falling from Brotherhood

The tokens of fatherly affection Brother Tarp offers to the narrator represent a communion based on race that counters everything the Brotherhood stands for: subordinating individual or racial identity to universal brotherhood and the "discipline" it demands. The organization claims that only by such means can any individual or social group advance its own cause but, as the narrator will soon learn, the Brotherhood, like Bledsoe, is willing to sacrifice anyone and anything to maintain its own power.

But it is precisely the "secrets of power and authority" (407) the narrator believes the Brotherhood will soon reveal to him that keep him from acting on the "blighting hurt" (406) the accusation (and attendant demotion) inflicts. In fact, in his desperation to continue believing himself upwardly mobile, he rationalizes his reassignment to lecture on "the woman question" downtown as "proof of the committee's goodwill. For by

selecting [him] to speak with its authority on a subject which elsewhere in our society [he'd] have found taboo, weren't they reaffirming their belief both in [him] and in the principles of Brotherhood...?" (408). Completely forgetting the reminder of white treachery so vividly evoked by Brother Tarp's broken chain, the narrator says he "had almost allowed an old, southern backwardness" he had "thought dead"—the scatalogically named Brother Wrestrum's allegations and the "childish dispute" to which it led (403)--to ruin his career.

By the time the narrator returns to Harlem, the community is vastly changed, the streets "strange" and the rhythms of the city both slower and faster than he had experienced them uptown, with a "different tension" in "the night air" (423). He has been called back because of the sudden disappearance of Brother Tod Clifton, and though nothing had seemed amiss, "[t]here had been...a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt that for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance" (428-9). Equally mysterious is the departure of Brother Tarp, along with the portrait of Douglass he had hung in the protagonist's former office. Feeling shut out by the Committee, whose meeting he has been told he is not to disturb, the narrator heads out to the district, where he encounters Tod selling Sambo dolls on the street and seeming not to recognize the narrator.

From this point forward in the narrative, time becomes much more condensed and the events depicted move at a much faster rate, while also seeming more painfully elastic. Tod's shooting by the policemen happens "in the swift interval of their circling very abruptly and in the noise of the traffic—yet seeming to unfold in [his] mind like a slow-motion movie run off with the sound track dead" (435). This expansion and

contraction of time conveys the chaos of the surreal events leading up to the narrator's escape underground, but also the agonizingly slow awakening that the narrator—and readers—endure before he can finally be rid of the Brotherhood and its false ideology.

Despite all signs telling the narrator that the Brotherhood has betrayed its promise to the people of Harlem and is using him, and them, as pawns in its own nefarious game, his vision—"trained" by the one-eyed Jack, two-bit Tobitt, and the rest--continues to skew his perception of Tod's actions and his death. So thoroughly has the protagonist imbibed the Brotherhood, that it is the organization's fate he at first is most concerned about:

It was all so wrong, so unexpected. How on earth could he drop from Brotherhood to this in so short a time? And why if he had to fall back did he try to carry the whole structure with him? What would non-members who knew him say? It was as though he had chosen—how had he put it the night he fought with Ras?—to fall outside of *history*. I stopped in the middle of the walk with the thought. "To plunge," he had said. But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. (434 emphasis in original)

The narrator is still so blind to the problem of the Brotherhood's structure, that its biggest problem *is* in fact structural, that he can only regard Tod's "fall back" (to where, one wonders?) as a regression instead of a conscious move away from the Brotherhood and its new, national and international priorities.

The protagonist's vision begins to clear, however, when he notices for the first time all the others who are "outside of history"--the zoot-suiters, the "girls in dark exotic-

colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles"—who had "been there all along" but invisible to him (443). This marks the first time the narrator questions the Brotherhood's Marxist view of history that cannot and will not admit these lives into their historical record, even as he struggles with his own sense of responsibility to get these people back inside "the groove of history" (443). "What if Brother Jack were wrong?" he asks himself. "What if history was a gambler instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge?" (441). These outsiders were "in the dark with Sambo...taking it on the lambo with my fallen *brother*, Tod Clifton" (my emphasis). The lower-case "brother" suggests the narrator regards Tod's fall in human terms, apart from any association with the organization.

