

Language and Reality in the Novel

Kuei fen Chiu

Thesis: In contrast to the Chinese novel which posits a direct correspondence between public language and reality, the Western novel is essentially a genre of adventure which questions any reality existing *a priori* or created by others' languages. Characters in the Western novel often try to create a truer and more satisfactory reality for themselves by replacing the public language with their own individual language. Language becomes for them a power to create reality rather than merely an instrument to transmit the concept of reality. As M.M. Bakhtin says: "What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system." Three Western novels taken from different periods and countries are used to exemplify my thesis: *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Spanish, 16th century), Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (French, 19th century), and Faulkner's *Abasalom! Abasalom!* (American, 20th century). For convenience's sake, English translations of these novels are used for discussion.

As Arthur F. Wright demonstrates in his "Values, Roles, and Personalities," a very important aspect of pre-modern Chinese culture is the stress on model emulation.¹ A man in pre-modern China often selected his model in early childhood and tried to make his whole life a re-enactment of the life of his chosen model. The exact correspondence between one's behaviors and actions and those of one's chosen model in similar situations was greatly emphasized and served as a guiding principle for one's life. In trying to make one's life a duplicated copy of the life of the emulated model, one's individuality is often blurred by those external attributes which link one with the emulated model and the successors who continue the line of emulation. In one sense, we may say that a person in this world of model emulation is nothing but a composite of conventional signs. Since these signs always invite appropriation, they constitute a kind of public language circulated and re-circulated through generations. And what one does in the act of appropriating this public language is in fact an attempt to effect a complete merging of the language with reality. Seen in this way, reality for the premodern Chinese always existed *a priori*, to be appropriated rather than to be created by individuals.

This reverence for a pre-existing, authoritative version of reality made popular through a wide circulation of the public language is seen clearly in traditional Chinese biographical writings. In depicting a human subject, the Chinese writer usually bypasses the intricate psychological workings of the individual and resorts to a mode of presentation that describes the human subject according to some pre-established categories. Set pieces, conventional episodes, formulaic language, and topoi are abundant in a piece of traditional biography, for they help to establish the link between the subject and some par-

agon of antiquity and define the subject's position in the history of Chinese culture. ² Public language, in this way, becomes the goal of one's life and replaces the real human subject as the final object of appropriation. In fiction, Chinese heroes are often those who appropriate most successfully the public language and establish themselves as the models of correct social behavior for the later generations to imitate. In other words, the highest achievement a Chinese hero can hope for is to incorporate himself into the public language and become himself an object of transmission and reappropriation.

In contrast to the Chinese novel, the Western novel seems to have questioned the direct correspondence between the public language and reality from the very beginning. It tends to substitute an individual language for the public language as the fundamental basis of one's own reality. Language becomes an act of creation rather than an instrument of transmitting reality. For, even though there may exist a pre-established reality, a truer and more satisfactory reality often comes into being when the protagonist successfully develops his own language. Language behavior, instead of being submissive, becomes creative, subversive, and even disruptive. The program of the text appears to be a programming of languages—a process that shows the gradual emergence of one's own language out of others' languages. Thus, Harry Levin defines realism in the novel as “a process of rectifying illusion” and sees the realistic novel as a depiction of the protagonist's spiritual development in which the protagonist's pre-conceptions are undermined one by one. ³ In other words, for the protagonist to reach true, spiritual maturity, he is expected to create a distinctly individualized vision of reality and to use his own language to express that vision. In the following, I shall use three novels ranging from the embryonic stage of novelistic development to the present age to exemplify how Western novels explore the complicated problem of language and reality.

I

Written as a report to a certain “Vuestra Merced,” the picaresque novel *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* depicts how the orphan Lazarillo travels through different social strata in search of a good master. As the men whom he takes as masters often exploit him and keep him constantly in a state of starvation, Lazarillo is forced to trick his masters in order to have himself fed. When he is found out, he suffers severe punishment. At last, he either abandons or is abandoned by his cruel master and sets out to find a new one. In this way, Lazarillo enacts the same plot pattern again and again until he finally establishes himself as a town crier. But the story does not end here. Lazarillo's new master, an archpriest, has an illicit affair with Lazarillo's wife and forces Lazarillo into silence with his social prestige.

