Exchanging Values: A Comparison of Flaubert’s Concept of Irony in *Madame Bovary* and Faulkner’s Reading of Commodity Culture in *Absalom, Absalom!*

by

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ABSTRACT

Wilson Kaiser: Exchanging Values: A Comparison of Flaubert's Concept of Irony in Madame Bovary and Faulkner's Reading of Commodity Culture in Absalom, Absalom! (Under the direction of Lilian Furst)

Flaubert attacked what he called "avachissement universel," the spread of bourgeois stupidity to all aspects of French culture. Faulkner also coined a term that indicated his concern with cultural changes, "snopesism." The differences between these two concepts, bovarism and snopesism, manifest a dramatic shift in the representation of society effected by the rise of commodity culture. Focusing on classical topoi as particularly dense cultural signifiers, I look at the developing presentations of culture in Absalom, Absalom! and Madame Bovary. As stable referents of bourgeois culture, classical topoi strongly identify a set of cultural values for Flaubert that he can then ironize. Faulkner, by contrast, demonstrates the destabilization of cultural referents with the "rise of the redneck" signaled by snopesism. However, while Flaubertian irony relies on the bourgeois bêtise he criticizes, Faulkner's critique of snopesism develops the tensions between utopian fantasies of fulfillment and irretrievable loss.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: From Bovarism to Snopesism ............................................ 1
Chapter 1: Irony in Madame Bovary......................................................... 9
Chapter 2: Commodity Culture in Absalom, Absalom!............................. 23
Conclusion: Bovarism, Snopesism……………………………………………… 43
Works Cited……………………………………………………………… 44
Introduction: From Bovarism to Snopesism

The eighty years between Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! manifest a shift from a stable, culturally dominant concept of bourgeois identity to a commodity culture constructed around a fantasy of fulfillment and happiness. In the following chapters, I will argue that the language and structure of these two novels fully express this shift. Both authors were critical of their respective cultures, and their widely divergent writing style is informed by their criticisms of two different cultures. For Flaubert, the term bêtise sums up the self-satisfied, unreflective bourgeois world-view—in a word, the bovarism—he ironizes in Madame Bovary. For Faulkner on the other hand, The Hamlet describes Snopesism as the devil’s bargain, the enslaveing exchange of empty fantasy for whatever is most precious and dear. As I will argue, fantasy in Absalom functions in the same way as it does in The Hamlet, following what I will call the logic of commodity culture. Bovarism and Snopesism thus express dual critical concepts of entirely different cultural milieux. The wide divergence between these terms of cultural criticism demonstrates the extent of change between the 1850s and the 1930s, and between the bourgeois culture of France and commodity culture in the American South.

In Timothy Unwin’s introductory essay on Flaubert, he reminds us that the “author’s author is after all a man with his foibles and weaknesses, that the mystic and the ascetic bears within him a creature of flesh and blood, and is on occasions prone to staggering and startling bêtise” (Unwin 12). The OED defines bêtise as “a foolish, ill timed remark or action; a piece
of folly." As Unwin suggests in the above passage, Flaubert's usage of the term broadens and deepens this definition to include the "staggering" inconsistencies in our world-view expressed in these little slips. For Flaubert, the concept of bêtise expresses the range of simple-minded clichés that his bourgeois culture traded in like common coin. Bourgeois bêtise thus includes the banal, typical phrases behind which utterly illogical cultural assumptions might hide. The exchange of these "ideas" was as quotidian as purchasing bread or drinking coffee.

As the "hermit of Croisset," Flaubert often seems above the banality of a culture in which thinking was increasingly just another aspect of participation in this culture rather than criticism of it. His Dictionary of Received Ideas takes particular aim at this self-satisfied complicity, but the permeation of culture by "avachissement universel" made it difficult to maintain an Olympian imperturbability. This avachissement, or bovarism, is practically synonymous with bêtise for Flaubert, and his use of bêtise throughout Madame Bovary expresses both an ironic distance and a troubling proximity to these thoughtless assumptions about life. In Madame Bovary, the language and thought of bourgeois bêtise fluidly interpenetrates the novel's free indirect discourse. Because free indirect discourse inhabits the minds of the bourgeoisie it ironizes, the novel demonstrates language's continuous participation in "avachissement universel" at the same time as it ironizes such bêtise.

In my chapter on Madame Bovary, I will discuss the ways in which the narrative unavoidably participates in the exchange of meaningless clichés with its readers, even as it destabilizes those commonplaces through irony. The use of classical topoi exemplifies the narrative's participation in banally standardized codes of meaning. The language of classical culture had become a kind of cliché in nineteenth-century Europe, with its own pre-
constructed meanings and thoughtless phrases. Binet’s lathe masterpiece, his “obelisk,” fits this category of a classical topos. The strange seduction scene between Binet (just as he is completing his phallic obelisk) and Emma parodically rephrases the classical topos of Achilles’ shield, shifting this commonplace of classical literature from Homeric poesia to the absurdity of an awkward and desperate seduction, and from Homeric high epic to Dumas’ romantic drama. However, despite the destabilizing irony generated by these conflicting discourses, the obelisk nevertheless also represents a totalized work of art like Achilles’ shield that subordinates and coordinates these discourses.

Like classical topoi, the béte hidden in bourgeois clichés are replete with predetermined, banal meaning in Madame Bovary. When Emma imagines escaping with her lover, Rodolph, she fantasizes exotic scenes with white marble cathedrals: “Often from a mountain top they would espy some splendid city, with domes, bridges, ships, forests of lemon trees, and white marble cathedrals whose pointed steeples were crowned with storks’ nests” (229). This trite image is vapid in the sense that it does not reference any real city, but, like Binet’s exotic and classical obelisk, this kind of image also serves a particular and definite function in bourgeois culture. As novelistic fantasies of exoticism, Emma’s “received ideas” (idées reçues) of escape and far away lands manifest her homely attachment to bourgeois provincialism. Views from mountain tops solidly reference Emma’s taste for “the sublime,” a widespread fad for high vistas and Alpine picnics. Emma’s wildest fantasies thus place her squarely back in nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe, where the interdependent economy of escapism and subjection to social codes structures our heroine’s identity. Just as Binet’s obelisk manifests the narrative’s reliance on bourgeois clichés, Emma’s sublime visions reveal her trite bourgeois provincialism.
As I have begun to sketch, Flaubert's criticism of bètise in *Madame Bovary* or his *Dictionary of Received Ideas* assumes a stable community in which these cliches can circulate. The dominance of bourgeois culture in 19th century France meant that dense loci of meaning such as classical topoi were highly contained concepts with a limited horizon of meaning. In other words, Flaubert could count on a culture in which certain ideas were received in certain ways. This is not the case for Faulkner. In my discussion of *Absalom*, I will look at the ways in which classical references reduce and homogenize Sutpen in order to use him as a stand-in for an idealized Old Southern culture. The uses Sutpen's narrators make of him, I will argue, most closely resemble the fantasy world of commodity culture. I would like to spend the rest of this introduction defining and exploring the logic of fantasy in commodity culture through the concept of Snopesism. I propose to use this brief look at *The Hamlet* to illustrate the logic of commodity culture that is also present (although in a more subterranean way) in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Flem Snopes' aggressive plan to climb from his poor, working-class origins to a position of social and economic power is strongly reminiscent of Sutpen's "design" to achieve the cultural status of a gentleman through material wealth. Faulkner describes Flem Snopes as a man "who can cope with the new industrial age" (Gwynn 80). This "new industrial age," Faulkner continues, marks an important shift from bovarism as a cultural phenomenon of the bourgeoisie to an era that produces "Cadillac cars or the economy which will give everybody a chance to buy a Cadillac car on the installment plan, or the deep freezes. That is, all that's advertised, it has to be advertised, in order to keep people buying it..." (Gwynn 34). In this brief statement Faulkner moves from industrialism to a society of
the spectacle in which absent commodities are idealized as fetishes.¹ For Faulkner, this
commodity fetishism expresses Flem Snopes' cultural context. Although the location for The
Hamlet, Frenchman's Bend, sometimes seems like a depiction of the pre-industrial South,
without cars or factories or malls for consumers, the ubiquitous, persuasive advertising of
commodity culture signals this otherwise remote industrialism and consumerism as a utopian
fantasy. Unlike Flaubert's concept of bovarism, therefore, Faulkner's concept of Snopesism
grapples with an increasingly abstracted world of appearances. As I will argue in my chapter
on Absalom, this fantasy world interacts with reality in a complex yet interdependent way. I
argue that Faulkner described this use of fantasy in The Hamlet as Snopesism, and so we can
begin an investigation of commodity culture in Absalom by first looking at Snopesism in The
Hamlet.

