Thinking of the Realist Novel and "Inappropriate" Attitudes of Faulkner's Narrators: Reenactments of the Nineteenth-Century Novel in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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This essay is based on the paper presented in October 2006 at the ninth national conference of the William Faulkner Society of Japan, and has been revised so that it would be a response to the common topic both of the symposium at the twelfth national conference of the Society and of the twelfth issue of the Society's journal, "The Postmodern Faulkner."

Introduction

One of Faulkner's major novels, *Absalom, Absalom!*, is structured as a frame story: narrators in the twentieth century recount a story of Thomas Sutpen taking place in the mid-nineteenth century South, or the era around the Civil War. When we take into account tragic nature and serious tone of such narrations in Faulkner's works, calling the narrators' attitude ethically "inappropriate" would seem blasphemous, an "inappropriate" attitude on the critic's part. Faulkner's male white narrators usually do their best to articulate events of the past, at least at the level of their subjective intentions; in that sense, their ethical stance is far from "inappropriate." Ike in *Go Down, Moses*, another example of such Faulknerian narrators, earnestly confronts his family's founder Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin's sins: the narrator confronts his own ancestor's rape of a slave woman and subsequent incest with their daughter through the close reading of the ledgers containing traces of the ancestor's deeds and the interpretation of the descriptions into a "story," and his endeavor culminates in his tragic moral predicament in the final stage of his life. In this essay we will argue that those

male narrators endowed with social status and power are, in spite of their best intentions, often unable to avoid moral "inappropriateness" in regard to events and characters in their narrative; we will see how their subjective "earnestness" or "seriousness" fails to fulfill their decent aspirations, sometimes even bringing about contrary consequences.

Both of these works provide critics of historicist orientation such as post-colonialism with good opportunities to apply their interests in actual history to reading of texts. Such criticism, however, often fails to pay due attention to the equally historically-conditioned self-consciousness of Faulkner as a "Modernist": positivistic methodology of criticism consisting of detailed research into "objective" historical facts and backgrounds and their application to the reading of the texts implicitly takes thinking of the nineteenth-century Realist novel for granted, and consequently ignores the Modernist's awareness of the difficulty in writing (i.e., articulation of so-called "reality" with words) and of the predicament that, after World War I, the first "total war," one cannot write in the same way as the nineteenth-century novelists and effectively deal with the world he or she lives in.[1] Text-oriented critics, who are descendants of Russian Formalists, New Critics, etc., often denounce such critical methodology from the side of text-oriented critics, insisting that such "historicist" approaches are extrinsic to "literature" and the "novel"; such denunciation, however, would be in itself extrinsic to the critical principles different from theirs, and hence less than convincing. We will rather pay attention to the contradictorily twisted premises of such historicist readings of Faulkner's novels such as *Absalom* dealing with the past, in the sense that their critical methodology implicitly involves ahistorical "universalization" of historically-determined assumptions of the Realist novel, a leading literary genre of the nineteenth century (like Balzac's works, filled with persistent descriptions of "things" material, commensurate with the Western bourgeois society of the era), whose characteristics we will attempt to illustrate and elucidate in this essay.

1. “(Post-)Modern” Narrating “Subjects”

From chapters 2 through 5 of *Absalom*, Mr. Compson retells Quentin the story of the Sutpens, succeeding the overtly-subjective starting point Rosa has told in chapter 1. This schematization of the structure of narration in the former half of the novel, however, is oversimplified: in this part (as well as in the latter half) Mr. Compson's narration is frequently intruded on by what seems to the voice of the “author.” Such interventions of the “author's” narration, in the case of *Absalom*, cause difficulty in determining reliability of what are told: in usual “frame stories” it can fairly easily be determined which narrative is reliable and which is not even when they are told by an “unreliable narrator” (Booth 158-59, 273-74), while in *Absalom* it is often debatable which narration is “unreliable” as well as which parts are endowed with the “authority” of the “author's voice.” We will, in this essay, deal with this unusual kind of the “author's voice's” intervention as an integral part of Mr. Compson's narrative so as to make clear the characteristics of his narration and the novel. This is an unusual strategy, to be sure, but then there are small number of novels in which the first-person “subjective” narration and the third-person “authorial” one intertwine with each other, the former taking a dominant position (we, nevertheless, can find abundant instances of such narrations in Faulkner's works); this, therefore, is a strategy especially designed to deal with Faulkner's texts' singularity, with little theoretical claim for universal applicability.