As a whole, the novel enacts a series of battles for language. The relationship between Lazarillo and his masters, or between the victim and the victimizers, is defined through their different control of language. In the story, whoever controls language controls power. Lazarillo remains the victim so long as he is reduced to silence or only utters inarticulate cry. But as the story is told by the older, maturer Lazarillo, a great disparity

is shown to exist between Lazarillo the victim and Lazarillo the narrator who exposes his masters' cruelty through the act of narration. The Lazarillo who speaks in the Prologue and calls our attention to his verbal performance appears a man at ease with his language. As a master of language, he is different from the young Lazarillo who can only utter inarticulate cry or weep helplessly while his masters narrate his "mischiefs" to the laughing on-lookers. By taking an initiative attitude toward language, the mature Lazarillo transforms the unpleasant reality of his victimization and creates a new reality for himself: he is turned from a silent, passive victim into an aggressive attacker of his victimizers.⁴ Through the act of narration, Lazarillo learns to control language and reverses the relationship between the victim (Lazarillo the child) and the victimizers (his masters). In the course of narration, all the people who have exploited Lazarillo are victimized by his language, for he not only exposes their cruelty but suggests that their languages, unlike his, are false versions of Truth. As Douglas M. Carey suggests, as a narration of Lazarillo's life story, the novel progresses from *deseo*, the instinctual desire for survival, through *poder*, the securing of a stable social position, to *arte*, the artistic use of language to launch a verbal attack.⁵

Thus, Lazarillo's journey is in essence a journey in search of the mastery of language. And it is the blindman, Lazarillo's first master, who initiates him into the world of language. Young Lazarillo's problem is his naive use of language. He fails to recognize that there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between language and reality. Shortly after the blindman becomes Lazarillo's master, they arrive at a bridge on which stands an animal carved of stone. The blindman says to him: "Lazaro, put you head close to this bull, and you will hear a loud noise inside it."⁶ When Lazarillo naively follows his words and does what he says, the blindman strikes his head against the stone animal and laughs loudly at his gullibility. Thus, Lazarillo learns his first painful lesson: to survive, he has to learn to interpret correctly the codified language that constitutes the major part of social transaction. As the blindman is the one who reveals this important message to him, Lazarillo regards him as his true master in spite of all the cruelty he has suffered under the blindman: ". . . second only to God, he gave me life; and although he was blind, he guided me and lighted the way in my passage through life."⁷

It is important to note that all the shrewd masters of Lazarillo's who manage well in the novelistic world are language-manipulators. They all rely on the exploitation of public language, especially religious prayers, for their survival. The blindman trades off the prayers he memorizes for money; the clergyman secures his meals by saying prayers at funerals; and the bull-seller's business depends chiefly on how well he succeeds in persuading people to buy his bulls through the use of religious language. If prayers are commonly accepted as the signifiers that point to a religious spiritual reality, all three men substitute material profits for spiritual reality as the signified. The subversion of the public language--in their case, religious prayers--creates a more satisfying reality and keeps them going in the mundane world. For them, language is not a tool that transmits an existing reality but should be exploited to transform the unpleasant reality

into something more positive.

Unlike these masters, Lazarillo's third master the squire is controlled by the public language rather than controls it. The codified language of the chivalric romance means for him the only possible reality. In his insistence on enacting to the last detail the chivalric code, the squire cuts a pathetic, out-of-the-place figure in the novelistic world. Yielding himself up to this set of public language, his efforts to appropriate public language endanger rather than secure his survival.

Through these masters, Lazarillo learns different types of one's relationship to language. The moment he acquires the power of language is also the moment that he becomes a master himself. Telling his life story in his own words, Lazarillo establishes himself as the authority-figure he has been seeking all through his life. For, by taking up the speech, Lazarillo reverses his former passive relationship to his masters: instead of being exploited by them, he "exploits" them by launching a verbal attack on them while they are not there to answer his charge. He turns the language which he has learned from his masters on them. At this moment, a second reality is born: Lazarillo's control of language transforms him from a victim into a victimizer.