The representations of commodity culture in The Hamlet cross-reference Sutpen's
“design,” suggesting that it is a brand of Snopesism. For example, in the “Eula” section, the
love-besotted local teacher stumbles into Varner's store, expecting to meet his end at the
hands of Eula’s jealously protective brother. Mounting the steps, he sees that,

on the closed door was tacked a paper placard advertising a patent medicine,
half defaced—the reproduction of a portrait, smug, bearded, successful, living
far away and married, with children, in an rich house and beyond the reach of
passion and blood’s betrayal and not even needing to be dead to be embalmed
with spaced aches, ubiquitous and immortal in ten thousand fading and tattered
offices on ten thousand weathered and paintless doors and walls and fences in
all the weatherings of rain and ice and summer’s harsh heat, about the land.”
(124)

¹ Here I am working with Benjamin’s modification of Marx’s notion of fetishism in Capital. “Marx had used
the term ‘phantasmagoria’ to describe the deceptive appearance of commodities as ‘fetishes’ in the market-
place. The Passagen-Werke entries cite the relevant passages from Capital on the fetish-character of
commodities, describing how exchange value obscures the source of the value of commodities in productive
labor. But for Benjamin, whose point of departure was a philosophy of historical experience rather than an
economic analysis of capital, the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-on-the-
market as the commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and
purely representational value came to the fore.” (Buck-Morss 3/11)

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This advertisement pictures a fantasy in minor key, tattered and neglected, yet still emanating idealized images of success and happiness that are more timeless ("immortal"), and thus more real, than the poster material or the building to which it is attached. The image gives the impression of being "ubiquitous," reproduced and distributed in the thousands. The ideals expressed in this image are also remarkably close to Sutpen's "design" to acquire "a big house with servants in it" (Gwynn 35). Sutpen functions for the narrators of Absalom the way that this "paper placard" functions for the school teacher, offering a set of ideals that are as lifeless as they are distant, "beyond the reach of passion and blood's betrayal." Absalom is a critique of this ideal, as Sutpen utterly fails to realize his design, but the snopes-like ascetic ferocity with which Sutpen approaches his originless and unrealizable dream successfully scatters him throughout the narrative, minds, and lives of the characters in Absalom like the unrealized yet idealized advertisement beckoning to the hapless school teacher in The Hamlet.

Like Sutpen's narrators, Flem Snopes is a purveyor of phantasmatic images of happiness, but unlike the storytellers of Absalom, he does not fall victim to his own fantasies. Flem's compound ability to sell without buying allows him to "cope" with the new industrial age and the commodity culture images that this age generates. In the final section of The Hamlet, "The Feasants," Flem arrives back from Texas in "a covered wagon drawn by mules and followed by a considerable string of obviously alive objects which in the leveling sun resembled vari-sized and colored tatters torn at random from large billboards—circus posters, say—attached to the rear of the wagon" (272). These objects are wild horses, but the narrative continuously describes them as a kind of gaudy advertisement or as untouchable phantoms. Like circus acts, these horses are illusionistic and entrancing, and it is apparently a
foregone conclusion that the poor farmers will spend the contents of their "tobacco sacks and worn purses, the sparse silver and frayed bills hoarded a coin at a time in the cracks of chimneys or chinked into the logs of walls" to buy these phantasms of unbound freedom (286).

Like the advertisement in the "Eula" section, these indoratibly free and noble horses represent a tantalizing set of ideals for the farmers enslaved by mortgages and land-toil. By the end of The Hamlet, Flem fully participates in the system of mortgages that generates the frustration among these farmers, and this angst in turn makes them available to these miracles of unfettered vitality. If bovarism signals participation in the bêtise of bourgeois culture, Flem's commodity world of fantastic yet costly illusions represents a kind of Snopesism that is completely alienated from any community. Flem stands apart from the crowd of men gathered to watch the horses, a coldly detached observer whose desire for money dwarfs all human considerations. He uses fantasy to recreate a world of promise for his victims, distracting these farmers from their material conditions with visions that gain their strength from this same poverty. Snopesism thus follows the logic of commodity culture described by Faulkner as advertising that seduces by promising an idealized world of superabundance for those who cannot afford it. Absalom's narrators also participate in this logic, constructing a fantasy of the Old South in the wake of its disintegration. Just as Flem's ability to entrance the farmers depends on their lack of money, so the narrators' use of Sutpen to represent the Old South manifests the absence of their ideal.

Faulkner claimed that "the Greeks destroyed [Sutpen], the old Greek concept of tragedy" (Gwynn 35). The Greek classical topoi of the foundation and homecoming myths are like the gaudy fantasy horses for the narrators of Absalom, seductive in their promises of
wild, noble, pre-Civil War freedom. These mythifying images of Sutpen are the projections of declining post-Civil War families back onto the Sutpen family. *Absalom* critiques this artificial ideal by continuously manifesting Sutpen’s fatal flaw, his Greek tragic hamartia, in his incongruity with these idealizing Greek topoi. The ideal homeland of the Old South simply does not sit easily on Sutpen’s shoulders as a backwoods “redneck” whose ruthless ambition would have made him a Snopes in a different epoch. The narrators’ fascinated mythification of Sutpen thus signals the tension between, on the one hand, his ennobling self-willed determination and, on the other, his exclusion from the caste of nobility to which he aspired. Sutpen’s dual and contradictory function in *Absalom*, I argue, follows the logic of commodity fetishism, in which the absent image simultaneously manifests and hides its alienating effects. As we shall see, Sutpen’s simultaneous embodiment of and exclusion from the idealized Old South follows a specific commodity culture logic that radically differentiates the novel from the bourgeois béitesse represented in *Madame Bovary*. 
Chapter 1: Irony in *Madame Bovary*

The concept of *bêtise* fascinated Flaubert. He inveighs against it in countless letters, ironizing and satirizing the thoughtless clichés of his contemporary bourgeois culture.

Flaubert’s first published novel, *Madame Bovary*, demonstrates this deep fascination with the thoughtless banalities of bovarism in his careful, even tedious crafting of the novel (the Goncourt brothers famously estimated an average of five words an hour). However, this craftsmanship also expressed a concept of art that diverged from the voluminous and vivacious Romantic opus of a Hugo or Balzac. Instead, Flaubert’s severe stylistic economy heavily depends on its terse, efficient quotation of bovarism in the novel. In constructing his novel as a quotation of bourgeois *bêtise*, the “author’s author” relies on the same culture he ironized, both participating in and critiquing the novelistic expectations of his readership. If bourgeois *bêtise* was the common coin of Flaubert’s mindlessly fashionable culture, *Madame Bovary* trades in that currency in the very process of demonstrating its stupidity.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which *Madame Bovary* unavoidably participates in the exchange of meaningless clichés with its readers, even as it destabilizes those commonplaces through irony. My point of inquiry into this discussion is a particularly strange scene in the novel, when Emma inexplicably attempts to seduce Binet. An unlikely object of affection, the unprepossessing tax collector (Binet) is at his hobby again, finishing a masterpiece of intricacy on the lathe when Emma bursts in and, apparently, throws herself at him. The scene reads like a trite romantic tragedy, except that Binet’s lathe-work, an obelisk,
provides an unusual and intriguing context for this otherwise novelistic incident. As a classical topos, the figure of the obelisk references nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe’s use of and interest in classical culture. This interest in classical Greece and Rome was hardly innocent, and, as I will argue below, the exchange of these signs of classical culture was an important element in the daily exchange of unreflective assumptions about the use and creation of meaning. The use of classical topoi in Madame Bovary might therefore signal the narrative’s participation in banal, commonplace codes of meaning traded amongst the bourgeoisie as empty signs of education and class.

A brief investigation of Flaubert’s ironic use of classical culture is an important preamble to my discussion of Binet’s obelisk, as it will help to contextualize Flaubert’s mock-classical topos in the same way that the concept of the sublime contextualizes Emma’s escapist fantasies. Flaubert, like his peers, was required to learn Greek and Latin as a child, and both law (the profession chosen out for him to follow) and medicine (the profession of his father and brother) borrowed at least part of their middle-class respectability from the use of commonplace language and concepts of classical culture. Literature (Flaubert’s gauntlet to his father’s bourgeois professionalism) participates just as powerfully in the nineteenth-century’s interpretation of classical culture. Classicism, like other commonplace discourse, was available for exchange amongst the middle-class and literate, signaling a set of uninvestigated general values that I will characterize in this chapter as “bourgeois.” Flaubert ironizes these unreflecting bourgeois values in Madame Bovary as a particular kind of bovarism, probably best represented by Homais. When Homais offers “saccharum” to Lariviere instead of sugar, the narrative ironizes the artificial Latinity of the chemist by juxtaposing it to the banality of the action. But more than this, the word “saccharum”
functions as an index of identity for Homais, and this signaling of bourgeois bêtise allows the narrative to ironize Homais' bovarism: saccharum is simply sugar.

In a similar but more extensive manner, Flaubert ironizes his authorial use of classical topoi in Madame Bovary in an attempt to destabilize the authoritative invocation of classical literary culture, while at the same time relying on this culture as a source of quotation. Just as the narrative uses trite language to create stable bourgeois identities for characters like Homais, it uses classical topoi to establish a stable authorial voice. In each case, the narrative’s aim is to work against the bourgeois platitudes that prescribe the narrative in unreflective, clichéd meaning; however, this mimicry also unavoidably recapitulates the structures of cliché. In the following case of Binet’s obelisk, I will argue that the classical topos simultaneously ironizes the prescriptive assumptions of bourgeois bêtise and participates in this bovarism.

