tory of slavery and racism, as well as the continuing U.S. involvement in the Republic of Haiti, the novel draws attention to the illusionary nature of fantasies of a new beginning, or dreams of splendid isolation. Instead, it evokes Karl Marx’s famous dictum that “[t]radition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (“The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” 32; see also chapter two), and gives literary form to this idea through equally Gothic tropes. Moreover, *Absalom, Absalom!* uses a technique that we may call uncanny narration in order to make readers undergo a similarly nightmarish experience as one of the novel’s protagonists, Quentin Compson.

In the preceding chapters, we have focused on the obstacles to belonging – social alienation, for instance, or injustices related to gender. In addition, we have examined the question of whether, at times, we ought to resist our urge to make ourselves at home because the ethical price to pay would simply be too high. In the discussion that follows, we will now have to examine what happens when someone would in fact prefer to leave the home behind, but finds to their horror that he or she simply cannot let go. In short, in assessing the potentially debilitating long-term impact of the family home and the wider community, *Absalom, Absalom!* constitutes an attempt to confront the nightmare of belonging, in order to unearth its potential as a basis for political action.

*Postmemory: Excessive Past(s) and the Weight of History*

The potentially overwhelming weight of history is made palpable in Faulkner’s novel through the sheer multiplicity of interlocking and sometimes competing narratives that, collectively, reconstruct the story of Thomas Sutpen. The novel opens in September 1909, with Quentin paying a visit to Miss Rosa Coldfield, an elderly lady who knew Sutpen personally (5). While the circumstances of Quentin’s visit are related by an extra-diegetic, third-person narrator, the embedded story of Thomas Sutpen is told in the “grim haggard amazed voice” of Rosa Coldfield (3). In fact, of the first chapter’s twenty pages, the final twelve consist almost exclusively of Miss Rosa’s embedded tale, making her a second-level narrator who virtually takes over the telling of the story. Similarly, of the second chapter’s twenty-three pages, only ten are told by the extra-diegetic third-person narrator, while the other thirteen consist of a monologue by Quentin’s father. Not unlike Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, then (see chapter one), the third-person narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* repeatedly loses control over the

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5 For a similar argument, see Heinrich Straumann, *Faulkner* 199–200.
narrative, speaking, for instance, only eight words in the twenty-four pages of chapter three. Later, in chapter five, the novel seems to dispose of the extra-diegetic perspective altogether, presenting us with another thirty-two pages of Miss Rosa’s voice before, on the second-but-last page, the third-person narrator stages a surprise return. Instead of controlling and orchestrating the novel’s many retellings, the ‘omniscient’ third-person narrator thus appears in a curiously precarious position and threatens to be drowned out by embedded narrative voices.⁶

Moreover, if the various retellings are well-nigh unmanageable in their totality, the embedded narrators appear similarly overwhelmed by their stories, which they recount in seemingly boundless sentences, as if compelled stylistically to recreate the enormity of the past. Consider, for instance, the following gargantuan sentence, spoken by Quentin’s father:

[Y]our grandfather never knew if it was Clytie who watched, kept in touch by some means, waited for the day, the moment, to come, the hour when the little boy would be an orphan, and so went herself to fetch him; or if it was Judith who did the waiting and the watching and sent Clytie for him that winter, that December of 1871;–Clytie who had never been further from Sutpen’s Hundred than Jefferson in her life, yet who made that Journey alone to New Orleans and returned with the child, the boy of twelve now and looking ten, in one of the outgrown Fauntleroy suits but with a new oversize overall jumper coat which Clytie had bought for him (and made him wear, whether against the cold or whether not your grandfather could not say either) over it and what else he owned tied up in a bandana handkerchief – this child who could speak no English as the woman could speak no French who had found him, hunted him down in a French city and brought him away, this child with a face not old but without age, as if he had had no childhood, not in the sense that Miss Rosa says she had no childhood, but as if he had not been human born but instead created without agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being [...]. (159)

This lengthy quotation in fact constitutes only the first third of the sentence, and though the example may seem extreme, it is not at all uncharacteristic of the novel’s overwhelming style. Too much, it seems, must be told:

I will tell you what he [i.e. Sutpen] did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the bold blank naked and outrageous words

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⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the competition (and even contradictions) between narrators see, for instance, Rimmon-Kenan, *Glance beyond Doubt* 43–64.
just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief.
I knew when I comprehended what he meant; or take three thousand sentences and
leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost
fifty years.) But I will let you be the judge and let you tell me if I was not right.
(134–135)

Words, that is to say, cannot do justice to Sutpen’s story (“three words are three
too many, and three thousand words that many words too less”), and the enor-
mity of the narrative task affects the very language in which Rosa – who is the
narrator at this point – tells her tale: definite statements that she immediately
qualifies ("I will tell you [...]. Or try to tell you"); adjectives crammed on top of
each other (“bold bland naked and outrageous”); repetitions (“and let you be the
judge,” “will let you be the judge”), speculations (“could take”), and unresolved
questions (“that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for
almost fifty years”). If John Brannigan is right in suggesting that an “excess of
memory and history is [...] the prototypical temporal condition of the twentieth
century” (117), then perhaps Absalom, Absalom! is the century’s paradigmatic
novel, enacting this excessive temporality in the very texture of its convoluted
style.