II

Like Lazarillo's world, Julien Sorel's world in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* is composed mainly of languages. But if Lazarillo subverts others' languages to create an alternative reality for himself, Julien tries to make several sets of others' languages work for him. However, these languages are finally abandoned in favor of an individual language with which Julien tries to create a reality exclusively his own. In one sense, the text may be seen as a dramatization of the interplay between different languages: the language for social advancement in different societies from Verrieres through the seminary to the Parisian world, Julien's model of romantic language, the narrator's language of the worldly wisdom, and finally the language of Julien's spontaneous self. The orchestration of these languages constitutes the movement of the plot.

Since very young, Julien demarcates sharply two kinds of languages: the language of romantic heroism and the language for social advancement. Taking Napoleon as his model, Julien dreams of climbing up the social ladder as Napoleon did and acquiring the same fame and love in the Parisian world. However, born into the wrong times, Julien realizes that while the goal he sets up for himself is a product of the romantic language, it can only be reached through the practice of the language for social advancement which is in spirit hostile to his romantic language. Therefore, even though he secretly regards Rousseau's *Confession*, *Bulletins of the Grand Army*, and the *Memorial de Saint-Helene* as his manuals of conduct, he pretends outwardly to be a devoted reader of the New Testament and M. de Maistre's work on the Pope in order to please the priest Chelan who has great influence on his future career. From the very beginning, Julien's world is thus shown to be composed of texts and languages that are hostile, and yet held in a state of tension, to each other.

Where Napoleon won with his sword Julien wins with his control of language. It is always with the aid of language that he climbs up the social ladder. The first time he goes to serve as a tutor at M de Renal's, he establishes himself as an authority-figure of learning by making a marvelous show of his memory of the Holy Bibles. When he enters the seminary which serves as a step-stone on his way to the Parisian society, he immediately wins the heart of Father Pirard with his mastery of Latin and his knowledge of theology. Finally, he changes M de la Mole's impression of him as an ignorant fellow from a provincial town by engaging himself in a debate with one of M de la Mole's guests. In winning M de la Mole's good feelings, Julien has achieved almost half of his final goal.

However, it is worth pointing out that in all these occasions, the language Julien uses to impress people is basically a dead language. People marvel at his incredible memory, but memorizing is a copying rather than a creative act. In his examination of Julien, Pirard notices that he "questioned Julien all in vain in the attempt to find out if he seriously believed in M de Maistre's doctrines. The young man could only answer from what he remembered."⁸ The texts Julien memorizes so well remain a foreign language, dead to him. And when Julien impresses M de la Mole in the drawing room, the narrator remarks that "Julien shamelessly annexed several ideas he had picked up from the Bishop of Besacon in the famous discussion he had had with his prelate—they were not among the least appreciated."⁹ Thus, Julien's social success depends on his skillful manipulation of others' languages. Nevertheless, these languages remain dead to Julien in the sense that they are simply echoed rather than truly assimilated and incorporated into Julien's intellectual sphere of thinking.

In order to achieve the ultimate success with M de la Mole, it is not enough for Julien to rely totally on memory. He also has to master the codified language of M de la Mole's drawing room. As an epitome of the Parisian society and a center of political intrigues, la Hotel de la Mole lives almost exclusively on language. It is the place where abundant information is circulated and transmitted. Implicit battles are also fought out there through verbal exchange. But language in M de la Mole's drawing room does not stop at the verbal level. Manners and dressing are also part of its codified language. Thus, M de la Mole insists not only on Julien's correct spelling of words but also on his proper dressing for different occasions at the Hotel de la Mole. Since a man is identified with his language, it is no wonder that M de la Mole should treat Julien differently when the latter puts on different clothes: Julien is only M de la Mole's servant when he is dressed in black; but when he puts on his blue coat, he becomes presumably the younger son of M de la Mole's friend, the Duke. The proper study and mastery of the codified language of the Parisian society is a prerequisite of one's survival there.