Emma’s attempted seduction of Bette towards the end of Madame Bovary features the topos of the microcosmic work of art that visually contains the entire narrative within it: Achilles’ shield, or Virgil’s bronze door. Towards the end of Flaubert’s meticulously crafted work, we find Binet calmly completing a small masterpiece of his own:

Il était seul, dans sa mansarde, en train d’imiter, avec du bois, une de ces ivoirines indescriptibles, composée de croissants, de sphères creusées les unes dans les autres, le tout droit comme un obélisque et ne servant à rien; et il entamait la dernière pièce, il touchait au but! Dans le clair-obscur de l’atelier, la poussière blonde s’envolait de son outil, comme une aigrette d’étincelles sous les fers d’un cheval au galop; les deux roues tournaient, ronflaient; Binet souriait, le menton baissé, les narines ouvertes et semblait enfin perdu dans un de ces bonheurs complets, n’appartenant sans doule qu’aux occupations médiocres, qui amusent l’intelligence par des difficultés faciles, et l’assouvissent en une réalisation au delà de laquelle il n’y a pas à rêver. (Flaubert 599-600)\(^1\)

\(^1\) He was alone in his garret, busily copying, in wood, one of those ivory ornaments that beggar description, a conglomeration of half-moons and of spheres carved one inside the other, the whole thing standing erect like an obelisk and perfectly useless. He was just beginning on the last section: the end was in sight! In the chiaroscuro
The parallels between the author of Madame Bovary and Binet in this passage are multiple. Like the author, Binet is removed from Emma’s troubles, nearing the completion of the work of art that holds his complete attention. Just as Flaubert recasts the grand novel in a humble setting, Binet’s work is a reproduction in wood that recasts one of those well-known ("une de ces") pieces that claim the status of art as both skillfully intricate and made of precious materials. The use of humble materials throws all the emphasis on the skill of the artists’ work, and this display of skill is consummated by the fact that, like Flaubert’s "livre sur rien" (Furst 72)², Binet’s painstaking reproduction recreates works "ne servant à rien."³ The provincialization of art enacted by both Flaubert and Binet ironizes the works to which they refer by recasting them in common, "provincial" materials, and this recasting, in turn, ironically reflects the problematic uselessness of the original work from which the copy is made. Just as Flaubert’s novel ironizes those fictions that make grand statements about life, Binet’s "ivoirerie du bois" undercuts the value-laden inutility of those "ivoireries indescriptibles."

This same provincializing irony describes Binet at work, as his parodically epic travail ("comme une aigrette d’étoffelles sous les fers d’un cheval au galop ; ’es deux roues tournaient, ronflaient")⁴ concludes in the anticlimactic structure so typical of Madame Bovary: he was lost in one of those "bonheurs complets, n’appartenant sans doute qu’aux

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² "book about nothing (rien)" (my translation)
³ "serving no (rien) purpose" (my translation)
⁴ "like a spray of sparks under the hooves of a galloping horse, the two wheels spun and whirred" (Flaubert 360)
occupations médiocres, qui amusent l’intelligence par des difficultés faciles, et l’assouvissent en une réalisation au delà de laquelle il n’y a pas à rêver.” Free indirect discourse generates
this shift from the epic to the provincial. The dramatic drop in tone from galloping horses to
the psychology of color-by-number is an effect of entering Binet’s self-aggrandizing
“discourse” for a moment and then shifting into a narrative voice that sets the reader
violently back into the provincial context of Binet’s reverie. The narrator’s banal sense of
provincial “reality” offsets the lathe-worker’s epic fantasy, simultaneously ironizing Binet’s
middle-class claims to high art and Flaubert’s bourgeois topos of the totalized microcosmic
work of art.

Like the topos of Achilles’ shield in the Iliad, this scene with Binet describes an
artwork that encompasses the narrative of Madame Bovary; however, Binet’s artwork
represents the ironic structure of the narrative rather than the more typical presentation of
plot elements we find in classical topoi. The design of the piece is “composées de croissants,
de sphères creusées les unes dans les autres,” with one circle or crescent touching or
encompassing another, representing the ironic structure of interlacing and parallel discourse.
Like Binet’s piece, the multiplication of voices in free indirect discourse allows those voices
to both travel in their own orbit of thought and intersect smoothly or run parallel with
divergent discourses. This formal juxtaposition develops the ironies of Madame Bovary more
often than any specifically ironic content in the novel. Binet’s masterful obelisk is thus a
visual representation of free indirect discourse.

The circular arrangement of the obelisk also mirrors the repetitive entrapment of
provincial life. Like Emma’s dog, her thoughts run tight circles in a confined space. She

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5 “states of utter bliss such as men seem to find only in humble activities, which divert the mind with easy
challenges and gratify it with the most utter and complete success” (Flaubert 360)
continuously cycles through a plot sequence of expectation, disappointment, and despair conditioned by her limited range of options. In the latter half of the novel, Binet’s lathe becomes a symbol for this circularity. Just as Emma is concluding another pattern of disappointed expectations (this time with Rodolphe), she hears the lathe, “au coin de la rue, il partit d’un étage inférieur une sorte deRonflement à modulations stridentes. C’était Binet qui tournait” (242). Like the rhythmically strident pitch of Binet’s lathe, Emma’s high points of passion are structured by the boredom from which they emerge. Since it cannot formulate anything but circles or half-moons in an obelisk-like column, the repetitive circular motion of the lathe predetermines the structure of Binet’s masterpiece. Similarly, the repetitive circular motions of quotidian provincial life and the trite bourgeois language that structures this provincial life predetermine all the disappointments that continuously bring Emma back to where she began, despite her furious trajectory along that circular path.

*Madame Bovary* is a complex artwork described on the lathe of provincial life, unable to produce anything for Emma but thoughts and hopes that run along the same confined track with ever-deepening intricacy, but without progressing. While the circularity of the obelisk seems to undermine the teleological structure of the bourgeois novel, it also figures the limited and specific space of the topos that enacts an aggressive control over Emma’s ability to move or think outside of her confinement. The endless circularity of middle-class cliché fills the vacuum left by a non-totalizing voice. The syntax and vocabulary of bourgeois cliché that shape Emma’s persona also restrict her field of action; Emma always seduces in the hope of escaping cliché, although this is the avenue of “escape” prescribed by the novels she reads.

*“From the lower floor of a house at the corner came a whirring noise with strident changes of tone: Binet was at his lathe”* (Flaubert 240).
Emma's attempt to seduce Binet and his obelisk practices the self-referentiality of metanarrative as a possible avenue of escape from the endless cyclicity of the narrative structure. Shortly before Emma finds Binet at his lathe, she meditates,

Mais, s'il y avait quelque part un être fort et beau, une nature valeureuse, pleine à la fois d'exaltation et de raffinement, un cœur de poète sous une forme d'ange, _lyre aux cordes d'airain_, sonnant vers le ciel des épithalames élogiagiques, pourquoi, par hasard, ne le trouverait-elle pas? (Flaubert 335, my emphasis)7

This line of thought contains a subtle but key shift in Emma's notion of desire, moving from a male object with definite qualities to a dematerialized authorial figure who would construct a properly grand novel for our heroine. The narrative itself has become sexy for Emma. "Un être fort et beau" is Emma's cliché for her ideal man. The poet in the form of an angel abstracts this man somewhat, placing him somewhere between an object of desire and a godlike author who can write the perfect script of passion and fulfillment. The lyre, however, is no longer even a man, but an instrument of narrative that creates Emma's ideal novel: continuous "épithalames élogiagiques" that progress to ever-higher pitches of excitement and fulfillment. In other words, Emma fantasizes about seducing the narrative itself, controlling her story by reaching outside its circular confines, and this is what she sets out to do in the scene with Binet. This strategy will get her nowhere, however. "Épithalames élogiagiques," marriage and death, present the two poles of life for a nineteenth-century bourgeois woman along which she may organize the linear narrative of life, but Emma is both driven and entrapped by the ecstasy of repetition. Just as she continuously reads the same novels with the same stories, Emma is doomed to quixotically read herself into the same plot because

7 "But why, if somewhere there existed a strong and handsome being—a man of valor, sublime in passion and refinement, with a poet's heart and an angel's shape, a man like a lyre with strings of bronze, intoning elegiac epithalaminims to the heavens—why shouldn't she have the luck to meet him?" (Flaubert 354).
bourgeois cliché unfaulingly recaptures the fantasy of meta-narrating her condition and distributes this fantasy once again along the plot line of marriage and death.