The "veil" gets one final lift once he realizes that Tod must have been amused by the narrator's "political stupidity" (445) and that Tod might have thought *he* was the one who had sold out (447). The latter thought is too "sickening" and "too big" for him to take in, however, so his "mind backed away from the notion," and away from any individual explanation, for "politically, individuals were without meaning." This mindless repetition of Brotherhood dogma is not quite convincing, however, even to him, and leaves him confused and even more consumed by his own sense of guilt, for Tod and all the others "outside of history."

Still vacillating between Brotherhood and brotherhood, the narrator finally acts on his own initiative, deciding "we'll use [Tod's] funeral to put his integrity together again" (448). This Humpty-Dumpty-like gesture both succeeds and fails, with the Brotherhood

condemning him for eulogizing a "traitor," while the people of Harlem apparently had never questioned Clifton's integrity in the first place and were undoubtedly moved by the eulogy. As he surveys the silent but enormous crowd, the narrator wonders why they had come, because they knew Clifton or "for the occasion his death gave them to express their protestations, a time and place to come together, to stand touching and sweating and breathing and looking in a common direction?" (452). Not satisfied with the adequacy of either explanation, he wonders, "Did it signify love or politicized hate? And could politics ever be an expression of love?" The funeral seems to answer yes to both possibilities, of love and hate simultaneously.

When an old man breaks out in song that begins a chorus, the narrator feels both moved and slightly envious (453). He notices the man's "worn, old yellow face" and a "knife welt around his upturned neck" attesting to his own past trials, and tries "to plumb its secrets" but to no avail. The song stirs within him the realization that "[it] was as though the song had been there all the time and he knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague, nameless shame or fear."

In an earlier scene in the novel, at the Truebloods' cabin, the narrator had expressed a similar shame associated with such songs. Already regretting that he has brought Mr. Norton, the white benefactor, to view these slave cabins and hear Jim Trueblood tell of how he inadvertently impregnated his own daughter, the narrator recalls the hard-working, story-telling, fine-singing Trueblood he knew of before this disgrace. Back then, Trueblood was often brought to the college to entertain white guests, as part of a "country quartet to sing what the officials called 'their primitive

spirituals" (47). "We were embarrassed," the narrator says, "by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet." He goes on to confess that he

didn't understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the "peasants," during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down.

In retrospect, the narrator realizes that he and his fellow college students had resisted the powerful pull of the music for fear that it might pull them down to the "primitive" earth from which this "true blood" arose.

Even in those "pre-invisible" days, the protagonist knew the power of music. He recalls the vespers service preceding his expulsion from the school and the "thin brown girl" whose solo voice transforms her into "a pipe of contained, controlled and sublimated anguish" (117). He could not understand the words she sang, "only the mood, sorrowful, vague and ethereal of the singing. It throbbed with nostalgia, regret and repentance," leaving him with a lump in his throat.

The old man at the funeral taps into a similar emotion, using collective memory to persuasive effect and seizing invention from a place where the narrator would not dare go. He notes that it is not the words to the song that "touched upon something deeper than protest, or religion," for they were "all the same old slave-borne words" too familiar to produce this result. Rather, "it was as though he'd changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above,

now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name." The singer seems able to stir ancient emotion while giving it new resonance, something the narrator tries unsuccessfully to "contain" in words—ineffable words perhaps uncontainable, but certainly outside of the lexicon of the Brotherhood, just as the slave songs Douglass describes could "seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves."

Mesmerized by his own emotions and the "unmeaning" of the song, the narrator is able to remember only the "*sound* of [Tod's] name" (454 my emphasis) when he is nudged to begin his speech. But because he has "no words" and had "never been to a Brotherhood funeral and had no idea of a ritual," he must rely on his own invention. Feeling that the crowd had come too late, that they should have come "when they could have stopped it all," he urges them to "go home" and worry about themselves instead of the "newly dead" man in the coffin (455). Seeing that they are still listening, and "intently," he asks, "Can I say in twenty minutes what was building twenty-one years and ended in twenty seconds? What are you waiting for when all I can tell you is his name?"