As for such a structure of narration, Hiraishi asserts that the “author” is entitled to exercise his or her “authority” in guaranteeing reliability of a novel (Hiraishi 175-202). I, notwithstanding, would rather take another stance about the presence of the “author” in a text, in hopes of maintaining autonomy of literature in the tradition of New Criticism, which is in close relation to Southern literature, or the desire for the novel to be an autonomous construct, a microcosm consisting solely of words: in this essay I will strategically refrain from resorting

to the "author" as an extratextual entity in dealing with such singular characteristics of narrating voices (both that of Mr. Compson in the former half and those of Quentin and Shreve in the latter half) of *Absalom*. Then I will turn, first, to the notion of "intersubjectivity" proposed by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, in his attempt at the beginning of the twentieth century to overcome the limitations of solipsism inherent in the notion of "subjectivity" or the Cartesian cogito at the basis of the nineteenth-century view of humanity (or the frames of reference embodied in Realist novels of the era) by "bracketing" the "natural attitude," i.e., naïve belief in existence of things and in human ability to perceive them, and establishing a basis for all knowledge, and, second, to Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality," which derives from the phenomenologist's theory (Kristeva 85). These notions will make it possible for us to problematize the modern view of humanity formed by the Enlightenment and the Romanticism in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, which has come to be taken for granted and considered "universal" in the last two centuries and provided "natural" views of the world as proposed by Realist novels and other works of literature of the era; this attempt, then, will make it possible for us to understand the nature of narrating "subjects" of *Absalom*. They are no longer such Romantic "individuals" distinct from the world and people around them and thus transcendentally autonomous, but are intersubjectively and intertextually constructed narrating "subjects" that can only find words in the networks or the (inter)texts consisting of the "language of the Other," instead of one's own; the boundary between their consciousness and the world around them can hardly be distinctly defined. With this (post)modernist view of human subjectivity in mind we can begin to grasp the reversed relationship between fictional characters' voice and the author's, that is, preeminence of the formers' narration and subordinate position of the latter's: the "author" does not dominate the narration of the text with authority. Faulkner, in spite of today's dominant critical presumption that could be summed up with the notion of the "death of the author" proposed by

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, had the desire to be an "author" "own[ing]" and having authority over the world he has created, as we can see in the caption of the map attached to the end of *Absalom*: "WILLIAM FAULKNER—SOLE OWNER & PROPRIETOR." The text of *Absalom*, however, is not determined by such a subjective desire on the part of the "author" but shows an inverted relationship between the "author" and fictional characters of his "creation," in the sense that the autonomous power of the characters' words prevails over the "author."

2. Belief in the Material Level of "Things" as a Principle of Realism

There are three characteristics in Mr. Compson's narration which make it seem credible to a certain amount, at least reliable enough to provide Quentin and Shreve with a starting point from which they can begin to seek for Sutpen's "true story" in the latter half of the novel. First, it tends to assert something forcibly without specifying its grounds, implying that its credibility is self-evident (for example, he says "I can *imagine how* Bon told Henry broke it to him. I can *imagine Henry in New Orleans*, who had not yet even been to Memphis, whose entire worldly experience consisted of sojourns at other houses, *plantations, almost interchangeable with his own*, where he followed the same routine which he did at home – *the same hunting and cockfighting, the same amateur racing of horses on crude homemade tracks*, ..." [86; emphases added]). Second, it lays emphasis on visual aspects of the things told, and leads to the illusion that the event is taking place before the eyes of the narrator and the listener, which would seem hollow without the above-mentioned forcible insistence on the narration's reliability (for example, frequent use of noun clauses "how . . ." and image-oriented descriptions of transactions between Henry and Bon [see emphasized parts of the quote above], which usually would have been explanations of circumstances, and, most notably, successive use of noun clauses in the scene from the end of chapter 4 to the beginning of chapter 5, in which

Wash Jones goes to Rosa to report the killing of Bon). Third, it suggests his advantageous position to the source of information on Sutpen's story, or his quasi-directness, as it were, in accessing the events, in the sense that he has heard about the Sutpens from Quentin's grandfather General Compson, practically the only person, among the people in Jefferson bewildered about how to deal with the mysterious newcomer, who was able to comprehend everything about him, won his confidence, and became his guardian to whom the stranger felt he could confide his secrets.