Interestingly, Julien's success at the Hotel de la Mole depends on his alternate use of the codified social language and the romantic language. While he wins M de la Mole's trust with the former, he wins the heart of Mathilde, M de la Mole's daughter, with the latter. Before Julien enters her world, Mathilde is already bored by the deadening effect produced by the circulation of social cliches around her: "She was amused by these

young men's letters; but, according to her, they were all alike. It was always the most profound, the most melancholy passion."¹⁰ The codified language practised by those Parisian young men is a language devoid of vitality. It is not surprising that Julien's romantic language should be welcomed by Mathilde who, like him, is also a disciple of romantic heroism.

The love battle between Julien and Mathilde is fought mainly in the circumscribed field of heroic-romantic language. Before Julien goes to work for M de la Mole, Father Pirard gives him the following instruction:

I won't hide from you the fact that the Comte de la Mole will certainly feel contempt for you at the outset because you are merely one of the lower middle class. His ancestor was attached to the court and had the honor of being beheaded in the Place de Greve on the 26th of April of 1574 for his part in a political intrigue. ... study the history of his family in Moreri; all the toadies who dine at this house make what they call delicate allusions to this work from time to time.¹¹

To memorize the family history of de la Mole poses no problem for Julien for he is a master of memorization. But for Mathilde, it is simply not enough to have Julien learn well her family history. She wants him to go a step further to enact the history. She would have him turn the clock back and become himself a copy of Boniface de la Mole--the ancestor of de la Mole who was beheaded in 1574 and has become Mathilde's romantic model. Thus, Mathilde loves Julien not for what he is but for the possibility that he may become an object through which she can speak her language of romantic heroism.

If Julien is, as Peter Brooks says in his analysis of *Le Rouge et le noir*, a master plotter,¹² here we have an ironical twist of the situation. To be a plotter means to be the author of one's narrative. But in the pursuit of his narrative, in the struggle to climb up the social scale, Julien is turned into a character in Mathilde's narrative. For all his life, he has taken heroic figures as his models and now he is asked to merge completely with them. He is victimized by the very language which he has internally idolized since childhood. It turns out that Julien does not speak the language of romantic heroism. Rather, he is spoken through by that very language which he has been seeking to appropriate. Indeed, from Mathilde's point of view, Julien's subsequent actions and his final beheading do correspond to the narrative she has written for him, though the narrative maintains its "romantic" dimension only on the surface level. An ironical dimension, imbedded in a deeper layer of the text, escapes Mathilde's grasp.

In addition to the language for social advancement and the language of heroic romanticism, two other languages also contribute to the shaping of the text: the narrator's language and Julien's latent language of the spontaneous self which he keeps trying to repress. If Julien prescribes for himself a chivalric code and constantly compares his behavior with what he imagines his chosen models would do in certain situations, it is often with extreme awkwardness that he carries out the actions he deems correct for a man of heroic stature. In other words, there remains a distance between his real self and the romantic language he tries to speak. Thus, his seduction of Mme de Renal is

based on his concept of *devoir* (duty) rather than an inborn romantic temperament. The narrator often points out the discrepancy between Julien's genuine feelings and his outward behavior. In a passage describing Julien's act of seducing Mme de Renal, the narrator says:

Yet, even at the most sweetly blissful moments a victim of his own queer pride, he still aspired to play the part of a man accustomed to subduing women to his will, and made incredibly determined efforts to spoil what was lovable in himself. ... In a word, what made Julien a superior being was the very thing that prevented him from enjoying this happiness right in front of his eyes. He was like a sixteen-year-old girl with charming colouring who is silly enough to put on rouge when going to a ball.¹³

This passage encompasses almost all the languages operating in the novel. Even though the narrator does not mention it explicitly, we actually have the presence of the language of *savoir-vivre* which the common town people speak. Julien's language of heroic romanticism is compared favorably with this language, for it is the romantic language that makes Julien a "superior being"--superior in the sense that he possesses the heroic imagination that the town people in Varrieres lack. In the last sentence of the quotation, the romantic language is in turn deemed inferior to the language of the spontaneous self, for certainly the natural charming colouring refers to a genuine self while the rouge to Julien's artificial code. The narrator suggests that if Julien could put aside his fixation on romantic heroism and act according to his genuine feelings, he would not have ruined the moment of bliss. Finally, we have the language of the narrator who, up to the last but few chapters, constantly informs us of Julien's unconscious as well as conscious thoughts.