He has the audience's rapt attention, and despite his initially being unable to muster words, he delivers the most powerful speech of his life, using well-established rhetorical devices like anaphora (the repetition of "twenty," "His name was Clifton," "he died," "he bled and he died") and short, staccato sentences bitten off by raw emotion. In one, long rapid-fire sentence, he paints a vivid, detailed portrait of Tod: "His name was Clifton and he was young and he was a leader and when he fell there was a hole in the heel of his sock and when he stretched forward he seemed not as tall as when he

stood" (456). His use of *aporia* is especially effective, as when he continually asks them "What are you waiting for me to tell you?" and "I won't call him [Tod] noble because what's such a word got to do with one of us?" By feigning doubt about what they are all there to do and how they should feel, the speaker reinforces the importance of burying one dead young black man too many.

Even though he repeats "that's all," suggesting the end of his speech, he continues to elaborate, using repetition of the cold facts of his life and death to remind them that Tod was just one more dead black man. "Aren't you tired of such stories?" he pleads. "Aren't you sick of the blood? Then why listen, why don't you go? It's hot out here. There's the odor of embalming fluid. The beer is cold in the taverns, the saxophones will be mellow at the Savoy...Go listen to 'Amos and 'Andy and forget it."

But he knows they will not go to the taverns and barber-shops, at least not yet, while still numb and yearning for catharsis or leadership or both. And in a mockery of the scientific precision of the Brotherhood and officialdom more generally, he barks out the "statistics" of Tod's life that "was scribbled...on a standardized [police] pad":

His race: colored! Religion: unknown, probably born Baptist...Cause of death (be specific): resisting reality in the form of a .38 caliber revolver in the hands of the arresting officer...one bullet entering through the right ventricle of the heart, and lodging there, the other severing the spinal ganglia traveling downward to lodge in the pelvis, the other breaking through the back and traveling God knows where. (458)

Despite his "sense of failure," of being "unable to bring in the political issues" (459), he has in fact done just that, and far more effectively than any Brotherhood-authored

speech could have. He exposed the "comic-book" absurdity of lives reduced to such clinical terms and destroyed by such "standardized" responses to their individual existences.

Moreover, he has issued a call for action, however vague and "unscientific," telling them that Tod Clifton wants them to "get out of the box and go teach the cops to forget that rhyme. Tell them to teach them that when they call you *nigger* to make a rhyme with *trigger* it makes the gun backfire" (emphasis in original). His claim of failure, if not disingenuous, is narrowed to what he feels he should have delivered for the Brotherhood. But he knows his message resonated with his audience, since "there were many things directed toward" him through the crowd's eyes. He can feel it. What's more, he himself has been transformed, able now to see "not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women." With the Brotherhood's hold on him now hanging by one tenuous thread, he thinks "the crowd's emotion had to be organized" (460), but it is not clear by whom or to what end.

What is clear is that the narrator has, by this point, a better developed sense of *kairos* than the Brotherhood does, as the riot ending the narrative illustrates. He knows, if they do not, that the boiling point is near at hand, with or without his eulogy. Jack at first seemed acutely aware of the importance of *kairos*, bringing in the narrator in order to prepare the community for some as yet undetermined action, telling the Committee that the time for purely scientific talk is nearly over, that changing circumstances require a change in rhetorical strategy. But his timing appears to be as "off" as his ahistorical sense of history.

From the Greek, meaning an opportune moment in time and circumstance (or speaking, writing, or acting in due time and with due measure), *kairos* was a crucial element of persuasion for Aristotle and Plato but especially for the Sophists, those itinerant, usually non-Greek teachers of rhetoric whom Plato believed corrupted the youth by teaching them to manipulate words instead of discovering truth through dialectic. The Sophists stressed the need for a rhetor to adapt to changing situations and seize an opportunity when the time is right, however fleeting that moment may be. Although the term itself was revived from classical rhetoric only in the 1970s,⁵² Jack seems to be working from a similar concept. The fact that he fails to "organize" the vast public outcry over Tod Clifton's death, or even recognize that the time is now, does not mean he is necessarily unfamiliar with the idea, just that he has not learned it well.