In respect to the third point, Rosa should be able to claim higher degree of directness. Her narrative's reliability, however, is compromised for three reasons: first, the way she narrates the story tends to give away the narrator's excessively subjective value judgements because she had been so close to him as to be often emotional (she says: "He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own anymore than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it." [9]; in this lengthy illustration of Sutpen the only reference to facts is just that he was wearing two guns and riding a horse); second, by her being too young to understand the meanings of what are taking place when Sutpen was alive, and, third, her narrative contains insufficient amount of concrete images because, in addition to her frequent use of abundant adjectives, modifiers, adverbs, and so on for the first reason mentioned above, events of consequence in Sutpen's story usually take place either on the other side of doors and walls or away from her, instead of in front of her eyes.[2]

Mr. Compson's narrative, in contrast, takes on the status of the source of "more objective information" and replaces Rosa's subjective one, on account both of lack of palpable descriptions of the scenes where General Compson hands on the information to his son (thus the text avoids representations of indirectness and vicariousness of the son's access to the Sutpens' story) and also of his

hereditary position as the legitimate inheritor, which brings about the equation "General Compson ≒ Mr. Compson." To the third ground of his narratives' reliability based on his quasi-direct access to the events told, our "accepted truth" of "individualism" does not apply: we take for granted the view of humanity that a person is a distinct, autonomous, separate individual even when he or she is a kin of someone, but in Faulkner's world blood relations often subvert this belief. Mr. Compson, therefore, seems to imply that he is justified in telling stories of Sutpen and his family because he is the legitimate inheritor of General Compson; the extended version of the equation above, "General Compson ≒ the Compsons ≒ Mr. Compson," is suggested, providing a ground for Mr. Compson's narrative. Consequently, his accounts of Sutpen's advancement in the town supported by General Compson's understanding and guardianship, function as an index of his father's greatness and mental capacity; in contrast, Theophilus, the patriarch of the McCaslins at the time, as distinguished in the world of Yoknapatawpha as the Compsons, and the father of Ike, the protagonist of *Go Down, Moses*, gives away his provincial narrow-mindedness, or his mental lack of capacity for accepting things alien or urbane as embodied in Charles Bon, who is a Catholic coming from New Orleans, which retains influences of French culture: "*. . . and Theophilus McCaslin said, 'Catholic be damned . . .' . . . 'Yaaaay, Forrest! Yaaay, John Sartoris! Yaaaaaay!' . . .*" (122; italics in the original text). Mr. Compson's narrative seems to imply that the Compsons are the greatest among the three most renowned faimlies, the Compsons, the McCaslins, and the Sartorises, both in the partiarch's stature and in the influential role he plays in the rise and fall of the Sutpens, which has come to be a common obsessive memory of the community.

Now we will go back to the second characteristic of Mr. Compson's narrative, emphasis on visual aspects. We usually do not use visually-oriented expressions, which we frequently find in chapters 2 through 5, when we talk about events and stories. To put it in grammatical terms, we seldom choose the style of expression abundantly employing noun-clauses beginning with wh-words

(for example, "*how* . . ."); we instead use sentences and that-clauses consisting of the subject and the predicate(s), with the emphasis on the verb at the beginning of the predicate, like "(Someone) did (something)." Mr. Compson's "narrative act," notwithstanding, frequently employs the former kind of visually-oriented style using noun-clauses and expressing static state of the incident, instead of the latter syntax centering on the verb designating a movement. This unnatural style of narration is comparable with an aspect of the nineteenth-century Realist novel, the sort exemplified by works of Balzac, etc., in which descriptions of the physical level of "things," or material objects, are excessively abundant, arresting the progress of the story (namely, movements). Mr. Compson's style is often considered "literary" in the sense that it is decorative and full of allusions to Greek mythology and fin-de-siècle literary figures. It, on the other hand, also exemplifies another assumption of the nineteenth-century view of the world, namely, its tendency to prefer "showing" to "telling" (Booth 8), which suggests the belief that visuality of description, or directness of the experience, ensures reliability of the representation: Realist novels embody the era's positivistic belief in natural science, that is, the conviction that one can only trust objective observation of the physical level of "things," that, correspondingly, one should be skeptical about other levels such as mediations or ideas, and that arduous description of "things" belonging to the level of physical materiality leads to knowledge of truth. The principle of description in the Realist novel includes the idea that it is desirable to create an illusion that events are taking place right in front of the reader's eyes by giving the false impression that language does not mediate between the reader and the events, thus creating; it is based on the trust of phenomena taking place and observed at the objective level of "things," which can be shared in common and verified by multiple subjectivities, and on the corresponding distrust of thoughts at other levels.