But even if the narrator possesses knowledge and information outside Julien's consciousness, this does not mean that the narrator's language is necessarily presented as superior to Julien's language of the spontaneous self. As Peter Brooks points out, in spite of the fact that the narrator prescribes a standard of worldly wisdom for Julien to follow, he often reveals an admiration for Julien's violation of it, especially when Julien acts on impulse and breaks away from his design of model copying.¹⁴ We should note that this language of the spontaneous self has always existed in the text in a suppressed form. So long as Julien speaks a language other than his own, he remains imprisoned in others' languages rather than is the true master of his narrative. Ultimately, all other languages, including the narrator's, must be supplanted by Julien's language of the self.

This language, latent throughout most of the text, finds its volcanic eruption in Julien's attempt to kill Mme de Renal. The enigma of this disruptive act has intrigued Stendhal's critics, and different theories have been postulated for a logical, psychological explanation. Of many critics, D. A. Miller seems to offer the most plausible account. We remember that Julien commits the act immediately after he learns of the letter that Mme de Renal, under the dictation of her new confessor, writes to M de la Mole. According to Miller, this letter gives a distorted picture of Julien, for it emphasizes Julien's tactical practice of hypocrisy and ignores completely the depth of feelings that Julien

often suffers in carrying out his prescribed actions. In other words, the letter reduces Julien to a consummate hypocrite. It does not, as the narrator has done, give us any glimpse of Julien's inner being which reveals a great discrepancy between what he does and what he is. Thus, says Miller, Julien's act of murder may be interpreted as a radical gesture to reject the image of himself as presented by the letter and add "a new fact to the biography that the readings of hypocrisy and ambition cannot well account for."¹⁵

We may say that Julien's disruptive attempt, unexpected and based on impulse, brings Julien's repressed language of the spontaneous self to the surface. This language denies the picture drawn by others' languages and rigorously asserts the existence of a spontaneous self that a consummate hypocrite cannot possibly have. The effect produced by this gesture of denial is so violent that it shatters the narrator and the text into a moment of silence. From then on, this language gradually takes over the act of narration. Consequently, the narrator becomes less garrulous in the latter chapters and the last four chapters of the novel are deleted not only of the intruding quotations under the chapter titles but also the titles themselves.

In fact, we do see Julien articulate his life story in his own words in the trial scene. For the first time, he does not rely on others' languages to compose his narrative. Throughout his whole life, he has been dominated by others' languages and other's beliefs. Now time has come for him to face his true self which he has repressed for so long. As he says: "What do I care for other people? My relations with other people are soon to be abruptly severed."¹⁶ Ironically, just when he succeeds completely in shedding off others' words and speaking in his own language, his text is terminated. Julien's new reality can only be realized in the realm of silence, for words can never escape the contamination of others. To be done with others, to insist on a pure language free from any connection with others, is to reject speaking at all. It is not in the realm of silence, but in that of heteroglossia, as M.M. Bakhtin phrases it, that one has to voice one's own words. To speak is to accept the precondition of heteroglossia and the ineffacable existence of others' languages that have invaded not only the object one is going to talk about but also the language one employs for talking.