For Emma, seduction is a strategy for narrativizing her life. After her first tryst with Rodolph she imagines herself as a novelistic heroine with a lover. When Emma decides to elope, she provides her circular life with the serial multi-directionality of romance, imagining herself episodically traveling through Europe with Rodolph. Besides the white marble cathedrals I mention in my introduction, Emma piles one incongruous image on top of another:

Et puis ils arrivaient, un soir, dans un village de pêcheurs, et des cabanes. C'est la qu'ils s'arrêteraient pour vivre ; ils habiteraient une maison basse, à toit plat, ombragée d'un palmier, au fond d'une golfe, au bord de la mer. Ils se promèneraient en gondole, ils se balanceraient en hamac : et leur existence serait facile et large comme leurs vêtements de soie, toute chaude et étoilée comme le mat doux qui qu'ils contempleraient. (236-7)

The free indirect discourse in this passage masterfully recreates Emma’s halting, ad hoc “narration” as an amassing of banalities. “On a bay beside the sea” is ordinarily a readily apparent aspect of a dwelling, but it comes after the “shade of a palm tree” because Emma is simply amalgamating various novelistic settings to come up with a replete fantasy world, even if it includes gondolas and cottages. Just as Binet’s obelisk is a totalizing organization of the discordant narrative of Madame Bovary, Emma’s fantasy narrative seeks to encompass all aspects of her exotic fantasy world. Rodolph is a mere adjunct to this fascination with narration, hardly figuring in her plans.

*“And then one night they arrived in a fishing village, whose brown nets were drying in the wind along the cliff and the line of cottages. Here they stopped: this would be their dwelling place. They would live in a low flat-roofed house in the shade of a palm tree, on a bay beside the sea. They would ride in gondolas, swing in hammocks, and their lives would be easy and ample like the silk clothes they wore, warm like the soft nights that enveloped them, starry like the skies they gazed upon.” (Flaubert 229-30)*
Likewise, Emma dominates Léon with her fantasies of seduction. When he admires
"l'exaltation de son âme et les dentelles de sa jupé" she sees these two attributes as bound up
in the same role of seductress (Flaubert 314). This phrase is anteclimactic for the reader who
sees that Emma has always played the same role, but for Léon she is "une vraie maîtresse" whose
overdeveloped novelistic fantasy is her most seductive element (314). In Emma's first
encounter with Leon they trade the silly platitudes that define their relationship: "'There's
nothing I love as much as sunsets,' she said. 'But my favorite place for them is the seashore.'
'Oh, I adore the sea, said Monsieur Leon'" (97). Their relationship never progresses beyond
these commonplaces of romance, and Emma's role-playing with Leon only expresses her
most novelistic attributes.

With Binet she plays the role of the desperate fallen woman, (perhaps) throwing
herself at him just as he is finishing an artwork that figures both the phallus and the narrative.
The obelisk represents Emma's notion of seduction, replacing the man with the père artwork.
With Rodolphe and Leon she demonstrates her fascination with the role-playing of
narrativization more than any interest in these men; with Binet's obelisk her fascination with
novelistic imitation is ironically sublimated: if Emma's fantasy has always been
novelistically autoerotic, she is closest to realizing that fantasy with crusty old Binet.

Whereas Emma wants a novelistic life that somehow transcends the novelistic, a
poetry that becomes poésie, Binet's phallic obelisk refers only to its novelistic setting, and
thus back to itself. A stand-in for the "hermit of Croisset," the lathe-worker is just as
provincial and entrapped as Emma. On the one hand, the novels after which the heroine of
Madame Bovary models her various roles are re-hashings of the same tired clichés, and her

1 "the sublimity of her soul and at the lace on her petticoat" (313)
2 "a real mistress" (my translation)
inability to realize the inertia of bourgeois béïse undermines her attempts from the start. On the other, Binet’s provincial masterpiece merely refers to itself as an epigonal and desiccated object “serving no purpose” and thus offering no hope of a transcendent narrative. Like free indirect discourse and Emma’s fantasy world, the obelisk can only pile up quotes in increasingly intricate patterns, but this strategy will never result in poësis.

Despite the prescriptive entrapment of Emma’s bourgeois language, she optimistically counters Binet’s obelisk with the idealizing topos of the Orphic bronze lyre (“lyre aux cordes d’airain”) that has the power to remake the world. Rather than the endlessly circular pattern of deepening complexity represented by the obelisk, Emma somehow wants a progressive narrative that nevertheless escapes the implied reiteration of the bourgeois novel. Although fantasies like Emma’s “épithalames déliéiques” foreclose the possibility of continuous novelty by their limited conceptual horizon, these same wry fantasies also compel her to escape her novelistic identity. Emma is at her most sublimely novelistic in this compulsion: the bourgeois novel always promises both predictability and continuous progressive escatologies. The novel’s repetition of the plot-that-works thus pretends to reconcile repetition and linearity, but not in the way that our heroine envisions. Her bid to seduce Binet and escape her situation is thwarted by the same bovarism that has disappointed her all along. In fact, romancing Binet’s phallic masterpiece involves Emma in the novelistic pattern of circularity in its purest self-referentiality.

If Binet’s artwork replicates the mentally and physically constrained bourgeois organization of narrative, the obelisk also represents the coercive structure of free indirect discourse in its imitation of the provincial circularity of gossip. Just as we are about to find out what happens between Binet and Emma, the narrative focalization shifts from Binet’s
room to Madame Tuvache and Madame Caron as they voyeuristically peep out of Mme Caron’s attic:

‘Ah! There she is!’ said Madame Tuvache. But the sound of the lathe made it impossible to know what she was saying.

... The tax collector [Binet] seemed to be listening, staring as though he didn’t understand. She [Emma] continued to talk, her manner gentle and supplicating. She came close to him; her breast was heaving; now they seemed not to be speaking.

‘Is she making advances to him?’ said Madame Tuvache. Binet had gone red to the roots of his hair. She grasped his hands.

‘Ah! Just look at that...!’

And she must have been suggesting something abominable, for the tax collector—and he was a man of courage: he had fought at Bautzen and Lutzen, and taken part in the French campaign, and even been proposed for the Legion of Honor—suddenly recoiled as though he had seen a snake.

‘Madame!’ he cried. ‘You must be dreaming!’

‘Women like that should be horsewhipped,’ said Madame Tuvache. (360-1)

Rather than an omniscient narrator, these two local gossips mix their uncertain voices with the narrator’s in this painful seduction scene, leaving crucial gaps in the reader’s understanding that must be filled in with generic assumptions about the role of the desperate fallen woman with which we construct and contain Emma’s identity at this point. The use of gossip to partially report this scene inculpates the two women and the reader in Emma’s role-playing, since everyone involved is reading from the same trite, novelistic script. Like other aspects of free indirect discourse, gossip is a narrative structure of partial knowledge and limited concerns that nonetheless participates in this totalizing novelistic language. It expresses the structure of provincialism and the multiplication of voices that immediately reinscribes Emma’s attempt to escape the narrative circularity created by these same structures. What Emma does not realize is that Binet’s obelisk is no bronze-stringed Orphic lyre, that the model for the bourgeois narrative is banal redundancy rather than transcendence, and that novel reading participates in the clichés of gossip rather than poesis.
Binet’s obelisk is a figure for the multiplication of voices and the provincialization of idealized classical art that structure *Madame Bovary*. It is an image of the ironic structure of gossip that uses free indirect discourse to reshape events through the multiple petty minds of provincials like Mme Tuvache, Emma, and Binet. Just as gossip feeds on novelistic events like passion and suicide, the obelisk emerges out of the same ideal art which it provincializes. Binet’s masterpiece originates from the classical topos of the microcosmic work of art that holds its disparate parts in harmonious balance. Emma’s struggles follow the same pattern as the obelisk in the sense that both are quotations of predetermined and recycled bovairisms. The impossible gap between Emma’s ideals and her prosaic situation becomes ironic when those ideals emerge out of and yet remain encompassed in the prosaic, allowing these antinomies to perpetually unbalance one another. Ironically, her exalted ideals fail because they develop out of the provincialism that conditions the naiveté of these very ideals. In a parallel manner, the obelisk represents both the ideals of novelistic art and their wooden artificiality. As a phallus, it is both an object of desire for Emma that promises narrative mastery, and a dehumanized piece that is as sterile as it is autoerotic.

The obelisk is representative of the novel because it bounds disparate voices in an artificial whole that makes a totalizing argument for the artwork’s cohesiveness. Binet’s phallic obelisk is an image of the bourgeois patriarchal origin of the multiple heterogeneous voices through which the narrative is constructed. It also organizes the multiple discourses of *Madame Bovary* into a complete image; the relationship is that between a totalized originary structure and its multiple dependent parts. The language of classical culture reasserts itself just where irony is supposed to make room for critical distance between bourgeois ‘truth’ and the novel’s displacement of that truth. In dissecting and examining unreflective, clichéd
language, the narrative has invariably reinstated these banalities because, like Emma, it cannot use bourgeois cliché without also participating in the culture of bovarism.