The narrator, by contrast, has learned it only too well but is powerless, as an individual, to seize the opportunity and, at any rate, still lacks a clear direction toward which to harness their raw emotion. His kairotic moment occurs, however, when he takes the "personal responsibility" to speak at the funeral, in the absence of any guidance from the committee. His use of the phrase "personal responsibility," and the bitter mocking it elicits from Brother Jack inverts the scene from the battle royal when he "mistakenly" substituted "personal equality" for "personal responsibility" (31). When Jack taunts him by asking, "Where did you get it, Brother?" the narrator very nearly begins playing the dozens with him, starting, "From your ma---" before thinking better of it. If "personal responsibility" had been the password primeval for Booker T. Washington and the narrator's ticket to college, for the Brotherhood it is a dangerous breach of "discipline" and a usurpation of their authority.

Although Jack mocks the notion that the narrator is suddenly a "tactician" (464) and "theoretician" (469), the truth is that he has learned to become both, since claiming invention and *kairos* for himself. He correctly observes that Tod's involvement with the Sambo had not meant much to his mourners because "they don't think in such abstract terms" and "the Brotherhood isn't the Negro people; no organization is" (468). Moreover, the people of Harlem, like the narrator's grandfather, know when someone has been "overcome with yeses" and "undermined with grins," and undoubtedly see the Sambo dolls in that light. Indeed, the crowd has responded to Tod as a black man selling entertainment, who was shot for doing so without a license and then resisting arrest.

When Jack slips back "into his fatherly role," cautioning the narrator to leave the theory and strategy to those who can "see the overall picture" (468), the narrator counters, "the political consciousness of Harlem is exactly a thing I know something about. That's one class they wouldn't let me skip. I'm describing a part of reality which I know" (471), elaborating that such knowledge comes from "the beauty parlors on Saturdays when they're frying hair" and the juke joints and the churches, places he has come to know in his brotherly duties.

Armed with a mother-wit reclaimed in barber shops, bars, and churches--especially the kind led by the pimping, numbers-running Reverend Rinehart who moves in mysterious ways indeed—the protagonist overcomes the Brotherhood with yeses, sabotaging their efforts to enlist his aid in sacrificing the people of Harlem, while pretending to go along until he can figure out a plan of his own. He now sees that he can "agree with Jack without agreeing" and he "could tell Harlem to have hope when there was no hope," or hope until he can find "the basis of something real, some firm

ground for action that would lead them onto the plane of history" (507). In the meantime, he'll have to "do a Rinehart," accept his invisibility and explore it, "rine and heart," and make the Brotherhood and others like them "gag on what they refused to see" and spit him out (508).

The narrator's fake lists of new recruits to the cause prove just the sop the Brothers crave: evidence that their plan is working, "the program was correct" (514). He "was to be a justifier," denying "the unpredictable human element of all Harlem so that [the Brotherhood] could ignore it when it in any way interfered with their plans." As with Thomas Sutpen, who ignores the human elements he can neither explain nor control, for the Brotherhood "facts were unimportant, unreal." All accounts can be reconciled by rationalizing human behavior to suit one's purpose. This darkly humorous realization and the absurd light it casts on the human condition, but especially on those minorities who are asked perpetually to sacrifice the greatest for the benefit of the whole, propels the narrator into action, who relishes his newfound duplicity in the service of hoisting the Brotherhood on its own petard.

But instead of getting a chance to follow through on his plan, his blueprints (like those discarded blueprints Wheatstraw collects) change when he returns to Harlem from his uptown intelligence-gathering encounter with Sybil. Feeling unhurried despite the billboard announcing "The Time is Now," the narrator hears the sounds of a riot underway, the sound "myriad-voiced, humming" becoming a "twitter, a coo, a subdued roar that seemed trying to tell [him] something, give [him] some message" (533). He feels "as though they had been waiting for me and no one but me—dedicated and set aside for me—for an eternity" (542). But he is soon "glad to follow" the well organized

actions of the type of man "nothing in [his] life had taught [him] to see, to understand, or respect, a man outside of the scheme till now" (547). When one of the men says, "If it become a sho 'nough race riot I want to be here where there'll be some fighting back" (552), the narrator realizes that this is part of the committee's plan to lead the people of Harlem to their own destruction and that he had "helped, had been a tool" (553), since it would be "suicide" for Harlem to riot without having guns for self-defense.