III

The very concept of heteroglossia lies at the core of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. Each narrator in the work speaks with a full awareness of others' words within his/her own words and tries to combat them by developing an individually marked language. This language embodies the narrator's attempt to create a life pattern for his/her own life. In one sense, language substitutes action as the reality for the narrators, for all narrators, as John T. Irwin's and John T. Matthews' brilliant essays demonstrate, are impotent or orphaned sons/daughters who try to redeem themselves through a creative and imaginative use of language.¹⁷

In the novel, we have a story that is repeated and recycled from one generation to another. The feeling that one could never avoid participating in the heteroglot world

is strengthened by the texture of the novel in which multiple narrators engage themselves, and even compete with each other, in the act of recreating the Sutpen story. As each of them is doing so, he/she is aware that his/her consciousness has already been invaded by others' consciousnesses and that his/her own words are also half someone else's. The story has been told too many times before one comes to narrate it, and there is no possibility of laying hold of the virgin word any more. Thus, Rosa's narration is punctured constantly by the bitter remarks that "they might have told you. . . ;" Mr. Compson's full of the phrases gathered from Quentin's grandparents and from town people's gossip; and Quentin, whose consciousness is oppressed by the endless retelling of the story, keeps telling himself that "I have been hearing too long."

For all narrators, the compulsion to narrate Sutpen's story is closely connected with their belief that the act of narration may shed some light on their personal and family histories, or even the broader, cultural history of the South. The difficulty is that the historical facts of the Sutpen story cannot be fully appropriated. Three of the narrators--Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve--are removed in time and space from the center of the story. All they have are "a few old mouth-to-mouth tales," the reliability of which is sharply undercut by the endless cycle of transmission. Even Rosa, who seems closest to the Sutpens among all narrators, is just as much an outsider to the Sutpen mystery. As she admits bitterly: "I heard an echo, but not the shot; saw a closed door but did not enter it."¹⁸ The impossibility of bringing the facts of the dim past to light is summed up aptly by Mr. Compson:

Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nick-names out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chock-taw. . .¹⁹

Under such circumstances, the issue at stake here is no longer that of appropriating historical facts. Rather, it is how to use the Sutpen story in such a way that the narrators can construct a logical pattern of their lives through it and that they may possibly find an escape from the oppression of others' languages by creating an individualized language. What happens, consequently, is that the story is used to process language rather than the other way around. The story becomes a means rather than the end for the narrators. Language itself is the end, for it is in the act of narration, in the processing of language, that the narrators create an alternative reality for themselves.

Each narrator, in trying to explain the Sutpen tragedy, reveals something about him-/herself.²⁰ Most critics have noticed that Rosa's narration is an emotional outlet of her frustrated sexual desire. But it may also be true that Rosa's narration is more than a spinster's passive lamentation over her fate. Through the act of narration, Rosa the "crucified child" who has been denied all chances in life rigorously asserts the value of her existence. Talking about how Sutpen proposed to marry her, she says:

I was that sun, who believed that he (after that evening in Judith's room) was not oblivious of me but only unconscious and receptive like the swamp-breed pilgrim feeling earth and tasting sun and light again and aware of neither but only of darkness' and morass' lack—who did believe there was that magic in unkin blood which we call by the pallid name of love that would be, might be sun for him (though I the youngest, weakest) where Judith and Clytie would cast no shadow; yes, I the youngest there yet potently without measured and measurable age since I alone of them could say. "O furious and old man, I hold no substance that will fit your dream but I can give you airy space and scope for your delirium."²¹

The fact that Rosa should insist so much on her being that sun that might give Sutpen what his crumpled home would not be able to produce reveals her desperate effort to give her shadowed life a positive dimension. This version of the story, as we see, is set against Rosa's consciousness of how the story has been told differently by people of her town: "They will have told you how I came back home. Oh yes, I know."²² By claiming herself the sun in Sutpen's life, Rosa tries to invalidate town people's version of the story. For, if she is the sun as she claims, then it certainly is Sutpen's misfortune to lose her rather than the other way around. Thus, Rosa's narration, like Julien's unexpected act of murder in Stendhal's novel, is an attempt to refute a picture of herself drawn by others' words. Through her own language, Rosa tries to invent a second reality, to create what her life has failed to create for her.

Mr. Compson's narration, like Rosa's, is told to serve some personal interests. As Matthews suggests in his essay, "Marriages of Speaking and Hearing in *Absalom, Absalom!*," Mr. Compson's inventive elaboration on the complicated relationship among Henry, Bon, and Judith implicitly points to Quentin's own incestuous complex that finds its full expression in *The Sound and the Fury*.²³ His theory that Henry tries to consummate his incestuous desire for Judith through Bon, according to Matthews, provides "a model for a brother's liberation from incestuous desire."²⁴ Moreover, his creation of a fatalistic Bon may be interpreted as an attempt to suggest fatalism as the very condition of human life and thus to justify his own failure as a lawyer and an incompetent son.