Classical culture has a cultural exchange value for nineteenth-century French readers and the scene with Binet participates in this system of exchange, creating a class-specific identity for the narrative through the use of classical references, as well as a dominant organizing narrative in the form of a unitary art work that encompasses the dialogism of free indirect discourse. Despite the masterfully ironic critique of bourgeois bêtise in Madame Bovary, Flaubertian irony also participates in a methodizing codification of language that partakes in the generalizing assumptions of bourgeois commonplaces. The necessity of participation thus ineluctably draws the narrative into the fashionable but thoughtless uses of language in nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. As I have argued, the very basality of the language in Madame Bovary reinforces the generalizing assumptions of bourgeois bêtise that Flaubertian irony is supposed to displace, and the triteness of Binet’s wooden obelisk demonstrates the unavoidable double movement.

In concluding this chapter, I would like to return briefly to the problem of gossip to summarize my argument. Looking at the scene with Mme Tuvache and Mme Caron, I argued that gossip is another aspect of free indirect discourse insofar as it is a narrative structure of partial knowledge and limited concerns that nonetheless participates in the banal, unreflective assumptions of novelistic language. As another vache, gossipy Mme Tuvache participates in Emma’s bovarism when she reads the scene with Binet novelistically. At the same time, her nosy voyeurism mimics the omniscient narrator as her voice mingles with the narrative’s exposition of this scene. Mme Tuvache stands mid-way between Emma and the narrator in this scene, but her mediating position mocks conventions of objective removal. Instead, she
presents the problematic inter-permeability of free indirect discourse, implicating the narrative in the béïse it ironizes. Gossip has a hard time escaping cliché, because it consists of the common coin of daily exchange that makes up the béïse that Madame Bovary ironizes. On the other hand, its obvious relation to free indirect discourse demonstrates its usefulness as a stylistic mode that juxtaposes divergent discourses, thereby creating Flaubert's ironic effect. Gossip thus nicely illustrates the intimate and troubling connection between cliché and irony that I have tried to bring out in my discussion of Madame Bovary.
Chapter 2: Commodity Culture in Absalom, Absalom!

In The Play of Faulkner’s Language, John T. Matthews explores the effects of Sutpen’s simultaneous absence and centrality in Absalom, Absalom!:

That language always escapes the simple dichotomy of presence and absence is a principle that also governs Absalom, Absalom! Each narrator embodies (invents, discovers) an identity in the words of the story he or she tells, and each telling is both true and false to the absent center—Sutpen’s ‘real’ story. Sutpen is analogous to Derrida’s trace, a product of language whose absence is encased in the movement of narrative’s difference, and whose presence is endlessly deferred by it as well. (61)

I would like to signal my proximity to this way of conceptualizing Faulkner’s fiction. In my reading of Absalom, the narrators’ description of Sutpen expresses their inability to recuperate him as a full presence, but I would like to carry this investigation further by asking a related question: if Sutpen is an absence, what kind of an absence is he? In this chapter, I will argue that Sutpen is a trace of the Old South, a synecdochic stand-in for an idealized time of noble instinct and pure will. But he is not simply a stand-in. As we shall see, Sutpen complicates the narrative-generating structure of absence by transgressing Southern cultural binaries like class and race, while his narrators respond to this complexity by mythifying Sutpen as a patriarch of the Old South.

By idealizing the Old South, the narrators of Absalom implicitly juxtapose Sutpen’s world to their own world in 1908-9. Sutpen is a thoroughly problematic substitute, however,

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1 Other students of Faulkner, perhaps most prominently John Irwin and Minrose Gwin, have also profitably read Faulkner’s fiction through the conceptual framework of absence. Irwin’s Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge looks at absence and loss from a psychoanalytic perspective. Minrose Gwin’s The Feminine and Faulkner uses French feminist theorists of the female and the feminine to investigate Faulkner’s disruption of logocentric narratives.
since he disrupts many of the categories that the narrators rely on for this juxtaposition. With this in mind, we might also call Sutpen a tactical absence. That is, he is problematically complex as a potential presence, but as an absence he is available for many logocentric roles in the various narratives of Absalom; as patriarch, gentleman, and successful parvenu he is a fulfilling presence that masks his function as trace. This tactical use of Sutpen’s absence stands out strongly against the novel’s structure of failure and loss; Sutpen is simultaneously a failed father and a patriarchal figure, a partial savage from south of the border and a man of inherent nobility, a “redneck” forever outside the South’s rigid caste system and a model of the drive to succeed in an era that valued courage above all else. Paradoxically, the narrative interest for both the readers and narrators of Absalom comes from Sutpen’s failure, since his struggle against this predetermined failure is at least partly what gives Sutpen the heroic stature that attracts his interpreters (including us). Because of Sutpen’s contradictory aspects in Absalom, he generates the narrative through his loss and absence at the same time, and for the same reasons, that he threatens to dismantle the narrators’ idealized vision of the Old South.

Because Sutpen resists his role as an absent ideal of Old Southern nobility, his narrators are constrained to develop strategies for representing him that do not disrupt this role. In this chapter, I will focus mainly on the ways in which the narrators of Absalom reference classical culture in order to contain Sutpen’s contradictory aspects as both a stand-in for the Old South and a disruptive element in their idealizing narratives. In the previous chapter, I discussed Flaubert’s simultaneous ironization and participation in the bovarism of nineteenth-century bourgeois classical topoi. In 19th century France, references to classical culture were a part of the daily exchange of Bêtise, and Flaubert signals his participation in
that culture even as he criticizes it. I propose to continue my investigation of classical
commonplaces, but I also want to emphasize the differences between classical topoi for
Flaubert and 19th century France, and references to classical culture for Faulkner’s early 20th
century American South. For example, Mr. Compson’s image of sowing dragon’s teeth, I
argue, evidences the absence and loss at the center of American commodity culture rather
than a stable mark of cultural identity as it would in Madame Bovary. In short, the difference
between Bion’s obelisk and Sutpen’s fecundity of dragon’s teeth expresses the cultural shifts
between Madame Bovary and Absalom, Absalom! In this chapter, I plan to emphasize the
divergent uses of classical topoi in order to point out the radical differences between these
two novels. For now we can say that the two novels differ in their uses of classical culture in
the same ways that bovarism differs from Snopesism.

In Reading Faulknerian Tragedy, Warwick Wadlington argues that the performative
structure of tragic elements (e.g. catharsis) in Faulkner’s fiction succeeds in expressing
authorial and readerly immortality, or a “No to death.” According to Wadlington, tragedy in
Faulkner generates a living community through shared interpretive processes like catharsis.
This shared interpretive process allows for heterogeneous elements in the text without causing
it to deconstruct under the pressure of its contradictions. Thus, the tragic performance of
Faulkner’s novels is a way of effectively creating real (and as far as I can tell, logocentric)
presence. In contradistinction to this reading, I see references to Greek tragedy as a strategic
attempt to stave off the loss and decay that permeates Absalom, Absalom!

I argue that Sutpen’s simultaneous absence and idealization follow the logic of
commodity culture, a false culture that pretends to provide community, immortality, and
satisfying fulfillment through the very performative participation that Wadlington

25
champions. We can see this in references to the house of Cadmus that pretend to bolster a narrative that is fundamentally groundless, and to make claims to a stable narrative center that is not present. For example, Mr. Compson's allusions to Sutpen as Cadmus seem to give Sutpen an identity that implies patriarchal originality, successful homesteading, etc. However, Sutpen also proves resistant to this singular identity because he is so wide-open to interpretation. Sutpen's simultaneous resistance to and embodiment of these classical allusions mimic the commodity concept of fashion, in which a fetish both completes the purchaser's identity and immediately becomes obsolete in order to make room for the next commodification in the series.

As Daniel Dennis Hill explains in *As Seen in Vogue*, the early 20th century saw the birth of the fashion industry, fueled by the growth of fashion and catalog magazines that made the concept of fashion available to every buyer in small town America. The industry was (and is) based on the principle of halting continuous development in fashions, in which each outfit was a complete identity that nevertheless would be superceded by a new fashion three months later. Like the culture of fashion, Sutpen is similarly available for the construction of multiple narrative identities that are alternately fixed and fluid. As a trace, Sutpen is a sign of fulfillment that is continuously deferred by a superabundant set of narratives. But as a characteristic of fashion in commodity culture, the trace of Sutpen also manifests the fantasies of fulfillment that cover over his absence. In other words, Sutpen's continuous redefinition does not disrupt his position as a placeholder for the Old South. Sutpen's narrators express loss through their narration, but this is not only a personal, solipsistic loss; rather, the absence-deferring narratives of *Absalom* develop from the larger social structure of commodity culture in which absence is simultaneously shifting and
totalizing. Mr. Compson’s reference to the house of Cadmus defers Sutpen’s identity by
renaming it, but, more importantly for my argument, the house of Cadmus also creates a
seemingly stable, totalizing narrative of fulfillment that sustains a larger fiction of the Old
South’s patriarchal nobility. As the Cadmian sower of dragons teeth, Sutpen is not only a
patriarch, but a divinely ordained patriarch who borrows both the certainty of past mythic
events and the modern cultural cachet of ancient Greek culture.