The narrator's last bid for eloquence falls flat as he tries to convince Ras the Destroyer and the mass around him that the riot is designed to have them destroy each other, to turn their "black blood" and "white blood" into the Brotherhood's own propaganda (558). Ironically, the "desperate oratorical gesture of disagreement and defiance" he begins but cannot finish becomes the means of self-defense, as his physical stance wrenches the ridiculous spear from Ras's hand and into a nearby mannequin. Instead of eloquence, the narrator recognizes that he has "no words" to turn the tide of the violence, and regards himself as "no hero, but short and dark with only a certain eloquence and a bottomless capacity for being a fool" (559). Though he has failed them, he was "just now, a leader, though leading them, running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of [his] illusionment." Figuring out how to strip away their illusionment will require a different kind of leadership at another time.

These closing scenes of the narrative illustrate the protagonist's recognition of the limits of oratory and the need for patience to discover the right time for, and mode of, action. The epilogue further reveals his discovery of both the power and the limitation of words--the polyphony of meanings that can signify beyond any speaker or listener, and the ineffable that cannot be captured or contained in language. This "thinker-tinker"

who invents his own illumination in a hole underground has also discovered rhetorical invention and *kairos*, but now knows that sometimes even the best words fail.

While giving voice to other invisible men and women and showing the means by which they are rendered invisible—particularly the "sociological," "statistical" view of humanity proffered by different people for various purposes—Ellison's narrator also finds ways of using invisibility to his advantage by attempting fully, finally, to divine the meaning of his grandfather's advice. Feeling that he himself has become "ill of affirmation, of saying 'yes' against the nay-saying of [his] stomach—not to mention [his] brain," the narrator attempts three different times in the novel's closing pages to unravel his grandfather's enigmatic last words (573). He cannot simply retreat from this world that refuses to see him, however, "because, damn it, there's still the mind, the *mind*." His grandfather especially continues to inhabit his mind and, "despite the farce that ended [his] attempt to say 'yes' to Brotherhood," he is "still plagued by" his grandfather's deathbed advice and what it can offer as an antidote to the scientific approach in which he has been schooled.

First, the narrator asks "Could he [his grandfather] have meant—hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence" (574). But he cannot decide if his grandfather meant affirming that the principle is greater than the imperfect men who practice it and "the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name," or if he meant accepting "responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle because no other fitted our needs." The latter strikes him as more likely because "we were older than they," the oppressors, "in the sense of what it took to

live in the world" and yet were younger in "human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running." His third iteration asks if he meant "we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring semi-visible world" that includes exploiters like Jack and Norton who regarded him and the others made invisible as "mere pawns in the futile game of 'making history'" (574-5).⁵³

The last possibility holds the greatest meaning for the narrator, as he now sees that the oppressors were "their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us," for "weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (575, emphasis in original). The cumulative weight of these ruminations is "the cream of the joke," the dark cosmic comedy of it all: humanity was as a species inextricably linked together, fated to rise or fall together, so the greatest protection against mutually assured destruction is an acknowledgement of one's own complicity with history, even if only as history's "pawns," and to reaffirm "the principle"—of human equality, as written in the Declaration and Constitution--despite its being practiced imperfectly or even maliciously.

Here, too, the grandfather's ideas mirror those of Frederick Douglass, of whom the grandfather had spoken often when the narrator was a young boy. Douglass had initially accepted the Garrisonians' interpretation of the Constitution as "a slaveholding instrument," feeling "bound, not only by their superior knowledge" but also because he lacked the means of arguing otherwise.⁵⁴ Douglass changed his mind over time, however, deciding that the Constitution was "in its letter and spirit, an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence, as

the supreme law of the land." He reached this conclusion after many years and careful study of "not only the just and proper rules of legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers, and duties of civil government, and also the *relations which human beings sustain to it*" (my emphasis). Douglass considers not just the verbiage of these legal documents and the dry rules of legal analysis in reaching this conclusion, but also the meaning that humans "sustain to it." Like the narrator, he too affirms "the principle" because "no other fitted our needs."

By finally reckoning with the two voices that have haunted and taunted him throughout the narrative--his grandfather's and Douglass's--Ellison's protagonist has finally caught up with himself and now knows what he had meant when he said he felt "more human" and that "we are all human." Perhaps as an African American man, he could be "more human," from having had to endure more inhumanity, even while acknowledging his participation in a common humanity.