The key to the particularity of Quentin's narrative may be found in his rigorous denial to Shreve's question "Why do you hate the South". The repeated phrases "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it!" with which Faulkner ends the novel seems to affirm at least half of what Quentin denies so vehemently. To hate the South means to hate its language-language in the broader sense of being the whole system of signification. At one point of the text, Shreve confesses that he does not understand the South. His people, as Canadians, "dont live among defeated grand-fathers and freed slaves. . . and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? . . ."²⁵ This passage suggests that to be a Southerner is to inherit a sense of guilt caused by the Southerner's practice of the language of separation for which the South suffered great humiliation in and after the civil war.²⁶ We may say that Quentin's rebellion against the South takes up the form of

rebellion against this language of separation.

The best way to combat a language of separation, of course, is to create a language that does away with differences and separation—a language with repetition or merging as its key-concept. Quentin's chief contribution to the Sutpen story is that he (either he learns this from Clytie or simply invents it himself) identifies Bon as the child Sutpen had with his first wife—the child Sutpen has denied for the sake of his dynastic design. John T. Irwin, basing his analysis on this information, elucidates admirably the vast scheme of repetition in the novel.²⁷ In Irwin's view, Bon, as Henry's double and his half-brother, may be seen as Henry's repetition. On another level, Bon is also a repetition of Sutpen, for he re-enacts the past history of Sutpen: a child who comes to knock at a white man's door and is turned away. The pattern of repetition, as Irwin demonstrates, is not confined only to the Sutpen family members but extends temporally to encompass the Compson family. Thus, in the complicated relationship among Henry, Judith, and Bon, Quentin may see a reflection of his own relationship with Caddy and Caddy's seducer Dalton Ames.

But Quentin's language of repetition and sameness does not stop at the psychoanalytical level based on the Freudian theory of the Oedipus Complex. In his obsessive consciousness, people become indistinguishable:

Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens but once and finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebbles sink, the ripples moving on, spreading. . . . Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us.²⁸

In this interior monologue, Quentin makes everything a repetition of everything else, and everybody interchangeable with everybody else. His language of repetition culminates finally in Chapter VIII in which he and Shreve cooperate in the imaginative construction of a narrative that would explain Henry's murder of Bon. Here, not only the narrators but the characters are merged into a complete union. The ambition of Quentin's language to break down all categories of differences and separation is momentarily achieved.

However, Quentin's effort to do away completely with differences seems to be nullified at the last moment, for, by admitting (or by inventing) miscegenation as the true cause of Henry's murder of Bon, Quentin acknowledges that difference is something insurmountable and that it is the inescapable condition of the human world. Hence, the complete union between Quentin and Shreve, which they have achieved through the act of cooperative narration, has to break down when their narration is finished. The world of sameness so carefully built up by Quentin's language of repetition seems to collapse all of a sudden by the intrusion of a language that rejects mingling and insists on separation.

On the other hand, even without the disruption of the language of separation at the crucial point of the text, it remains open whether Quentin succeeds in escaping from the

engulfment of the South by rebelling against its language. During the process of narration, Quentin discovers that his language of repetition, instead of helping him to reject the South, only strengthens his tie with it by bringing into being a pattern that makes all characters and all families re-enactments of a repetitive, cyclical historical process. Thus, the new reality Quentin's language of sameness tries to create collapses back into the old, pre-existing reality of the South already brought into existence by the language of separation. Maybe this is why Quentin, as we learn from *The Sound and the Fury*, finds the final solution of his problem in death. For, according to Freud's theory of the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, death is the ultimate state in which all categories are abolished.