In my introductory discussion of Faulkner’s concept of Snopesism, I analyzed some
of the ways commodity fetishism described Snopesism in The Hamlet. This chapter
continues that discussion by looking at the ways in which the fetishizing logic of the fashion
industry illustrates Sutpen’s relationship to his narrators. If we return to my opening question
(what kind of absence is Sutpen?), we begin to see that he is what I would call a
commodity fetish. Commodity fetishism is the overdetermination whereby a commodity is
imbued with the traits of fulfillment that it both negates (as the absence of actual fulfillment)
and represents (as the placeholder of real alienated labor). As an object of exchange, Sutpen
moves from one narrator’s narrative to another. He is never present, but his overdetermined
image simultaneously conjures the fantasy of an idealized Old South and demonstrates its
absence. In this reading I am following Walter Benjamin’s work on commodity culture.
Benjamin argues that commodities express a phantasmatic dream world imbedded in our
rationalized industrial world.

In “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Benjamin suggests that the dream-
inducing commodity fetishism of capitalism strategically creates a fantasy of progress and
success at the very center of alienation. Take for example the Paris World Exhibitions, to
which tens of thousands of industrial workers were given free tickets so that they could
marvel at the machines that they had themselves built. The industrial machinery that promises the rationality of the bourgeois order of nineteenth-century France hides its alienated labor under a utopian myth of universal progress. This machinery is thus both a sign of progress and alienation, and the utopian fantasy created around it expresses both these elements.

Benjamin and Faulkner were contemporaries, and both were investigating the creation of fantasy in the mid-nineteenth century. It seems that Absalom expresses a critical cultural outlook that parallels Benjamin’s work on the rise of commodity culture, since the novel’s narrators strategically use Sutpen to create a utopian vision (or what Benjamin, following Marx, would call a phantasmagoria) of the Old South that both smooths over and manifests Sutpen’s transgressive complexities (Buck-Mora 310-11). In Absalom, the references to classical culture I am looking at are multiple and lack a stable significance, but they nevertheless function to fetishize Sutpen as an image of fulfillment that idealizes the Old South in the same way that Fioz used horses to create a fantasy image of unfettered freedom in The Hamlet. I would like to turn now to proving these claims by investigating the ways in which classical commonplace both express and repress Sutpen’s transgressive function in the novel according to the fantasy-generating logic of fashion.

I argued in the previous chapter that the mock-heroic language in the obelisk passage was meant to be understood by a well-defined readership. Since Flaubert assumed this audience would share his cultural assumptions about the meaning and uses of classical topoi, he could base his irony on these assumptions. Classical references in Absalom are diametrically opposed to this notion of a shared classical heritage. References like Mr. Compson’s house of Cadmus connect the mythic Greek past to the Old South and to the
narrators’ time in ways that are open to multiple interpretations and re-appropriation. This does not prevent Sutpen from being a place-holder for the narrators’ utopian fantasies. In fact, I argue that just the opposite is the case: Sutpen’s liminal position in Southern culture makes him ideally suited to the multiple definitions of the ideal Old South that permeate Absalom, Absalom!

Mr. Compson’s narrative exemplifies the use of classical references to try to subordinate complexity to a coherent, totalized narrative. When he encounters a detail that does not fit his mythifying narrative, he simply changes it. For example, while discussing Sutpen’s miscegenetic daughter, Clytie, he explains:

I have always liked to believe that he [Sutpen] intended to name Clytie, Cassandra, prompted by some puré dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding augur of his own disaster, and that he just got the name wrong through a mistake natural in a man who must have almost taught himself to read. (2)

The unusual commas around “Cassandra” signals a reinterpretable parenthesis that mirrors a stylistic technique which became so well known in Faulkner’s writing that it would be parodied throughout his writing career. In Absalom, this stylistic shows up as a pronoun followed by the proper name in parenthesis or parenthetical commas such as “he, Bon,” or “he (Henry).” In the above passage, Mr. Compson usurps both the author’s technique and the father’s privilege of naming his offspring in order to interject his own interpretive renaming, vying with Sutpen’s procreative control by re-authoring characters to fit his own narrative design.

Further on in the same section, Mr. Compson continues the same aggressive interpretive activity with Miss Rosa. Describing her first substantial contact with Sutpen he narrates,
When he returned home in '66, Miss Rosa had not seen him a hundred times in her whole life. And what she saw then was just that ogre-face of her childhood seen once and then repeated at intervals and on occasions which she could neither count nor recall, like the mask in Greek tragedy, interchangeable not only from scene to scene, but from actor to actor and behind which the events and occasions took place without chronology or sequence… (Absalom 62)

just as Clytie becomes the Greek tragic figure of Cassandra for Mr. Compson, he converts Miss Rosa's fairytale ogre into a “mask in Greek tragedy.” This rereading of Miss Rosa’s myth works to evacuate the temporal, bodily complexity in her interpretation of the Sutpen family, reducing her encounters with Sutpen and his family to a serial and hollow uniformity.

Mr. Compson’s image of a series of masks “without chronology or sequence” denies the bodily complexity that Miss Rosa expresses in some parts of her narrative. For example, when Clytie has Miss Rosa from going upstairs after Henry shoots Bon, she observes that Clytie’s face “was Sutpen enough, but not his; Sutpen coffee-colored face enough there in the dim light, barring the stairs” (Absalom 136). In this association with Sutpen’s mask Clytie is a “Cerberus of[Sutpen's] private hell,” but when the woman described thusly puts her hand on Miss Rosa the “eggsheet shibboleth of caste and color” falls and the arm that bars Miss Rosa’s way becomes “a fierce rigid umbilical cord, twin sistered to the fell darkness which had produced her” (Absalom 140). This savage (“fell”) darkness is not only the “wild” slave blood in Clytie, but also Sutpen’s ogre “redneck” blood connecting Miss Rosa through her sister to his family. The “caste” that falls when Clytie touches Miss Rosa is thus also the white (“eggsheet”) class system that separated “rednecks” from respectable ladies. Miss Rosa’s bodily contact with Clytie breaks the paper-thin segregations of class and race, both of which inhere in Clytie’s status as a miscegenetic daughter of a parvenu.
Miss Rosa’s concern with bodily identity ("the citadel of the central I-Am’s private own") in Absalom becomes a severe problem for the post-war South with the end of slavery and the "rise of the redneck," when the "eggshell shibboleth of caste and color" fractures (Absalom 139; Rhotner 192). The timeless, mythic, serial masks of Greek tragedy that Mr. Compson ascribes to Miss Rosa’s understanding of the Sutpen’s personal and familial masks. The societal changes identified by Miss Rosa’s phrase "caste and color" signal the decline of families like the Compsons that hold on to the Old Southern ideals of the conduct of gentlemen and ladies. If this reading is accurate, Mr. Compson’s contemporary relationship to cultural changes in the South actively frames his aggressive re-reading of Miss Rosa’s narrative by covering up the complex bodily contemporaneity that drives his depiction of the Old South. The series of disembodied masks imaged by Mr. Compson denies the convoluted, blood filled bodies behind the mythic uniformity of Greek tragedy.

The timelessness of myth also expresses itself in the repetition of narrative. As a classical topos, Mr. Compson’s Greek tragic masks repress Miss Rosa’s bodily understanding of difference by reducing all of her encounters with Sutpen to a single, reiterated moment that regresses into the past with the uniformity of a Chinese box. Likewise, the continuous recounting of the event in Absalom also tends to cover over and evacuate the spots of time in the narrators’ stories, simphifying problematic detail in the process of creating a seamless myth of the past. This reductive recapitulation shows up in Miss Rosa’s narrative, when she returns to the day that Henry shot Bon: "And then I went back home and stayed five years, heard an echoed shot, ran up a nightmare flight of stairs, and found—" (Absalom 149). Clytie has disappeared from this dream-like narrative along
with the "acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsed time." The complex interaction of bodies has become the ghostly absence that Mr. Compson describes as a characteristic of gentlemen and ladies. This mythic mood characterizes large portions of Miss Rosa's narrative, cutting her off from her own story "like a sheet of glass though which we watch all subsequent events transpire as though in a sound vacuum, impotent, helpless, fixed" (Absalom 151). Miss Rosa's mythification of these traumatic events disempowers her, presenting "stillborn" moments that are cut off from the present, rather than allowing her to actively renegotiate these moments in a meaningful, bodily present.