Rejecting equally "rugged individualism" and "group-think"—without discarding the basic principles of democracy--the invisible man finally discovers his own singular but polyphonic, heteroglot voice. Thus the novel ends on an unresolved, forever suspended, but euphonious note. In the epilogue, the narrator waits in hibernation for later "covert action" and "torturing" himself to "put [his story] down" (579). But he won't stay down there forever, he insists, feeling "the old fascination with playing a role" resurge within him, drawing him "upward again." But even though he feels he's "overstayed" his "hibernation," and even though he wonders if "there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581), we are not privy to

when or how or even if that will happen--only that it's possible that "on the lowest frequencies," he speaks for all of us.

¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 3. All references are to this edition and appear parenthetically within the text.

² Robert O'Meally, *New Essays on Invisible Man*, 15. While I would agree that the narrator's naiveté is exaggerated for comic effect, and I applaud O'Meally for highlighting the consistent level of humor in the novel, I regard the narrator's "innocence" as making him more than just the "butt of practical jokers' wiles."

³ H. William Rice, *Ralph Ellison and the Politics of the Novel* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 10.

⁴ Gerald T. Gordon, "Rhetorical Strategy in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 41.4 (1987), 199-210.

⁵ Christopher Hanlon, "Eloquence and *Invisible Man*," *College Literature* 32.4 (Fall 2005), 75.

⁶ Hanlon, for example, offers no commentary on any of the protagonist's frequent observations that language overpowers him, that words are coming automatically ("I could feel the words forming themselves," 345) and feeling exposed by his inability to marshal language effectively, as when he feels suddenly "naked, sensing that the words were returning and that something was about to be said that I shouldn't reveal" (345).

⁷ John F. Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence," in *New Essays on Invisible Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹ Robert B. Stepto, "Literacy and Hibernation: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Invisible Man*, Ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999), 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ David Gold, *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873-1947* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 15.

¹⁴ Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.), 110.

¹⁵ In his essay, "Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of Modernism," Robert Genter offers a convincing portrait's conception of rhetoric and its uses in fiction under the friendship and tutelage of Kenneth Burke. In *Twentieth-Century Literature* 48.2 (Summer 2002), 195.

¹⁶ Donald E. Pease, "Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: The Nonsymbolizable (Trans)Action," in *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 30.2 (Summer 2003), 66.

¹⁷ For an explanation of Burke's theory of scapegoating see pages 406-8 in his *A Grammar of Motives*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰ For Burke's summary of the dramatic pentad, see the Introduction to his *A Grammar of Motives*.

²¹ Richard Young, Richard E., Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike. *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 127.

²² Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will-to-Invent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 13.

²³ Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students, Third Edition* (New York: Longman, 2003), 317.

²⁴ Marc Singer, "'A Slightly Different Sense of Time': Palimpsestic Time in *Invisible Man*." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 49.3 (Fall 2003), 390.

²⁵ Singer, 392.

²⁶ Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," in *Shadow and Act*, 296.

²⁷ Singer, 397.

²⁸ Eric J. Sundquist provides a key to many of the novel's references in his *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995). An explanation for this passage occurs on page 123.

²⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Vintage, 1990), 8-9. DuBois defines double-consciousness as follows: "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

³⁰ Alan Dundes, Preface to *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), xvi.

³¹ One of the more interesting takes on this issue is Marc Singer's view of the paint factory incident as "the death of his old sense of time [as linear, then cyclical], creating the possibility for the birth of a new one" (399).

³² Singer, 399.

³³ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

³⁴ Kenneth Burke, "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded Bindungsroman" in *Modern Critical Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Books, 1999), 102.

³⁵ Herbert H. Clark and Thomas Wasow, "Repeating Words in Spontaneous Speech," *Cognitive Psychology* 37.3 (1998), 1.

³⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1963), x-xi.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ M.M. Bakhtin, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik (New York, 1976), 128.

³⁹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969), 361.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁴¹ Ralph Ellison, *Trading Twelves*.