No matter whether or not the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* succeed with their projects of language in creating an alternative reality, they have at least one compensation: through the act of narration, they replace Sutpen as the author-figure in the text and overthrow the hierarchical relationship between the past and the present. An author, says Edward Said in *Beginnings*, is "a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, a beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements."²⁹ In the story, Sutpen is the author/ancestor as well as the author/statement-composer, for he sets up a historical pattern which the later generations, his children, have to follow and repeat. But the crucial point is that Sutpen himself does not consciously construct this pattern of repetition. In fact, the pattern only comes into being through the narrators' narrations. It is a part of the narrators' construction and, as each narrator sets out to construct a narrative about Sutpen, Sutpen becomes a character in his/her narration. In this sense, the narrators are the authors, the begetters, of Sutpen. Moreover, as each narrator only uses Sutpen's story to establish a logical pattern for his/her life, the past is defined through the present rather than the other way around.

Judging from our discussion above, a text in the Western novelistic tradition seems to often originate in the will to power--to take over the power of language belonging formerly to some one else. The Western novel often emphasizes the importance of subverting any authoritative version of reality formed by others' languages. No matter whether the characters succeed in doing so or not, the individuality of their beings is confirmed by a language marked by their own idiosyncracies. In contrast to the Chinese hero who often looks to the ancients for instruction, the Western hero is expected to break out from the prison-house of others' languages to create his own reality.

Seen in this light, the Western novel is essentially a genre concerned with the tension between languages and their relationship to the concept of reality. Indeed, the drama of languages rather than the drama of action should be seen as the backbone of the Western novel. For, if reality not only comes to us through the mediation of language but can be created by language, the behavior of language and one's own relation to it become all that matters in one's relation to reality. The novel, as a genre concerned especially with the problems of reality and man's position in it, inevitably takes up as its focus the issues of languages and the interplay among them. In all three novels discussed above,

the movement of the text is in fact, as we have seen, the movement of the dialogical process of different languages. From this process there often emerges a new, truer reality for the characters. As Bakhtin says in his discussion of novels in the Western tradition: "What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's belief system."³⁰

Notes

1. Cf. Arthur F. Wright, "Values, Roles, and Personalities" in *Confucian Personalities*, ed. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 3–23.
2. For a discussion of this subject, cf. D.C. Twitchett, "Chinese Biographical Writing" in *Historians of China and Japna*, ed. W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleyblank (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 95–114.
3. See Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), esp. pp. 47–53.
4. Cf. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 105. Smith remarks that "Language is action, both speaking it and also listening to it, and that it always operates through the use and control of other people."
5. See Douglas M. Carey, "Lazarillo de Tormes and the Quest for Authority" in *PMLA*, 1979, #1, pp. 36–46.
6. *The life of Lazarillo de Tormes*, trans. J. Gerald Markley (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1954), p. 8. Subsequent references are to this edition.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
8. Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black*, trans. Margaret R.B. Shaw (1953; rpt. Penguin Books, 1985), p. 187. Subsequent references are to this edition.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
12. Peter Brooks, "The Novel and the Guillotine, or Fathers and Sons in *Le Rouge et le noir*" in *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), pp. 62–89.
13. Stendhal, p. 103.
14. Stendhal, p. 103.
15. D.A. Miller, "Narrative 'Control' in Stendhal" in *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 195–264.
16. Stendhal, p. 477.
17. John. T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975). John T. Matthews, "Marriages of Speaking and Hearing in *Absalom, Absalom!*" in

- The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 115–161. In his essay, Matthews suggests that Shreve, as a Canadian, “wants to provide Bon with what he lacks: a father, mother, childhood. . .” (p. 144). So Shreve the outsider may be regarded as an orphan in comparison with other narrators who belong to the same family of the South.
18. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 11.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.
 20. Matthews, pp. 115–161.
 21. Faulkner, pp. 167–168.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
 23. Matthews, pp. 134–142.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
 25. Faulkner, p. 361.
 26. For a discussion of the relationship of the novel and the social/cultural background of the South at the time of the civil war, see Eric Sunquist, “Absalom, Absalom! and the House Divided” in *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 96–130.
 27. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest*.
 28. Faulkner, pp. 261–262.
 29. Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 83.
 30. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 365.