Clytie does not entirely disappear from this part of Miss Rosa's narrative, but her body has been reduced to a mythifying binary organization. Unlike Miss Rosa's earlier encounter with Clytie's unfathomable body under that "eggshell shibboleth of caste and color," Clytie is now a simple combination of antithetical principles, "half untamed black, half Sutpen blood: and if 'untamed' be synonymous with 'wild,' then 'Sutpen' is the silent unseeping viciousness of the tamer's lash" (156). Both "caste and color" and "felt darkness" are phrases that participate in a logic of both-and, complexly mixing Sutpen and his slaves in the single body of Clytie. Clytie's Greek tragic namesake, Clytemnestra, mirrors this complexity, as she constitutes a set of ambiguous motives for her actions. Clytemnestra mixes mother and adulteress, murderer and victim in a single body. Clytie's compound body also creates a space of undecidable ambiguities between "caste and color." Conversely, in this passage Miss Rosa denies Clytie's body, mythically organizing white and black blood into opposing forces. As a "tamer's lash," the Sutpen blood in Clytie's body "tames" her "wild" black blood, suggesting that the naturalized order of master and slave recapitulates its binary structure even at the site of the body. Miss Rosa's simplifying dream-like and a-
temporal style in this passage thus also masks a set of ideological assumptions about racial purity that correspond to the myths of the Old South. The earlier phrase "twin sistered to the fell darkness" has somehow lost its intertwining in Miss Rosa’s recapitulation, separating Clytie into homogenous discrete units necessary for both myth and segregation.

The evacuation of time and the complexity of bodies in _Absalom_ usher in a purified space of simple categories and binary antagonisms. Sutpen is a problematic stand-in for the master’s whip, however, as Miss Rosa’s earlier narrative of her encounter with Clytie signals. The "eggshell shibboleth of caste and color" refers to Sutpen’s caste as well as his slaves’ color. Miss Rosa’s later binarization of these categories thus ignores one of the foundational premises of _Absalom_: that a subordinate “redneck” can rise to the position of a plantation owner through industry and will-power. As a parvenu, Sutpen does not represent the naturalized order of master and slave so much as threaten to expose the arbitrary structure of this binary. Just as Miss Rosa’s later discussion of Clytie organizes her complex body into discrete binary units, and just as Mr. Compson’s Greek masks deny Miss Rosa’s bodily identity, the a-temporal myths in _Absalom_ work to cover over Sutpen’s problematically uncertain status.

The mythic separation of blood into homogenous discrete units and the evacuation of bodily desire counteract the fears after the Civil War of racial pollution that Eric Sundquist characterizes as “a convulsive hysteria about potential miscegenation” (Hobson 135). As Sundquist points out, the concept that would categorize Clytie in Miss Rosa’s narrative would not have been “miscegenation,” a post-bellum term, but “amalgamation.” The concept of amalgamation comes from a muddy genealogy of Medieval Latin and French, and connotes inseparable admixture and polluting confluence when it is applied to concepts of
race. It is importantly different from the pure Latin terms *miscere,* "to mix," and *genus,* "race," with its implications of a priori distinct racial categories. The post-bellum myths perpetuated through classical topoi in *Absalom* demonstrate the same evacuation of complex bodily amalgamations by creating a set of absolute binary categories. The utopian gynelotry that Miss Rosa alternately refutes and embraces divides the Old South into ladies, gentlemen, and the wild un-gentility that doubly inhabit Clytie’s amalgamated body. This schema implicitly places Sutpen and his kin a race (or a caste) apart from Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson as a fairytale man-eating ogre with his cannibal slaves. Sutpen is uncomfortably indistinguishable from his slaves as he works, fights, and lives with them. He is thus as wild in his un-gentility as his slaves, and Clytie is born of this doubly polluting "fell darkness."

The classical Greek topoi that I have considered up to this point participate in myths of linguistic as well as conceptual and original purity. Mr. Compson’s imputation of Sutpen’s unschooled ignorance in Greek mythology in his naming of Clytie parallels the categorical, Latinate concept of miscegenation in its rectitude and precision. Sutpen not only demonstrates his impure origins by mixing his mythological references, he also muddies his language with incongruous Latinate expressions. In rare instance of Sutpen’s reported voice, Grandfather Compson illustrates his “bombastic phrases” with the words “adjunctive” and “incremental,” both of which sound oddly pretentious. The linguistic context of Faulkner’s *South* and the typical language in his novels is based on Anglo-Saxon and full of colloquialisms. By contrast, Sutpen’s language sounds artificially Latinate because it is juxtaposed in *Absalom* with speech like Wash Jones’ eternally repeated phrase “Well, Kernel, they kill us but they aint whapped us yit, air they?” (*Absalom* 184). As a place holder for Sutpen’s “redneck” origins, Jones and his mode of speaking incriminates the artificial
“bombast” of Sutpen’s use of words like “incremental” and “adjunctive.” Jones stands at the opposite pole from Grandfather’s casually educated language. The French term bombast represents sound Shakespearean English, and mocks Sutpen’s artificial Latinity as the sign of a parvenu who tries too hard. “Bombast” in Grandfather’s mouth is natural and ironic, whereas Sutpen’s artificiality only points to the very caste differences he wants to efface. Sutpen’s incongruous language illustrates his untenable middle position between the absolute caste differences represented by the two linguistic registers of Wash Jones and Grandfather.

Sutpen’s uncertain class identity presents a severe problem for the narrators of Absalom that goes well beyond his “bombast.” Without a proper foundation myth, there can be no utopian Old South in which to locate an idealized, fetishized presence. Sutpen’s transgressions of caste point to the narrators’ contemporary situation, when the “rise of the redneck” was breaking down old social barriers. The narrators’ fear of this “rise” through class barriers is reflected in the depiction of Sutpen as a parvenu whose success signals the downfall of the Old South’s caste system. Although caste is rarely mentioned in Absalom outside of Miss Rosa’s phrase, there is an important development of the concept in a passage on the South’s defeat in the Civil War:

…battles lost not alone because of superior numbers and failing ammunition and stores, but because of generals who should not have been generals, who were generals not through training in contemporary methods or aptitude for leading them, but by the divine right to say ‘Go there’ conferred upon them by an absolute caste system… (Absalom 345)

Caste clearly refers to class differences here as well as racial segregation, since these generals would say “Go there” to white men in an all-white Confederate army. The war therefore literalizes the white caste system of the South in Absalom, Absalom! As a Colonel, Sutpen achieved status in the caste system he sought to transgress just as it was collapsing.
around him. Sutpen’s transgressions of the Southern caste system thus paradoxically undermine his own “design,” but it also demonstrates the emptiness of the narrators’ utopian fantasies of an Old South that relied on arbitrary caste distinctions at the same time that it championed noble instinct and pure will.

Several of the narrators of Absalom illustrate this simultaneous achievement and failure in Sutpen’s relationship to the “redneck” squatter Wash Jones. Wash’s appellation “Kernel” apparently refers to Sutpen’s army rank, but this title comes in the context of Sutpen’s fantasy (according to Grandfather’s narrative) of a master-slave relationship. Jones is like the “negro” servant who pours drinks for the plantation owner in Sutpen’s childhood experience. Military rank blends into a social caste system in these scenes, reminding the reader of Sutpen’s own childhood conception of “the difference between white men and white men” (Absalom 226). This context of social and military caste further bleeds over into sexual and procreative caste systems. As seed, “kernel” also references Sutpen’s ambivalent “fecundity of dragon’s teeth,” foreshadowing the Kernel’s attempted exploitation of Jones’ granddaughter, Milly, to produce a male heir for his line of princes. The absurdity of this final attempt at a myth of the Old South plantation exaggeratedly illustrates the destabilization of idealized Southern patriarchy in Absalom.

The complex interplay and transgression of binary social codes focuses on Sutpen because of his uncertain and shifting social position. Just as Clytie’s “fierce rigid umbilical cord” transgressively brings bodies into contact by intermixing “caste and color,” Sutpen’s mediating position between the supposedly inflexible social hierarchies breaks these categories down. According to the caste system Sutpen comes to represent in Absalom, Milly could no more re-establish Sutpen’s line of princes than Sutpen could found a dynasty or
become Kernel in the first place. *Absalom*’s narrators continuously struggle with the dissonance between the accepted premises of the novel (that Sutpen successfully transgresses social boundaries) and the impossible conclusions that they each draw from these premises (that Sutpen cannot succeed in his transgressions).

Unlike Quentin, Mr. Compson, or Miss Rosa, Shreve stands apart from the other narrators in his attempts to bypass this tension between premises and conclusion by self-consciously treating the narrativization of the Old South as a game, likening it to “the theatre,” and demanding that Quentin let him “play” too (*Absalom* 217). Shreve’s play has the effect of destabilizing the entire myth of the Old South by questioning the concept of an original homeland. He undoes Mr. Compson’s depiction of Sutpen as a Cadmus in the final section of *Absalom*, re-imagining the previously stable topos of (Cadmian) Thebes as a site of African roots rather than white European ancestry:

> I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won’t show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (*Absalom* 378)

The founding of Thebes is a commonplace in *Absalom*, but there are two cities that own that name: one is mythological and Greek, while the other was actual and black, founded by “African kings.” If Mr. Compson assumes that Cadmus’ city is part of a white European heritage, Shreve reverses those assumptions in this passage. As Martin Bernal has shown, the Western myth of Greece as the origin of Western culture is a construction that tells as much about the racism of the storytellers as it does about the origins of the story (24). In many ways, then, the Greek myths in *Absalom* have been specifically white myths of origin that ignore the black founders and originators who ruled over the same, yet somehow different,
city: one further south. For Shreve, Jim Bond illustrates the problems with Mr. Compson’s myths of origin. Descending from Sutpen’s rejected offspring, Jim Bond crosses between the Greek Thebes/South of white myth and the African Thebes/Haun that this Canadian transplant wants to mythologize as a more original origin. Jim Bond, in other words, is living evidence of the impurity of the project of narrativizing origin in *Absalom*, and as such he disrupts the originary patriarchal myth of Sutpen and the Old South.