⁴² Perhaps this is what leads Robert Stepto to charge the narrator with misreading Frederick Douglass, on whose portrait the narrator gazes as he delivers these lines. Stepto questions the narrator's "assertion that Douglass defined himself as an orator—as a private-become-public act of speech," and that Douglass "talked his way from slavery to a government ministry" (381). Stepto is correct in noting that Douglass's "pathway from slavery to freedom" began with reading and writing--first by reading the signs all around him, then through public speaking, and finally through his three autobiographies and numerous other writings—but it is nonetheless true that Douglass made his name as an orator before becoming a writer, and he enjoyed a long and successful career in public speaking long after he also became a writer and public servant.

⁴³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 5-6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁷ For an insightful reading of this scene and a rich discussion of Douglass's incorporation of numerous artistic models to produce far more than the "bare facts" of his life demanded by his audience and abolitionist leaders, see Douglass Anderson's "The Textual Reproductions of Frederick Douglass" in *CLIO* 27.1 (1997), 57-87.

⁴⁸ Douglass, *Narrative*, 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

⁵¹ Douglas, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 362 (emphasis in original).

⁵² See especially James L. Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980). Kinneavy is generally credited with the reintroduction of *kairos* to contemporary rhetoric and composition. For other, more recent discussions of *kairos* that complicate its use on classical rhetoric, see especially Carolyn Miller in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*. Ed Phillip Sipiora and James Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) and Debra Hawhee's "Kairotic Encounters" in *Perspective on Rhetorical Invention*, ed. Janet Atwill and Janice Lauer (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 2002).

⁵³ Christopher Z. Hobson says each "exfoliation of interpretation" is "more socially radical than the last" and that Ellison "achieves a philosophic political coherence and social prescience rare among novelists." See his "Invisible

Man and African American Radicalism in World War II." *African American Review* 39.3 (Fall 2005), 367. Of the narrator's universalizing "the principle" and denuding it of any specific temporal or historical reference, Hobson says this conception conforms to what has "probably been the dominant African American attitude to the US political system for the last century and a half" (364) and connects it particularly to Frederick Douglass's claim in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" that "interpreted as it *ought* to be, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT."

⁵⁴ Douglas, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 397.

CONCLUSION

Words fail. At best, they are incomplete expressions of incomplete understanding. When words do succeed, they do so only partially, approximating the intent of the speaker or author—to the extent that either can fully know his or her intentions to begin with. Yet, language is all we have to make ourselves known and understood by others and ourselves. We are "symbol-making animals" whose primary tools are symbols, and despite the imperfections and imprecision of these tools, we have devised--over some 2,500 years of rhetoric, philosophy, and literature--various means of understanding and using them, as well as numerous ways to abuse them and, through them, abuse each other. Human history seems to function much like the boomerang that Ralph Ellison describes, its discontinuities circling back around to remind us, painfully, that the past will not be ignored and that the messiness of being human cannot be fixed once and for all.

Edith Wharton, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison have shown that language (including numbers) also refuses to be fixed once and for all, and that it has power worthy of our respect and care. Instead of boiling down language to some "essence" that, "in the final analysis," tells us very little at all, these writers (and many others) show the rich complexity and genuine difficulty involved in communicating to other human beings. The characters they have created are undone by language, however, because they have an incomplete rhetorical register that blinds them to the rich contexts that give

symbols their meaning. I have attempted to discover some of the reasons why Lily Bart, Thomas Sutpen, and Ellison's unnamed narrator struggle with language, beginning with the sweeping economic, cultural, and social changes of their respective eras and attendant shifts in the language used to describe reality. I hope also to have demonstrated how complex literacy is if it is to be meaningful in any way--the kind of literacy that, through a consideration of the full rhetorical situation of any communicative act, enables us to make ourselves heard, felt, and understood, even if such understanding must always be partially concealed from us by the nature of *logos*, in the Heraclitean and biblical sense, or from the Lacanian lack that accompanies our entry into the symbolic order.

Although the three central characters of my study occupy vastly different social environments and geographic regions over the first half of the twentieth century, all of them suffer from rhetorical illiteracy that alienates them from their surroundings to an unusual degree. Lily Bart's considerable charms ultimately fail her because they constitute a rhetoric of the shallowest variety, blinding her to important subtexts and non-verbal cues that prove fatal. Despite her verbal fluency, she is powerless to understand or be understood in the shifting social and linguistic currents of her time.