Nevertheless, much like Rosa Coldfield, Quentin is aware that even the most
excessive of narrations cannot encompass the full reality of the past, but must
instead select, rearrange, and condense its components. In order to tell Sutpen’s
story, the characters must thus distort the reality to which their tales purport to
refer, thus adding to their material a dream-like quality:

It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and
reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, still-
born and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to
move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity – horror or pleasure or amazement –
depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and
yet elapsing time as music or a printed tale. (15)

The “logic- and reason-flouting quality” of dreams finds its counterpart in the
storyteller’s need to manipulate time – to compress, for instance, the thirty-three
years between Sutpen’s arrival in Jefferson and his death in 1869 into a novel
that one can read in only a few days. Such passages that discuss the precarious
relationship between the reality of the past and its recreation as a text represent
an explicit metafictional discourse in Faulkner’s novel, and this explicit dis-
course in turn complements the novel’s implicitly metafictional style (i.e. the
extraordinarily long and complex sentences that flaunt the text’s artificiality
and constructedness). Absalom, Absalom! thus constitutes what Linda Hutcheon
It would be interesting to pursue in more detail how Faulkner’s novel engages with the tradition of the historical novel as a genre, particularly with the model provided by Walter Scott. For instance, as Ian Duncan points out in an essay on Waverley, Scott “follows Shakespeare to make civil war the classical setting of historical fiction: it is the fiery, bloody rift in the fabric of common life through which history and national character become visible” (173). What Duncan says here about the role of the civil war and national character in Scott can, of course, equally well be applied to Absalom, Absalom! – an intertextual link that is made explicit in Faulkner’s novel when we learn that Sutpen rides off to war on a “black stallion named out of Scott” (63).

For the distinction between existential and historical trauma see Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz 46–48 (also discussed in the introduction of the present study).

has termed a historiographic metafiction: a novel that “problematises the very possibility of historical knowledge” (106).

It is, in part, this problematic nature of attempts to reconstruct the past that Shreve, Quentin’s roommate at Harvard College, finds stimulating and even exciting. “Let me play a while now,” Shreve asks Quentin when the latter tries to interrupt his friend in the course of a free-flowing narrative improvisation on the story of Thomas Sutpen, and Norman W. Jones has rightly pointed out that there is a markedly homoerotic charge to the roommates’ “back-and-forth storytelling” (334). We learn, for instance, that Shreve is “naked to the waist” (Absalom 176), and that the two roommates sometimes glare at one another “not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself” (240). Thus seduced by each others’ imaginative prowess, Shreve and Quentin move further and further away from a version of the past based on verifiable fact, creating, “out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all” (243): a dream-like historical fantasy driven by their mutual narrative desire.

However, while Shreve, a Canadian, is for the most part able to enjoy this game of narrative seduction, the Southerner Quentin finds himself unable to gain unadulterated pleasure from their flights of fancy because he is weighed down by the effects of collective historical trauma. At one point in Faulkner’s novel, Shreve and Quentin explicitly address this crucial difference in their relation to the past:

[Shreve: I]t’s something my people haven’t got. [...] What is it? something you live and breathe like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children’s children produce children...
you won’t be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge at Manassas?”

“Gettysburg,” Quentin said. “You can’t understand it. You would have to be born there.”

“Would I then?” (289)⁹

A particular way of relating to history is, Quentin and Shreve suggest here, passed on like a “birthright” from father to son, and can only be understood – if at all (“Would I then?”) – by those for whom the South has always been home.¹⁰

Though Quentin has no personal recollections of the Civil War, he is thus unable to escape the impact of what Marianne Hirsch has called postmemory: memories handed down from one generation to the next, and therefore characterized by a deeply personal sense of emotional investment despite the temporal distance that separates the younger generation from the events concerned (Family Frames 22).¹¹ In Absalom, Absalom!, the story of Thomas Sutpen is part of this postmemory that Quentin ‘inherits’:

[T]his first part of it, Quentin already knew. It was a part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town’s – Jefferson’s – eighty years’ heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed [...]. Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. (7)

In the collective memory of Jefferson, Mississippi, Thomas Sutpen is such an overwhelming presence that Quentin is familiar with his story from childhood; Quentin’s memories are “myriad,” and his very self is not truly individual but instead “a commonwealth.” Indeed, so heavily does postmemory weigh on Quentin that his sense of self threatens to collapse:

[H]e would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now – the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with

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⁹ Note that expressions such as don’t or can’t are spelled without apostrophes throughout Absalom, Absalom!

¹⁰ The fact that Shreve imagines that this birthright is passed on from fathers to sons (rather than from mothers to daughters) would, incidentally, provide a good starting point for a feminist reading of Faulkner’s novel.

¹¹ I would like to thank Christa Schönfelder for bringing Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to my attention.