Shreve’s play successfully disrupts the narrative cycle of utopia in *Absalom*, but in doing so he also abandons the culture that organizes the novel. The myth of the Old South unites the narrators, even as their transgressive complexity struggles against this simplified, absolute myth. This complex relationship creates a rich interplay of meanings that relies as much on an idealized Old South as it does on the loss of that ideal in the narrators’ present. Shreve disregards the struggle with the mythic Old South because he fails to take it seriously. He simply does not realize that these fictitious ideals form an integral part of the identities of the other narrators. By changing the rules of the game, Shreve has misunderstood the tragic structure of *Absalom*. This, I believe, is why Shreve’s narrative closes the novel: the narrative tensions that bound the other narrators together no longer exist after Shreve’s originless play.

Faulkner once said that “the Greeks destroyed [Sutpen], the old Greek concept of tragedy” (Gwynn 35). In each of the narratives in *Absalom*, there is a fatal flaw, a hamartia, that results in the punishment of the putative hero and attempts to redress his paradoxical status. In the Greek tragic tradition, the *para doxa* was the transgression against social codes (*doxa*) that the tragedy would demonstrably correct. I propose that Sutpen’s *para doxa* was his transgression of the social caste system, and that the narrators attempt to recuperate this transgression by reincorporating him into a hierarchy that he (paradoxically) cannot
represent. The narrators thus re-ress Sutpen’s transgressions by making him stand for both the myths of the Old South and their failure in order to punish him for this para doxa.

However, whereas tragic paradox would eventually restate the doxa, Sutpen’s failure simultaneously signals the crumbling of the social edifice on which his myths are built. For Miss Rosa, Sutpen is that symbol of nobility, a “horseman,” and at the same time an ogre, “not even a gentleman;” for Mr. Compson and Grandfather Compson, Sutpen is an originary patriarch while his language expresses his parvenu “innocence;” for Quercin, Sutpen is another absent father, with all the attendant ambiguities implied by his mantra “father said” (Absalom 8, 240). The contradictions in and among these narrators’ stories signal the problematic interdependence of Sutpen’s transgression and reconstitution of the doxa. The paradoxical structure of Absalom thus expresses the narrators’ desire for an idealized presence that hides the disintegrating racial and caste system (its doxa).

As a figure of continuously re-narrated transgression and punishment, Sutpen allows the narrators to ritually re-establish the mythic Old South, but they can only do so in a complex, temporally-bound present that resists this reductive mythification. In a strange back-and-forth movement, the longed-for homecoming back to the Old South would also be a return to the parvenu (Sutpen) who points forward to the “rise of the redneck” contemporary with the narrators’ idealizing narrative. This circular repetition of desire and absence binds the diverse narratives of Absalom together, simultaneously disrupting and generating the utopian fantasy that drives the narrative. As I have argued in the first part of this chapter, and as I have hoped to prove in the second, the production of fantasy in Absalom relies on absence that follows the simultaneously shifting and totalizing logic of commodity culture. As a fetish, Sutpen is passed from one narrative to another, an absence that is
continually redefined without changing his role as a place holder for a fantasy that covers over an irretrievable absence.

As I argue in my introduction, Faulkner develops the broader context of these cultural changes in his 1940 novel, *The Hamlet*. This first book of the Snopes trilogy signals the absence and alienation that increasingly pervades the author’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County. The narrators of *Absalom* are contemporary in 1909 with the rise of Flem Snopes in Frenchman’s Bend, when they might have linked Sutpen’s “unscrupulousness” with Snopesism. Like Thomas Sutpen, Flem comes from unspeakable “redneck” origins that he makes up for with an astonishing rapacity. I am not contending that *Absalom* is another version of *The Hamlet*: Snopesism signals the complete transgression of any doxa, while *Absalom’s* narrators constantly labor to mythically reconstruct the social codes of the Old South. I am arguing, however, that the absence of a stable doxa drives both novels. As a stand-in for the myth of the Old South, Sutpen represents for the narrators of *Absalom* what the wild horses represent for the farmers of Frenchman’s Bend. In either case, a fantasy-world of desire is built around lack. In my discussion of both *The Hamlet* and *Absalom*, I have referred to this structure in terms of the fetishism of commodity culture.

I would like to end my discussion of *Absalom* by looking at one more episode from *The Hamlet* in order to draw out its similarities with Faulkner’s 1936 novel. The abandoned plantation property that gives Frenchman’s Bend its name is notoriously difficult to sell. Flem Snopes manages, however, to convince several men that there is gold buried in the rose garden, gaining enough by the sale to make his important move to town. Flem’s trickery involves more than the salted mine trick, as the context of the story shows. The locals assumed that the buried gold was left by the plantation owner during the Civil War, just
before his mansion was ruined. The narrator describes the remains of a “tremendous house” standing amongst Oak trees, “where it had been decreed too by the imported and nameless architect and its master” (The Hamlet 338).

The parallels with Sutpen’s Hundred are clear, but instead of Miss Ross’s fascination with the mysteriously absent Sutpen family, Bookwright, Ratliff, and Armstid come to this decrepit mansion because Flem entices them with the fantasy of the riches of the Old South. Just as with the wild horses, Flem manipulates his victims’ fantasies of an affluent and free antebellum South in this story. For the narrators of Absalom, the Old South is the site of satisfied desire, where absence finally is fulfilled. Likewise, the mythical, abundant riches of the antebellum South promise fulfillment for the three men tricked by Flem. However, for these three treasure-hunters, this myth of past opulence translates into hard ready cash in their present commodity culture, as they each fantasize about what they will buy with all that antebellum gold. Conversely, the narrators of Absalom search for an idealized past, expressing their desire for a mythical antebellum economy of noble instinct and pure will that specifically rejects their present commodity culture.

Bookwright and Ratliff quickly realize their deception when they find that their coins are newly minted, not part of a buried mythic past but of present expenditure. Armstid, on the other hand, cannot reject his fantasies of an opulent South, and goes crazy with desire for an ideal that would negate his present misery. In a terrifying irony, his insanity achieves this escape, but at the cost of his consciousness of the present. He incessantly digs for buried treasure like a dehumanized “mechanical toy,” driven by absence and the myth of abundance (365). Absalom’s narrators also maniacally excavate Sutpen’s past in the hopes that they will realize the fantasy of the Old South. Like Armstid, the narrators’ utopian fantasies cycle
around an idealized absence that masks the terrible complexity of their present world that, one could argue, pushes its narrators towards a similar insanity. The scheming Snopesism of *The Hamlet* looms in *Absalom* as well. Flem’s ability to sell without buying comes from his ability to manipulate cultural ideals in the same way that commodity culture does; with fetishized utopian fantasies. The two decrepit mansions in *Absalom* and *The Hamlet* signal both the decrepitude of the idealized Old South and the narratives’ readiness to re-imagine these sites as present utopias that deny the shifting, empty logic of commodity culture. On the other hand, the classical topoi in *Absalom* signal the backwards-looking yearning for a complete and totalized past embossed in classical topoi, while the present of *The Hamlet* dispenses with these commonplaces altogether, exposing the idealized past as a myth that masks a snopesist present.
Conclusion: Bovarism, Snopesism

Although I have focused on the differences between Madame Bovary and Absalom, Absalom!, my initial point of comparison between these two works stems from their fundamental similarities. Both works are critical of the world-view of their cultures. As cultural critics, both authors challenge the interpretive habits of their contemporaries. Flaubertian irony destabilizes the univocal certainty of linear narrative by continuously introducing the possibility of multiple and often contradictory interpretations. Free indirect discourse undermines the role of the omniscient narrator, scattering him amongst the characters and introducing narrative uncertainty in the process. Likewise, Faulkner explores the commodity culture of his time. The absence at the heart of Absalom, Absalom! engenders the dislocation of the narrative, and assures that the novel will fail to produce a confirming fantasy of completion. This Faulknerian absence works like fashion, generating the desire for completion at the same time that it guarantees the impossibility of completion. In either case, Madame Bovary and Absalom, Absalom! challenge the fantasy of a stable, present sense of self that coordinated the assumptions on which their cultures depended. Emerging from specific historical moments, the dual critical concepts of bovarism and snopesism thus unavoidably describe, criticize, and also participate in their respective cultural milieus.
WORKS CITED