Thomas Sutpen, who is inarticulately powerful, also pays the ultimate price for rhetorical illiteracy. Mastering the logic of capital necessary to amass his fortune, his downfall, like hers, results from a limited rhetorical register that does not allow him to see the full contexts at work in any communicative act. In his case, it is the ethical and emotional contextst that he fails to register and that cost him his "design" and his life.

The third protagonist, Ellison's narrator, initially is also blind to subtext, understanding only the literal meaning of the words. As a black man in postwar America, he especially cannot afford to misunderstand his surroundings. But, unlike Lily and Sutpen, Ellison's narrator avoids their fate by discovering his own means of achieving rhetorical literacy. In recovering his "mother-wit," he is also able to reclaim rhetorical invention and a new sense of timing or *kairos*, thereby freeing himself from manipulation by the Brotherhood and others who wish to exploit his rhetorical gifts. He is able to gain both articulateness, in a meaningful sense, as well as agency, though how or whether he will use either remains to be seen by the novel's end.

Although we might flatter ourselves, as every American generation seems to do, that we are somehow at the "end of history" and facing unprecedented challenges, we believe this at great risk, losing valuable experience that can help us navigate our own lives. Moreover, as Thomas Sutpen discovered, ignoring history does not make it go away; the repressed will return, the soil "manured by blood" will avenge that blood. Believing that we have fixed language and meaning through rational systems blinds us to everything for which that system cannot account and reduces our lives to the merely statistical. Language, too, has a way of signifying beyond our control.

As I have shown, the mystifying potential of language has been with us always, the heteroglot utterances that Bakhtin describes as the "functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve." To be sure, the internet age has complicated communication still further than was the case when Wharton, Faulkner, and Ellison wrote, but surely all of us can relate to the predicaments

of their central characters and feel acutely the pervasive loneliness and isolation each feels as they struggle to understand and be understood.

The confusing and alienating changes that Lily Bart faced at the beginning of the twentieth century linger on in the first decade of the twenty-first, and in surprisingly similar ways. Wall Street, for example, continues to exert untold influence over our daily lives, now more than ever, while the machinations that keep the financial economy running are every bit as baffling to the average person today as they were to Lily Bart. Certainly the corporate structures that were still making their way into America's cultural life a hundred years ago have become almost a defining presence in virtually every aspect of American culture. The "bottom line" language that originated with double-entry accounting—making both sides of a ledger balance out—is a stock phrase in the nation's lexicon and is applied to situations far removed from the financial world. Higher education is just one domain now clearly under the purview of business management, as CEO-style management and the language of assessment, transparency, and accountability reveal.

Education has been in crisis mode for decades, it seems, and the alarming cry that "Johnny can't read or write," though familiar, has reached a fevered pitch in the past few years. The lament has shifted slightly, however, to include workers (especially college graduates) who are deemed insufficiently "literate" in the broad range of skills needed in today's high-tech knowledge-based economy. Literacy has long been regarded as a bellwether of educational effectiveness, allowing lawmakers, parents, and other "stakeholders" to place disproportionate blame on English departments because writing, reading, and critical thinking "skills" haven't been fully inculcated in students

after two entire semesters of first-year composition. Obviously, the fields of literature, rhetoric, and composition have a stake both in how students are educated in certain kinds of literacy and how our effectiveness will be, or ought to be, assessed.

What I have tried to show here is that literacy always has been tremendously complex, as these three literary works demonstrate. Anyone who has taught writing or literature of course knows this already. But the larger public, and especially policymakers, do not or they would not devise reductive measures like standardized testing to assess student learning. Nor would they continue to make decisions resulting in an academic labor market that all but ensures that writing classes are taught overwhelmingly by graduate students and overworked, underpaid adjuncts. It is a testament to their dedication to teaching that such classes are often taught so well.

For literacy to have any meaning, students must understand far more about reading and writing than the mechanical correctness and empty five-paragraph essays often emphasized in current-traditional pedagogy. (One need only look at Lily Bart's success with "correctness" to understand the limitations of this approach to language.) Literature also has much to teach about rhetoric, not only in revealing the choices authors make, but those of their characters as well. I have chosen merely three of the many literary texts that offer such possibilities.

If we are to fully appreciate the power of language and use it responsibly we must recognize, along with Judith Supten, that language perhaps "cant matter or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better," yet it must matter.

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