The narrative style of *Absalom*, however, gradually begins to move away from such a total trust of the physical level of "things," as Mr. Compson's

narrative is succeeded by the "dialogic" narrating by Quentin and Shreve in the dormitory room at Harvard College in the North in the latter half of the text, namely, from chapter 6 on, although it retains abundant use of noun-clauses. In the episode in chapter 7, perhaps the most well-known one in the novel, in which Sutpen as a boy suffers the humiliation of being told not to come to the front door but to go around to the back (188) at a planter's mansion in Tidewater Virginia, the description of the event gives the impression of unreality (185-90): it is evident that the events told are really taking place at the physical level of "things," but the text makes the reader feel that Sutpen's thoughts (at least temporarily) has lost connection with reality, or the level of "things." This sense of unreality implies the pessimism that, while this work as a novel maintains faith in realistic "descriptions" that lay emphasis on nouns (let us note that, etymologically, the English word "real" derives from the Latin word "res," meaning "thing"), articulation of "reality" sometimes requires something more than mere physical descriptions of "things." The second section of *The Sound and the Fury*, likewise, begins with Quentin waking up and re-entering the world at the level of "things" (76), but, as he approaches the crucial moment of suicide, the text describes the way he gradually loses sight of the tie to the physical world at the level of "things" to be measured by Cartesian coordinates. With this change of the style of narrative in view, we will move on to the discussion of the relationship between the "truth" the two narrators tell in the latter half of the novel and the objectively verifiable physical world of "things."

3. Shreve Getting "Inappropriately Wild"

When Quentin and Shreve starts their attempt to tell Sutpen's story together, Shreve calls Rosa "Aunt Rosa" two and a half times, and Quentin insistently corrects him, telling him to call her "Miss Rosa":

> . . . then Shreve again, "Wait. Wait. You mean that this old gal, this Aunt

Rosa — "

"Miss Rosa," Quentin said.

"All right all right. — that this old dame, this Aunt Rosa —"

"Miss Rosa, I tell you."

"All right all right all right. — that this old — this Aunt R— All right all right all right all right. . . ." (143-44)

According to *Webster New International Dictionary*, Second Edition, "*Aunt* is sometimes applied as a title or term of endearment to a woman not thus related"; so there is no problem in applying the title "Aunt" to her, a senior lady. Quentin's protest is not to be regarded as a confirmation of precise facts about their relationship, either, for Shreve has already confirmed that she is not his kin (142). After this confirmation the text follows: ". . . that not Shreve's first time, nobody's first time in Cambridge since September: *Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all* . . ." (142; italics in the original text); this passage implies that what annoys Quentin is non-Southerners' stereotyped view of the South as a premodern region where every member of the community is almost a relative of the other residents. Shreve's response to the objection, "All right all right all right," gives away his unwillingness to take his roommate's irritation seriously: he does not talk back because he wants no more protest, but is at the same time insensitive to his friend's feelings that make the correction necessary, not prepared to respond to the "language of the Other."

Their following "collaboration" in finding out Sutpen's true story, then, may not be a Bakhtinian "dialogue," which is highly esteemed as an alternative to monologic modern knowledge, for in order to attain a "dialogic" knowledge one has to face and respond to the other person's words as the "language of the Other." The positive appraisal of their collaborative narrative as an outstanding example of two narrating subjectivities' synthesis premises that their effort has

successfully overcome the limitations of individuals' subjectivities or Cartesian cogitoes and attained the realm where truthfulness is assured by intersubjectivity. Their final version of Sutpen's story, in which Henry kills Bon because the latter is part black and hence a black man and because his marriage to Judith should be prevented to avoid miscegenation, is not grounded on facts mentioned in the text; it cannot be considered to be true on the ground of the commonly shared world two narrators' intersubjective collaboration accomplished, either. Their view of Sutpen's story attained at the end of the novel, on the other hand, is far from meaningless for the work and for the characters even if its factual accuracy is not guaranteed at the objective level of "things," which can be commonly shared and verified. The "story" is the product of human attempt to give a beginning and an end to time and thus to supply the duration between them with a meaning; the "end" of a story, therefore, is a conclusion that guarantees the significance of the time or duration leading to it (Kermode 44-45). The "story" presented in the text of *Absalom*, with such a beginning and an end, is not Sutpen's one or the family romance of the Sutpens but that of a young man Quentin, who happens to confront and deal with the life of a man and tries to find out what the man's life means to him as a Southerner. The significance (not necessarily truthfulness) of the two narrators' "conclusion," therefore, concerns not Sutpen or his family but Quentin and his roommate, the "subjects" telling a story.

Their narrative, perhaps without the narrating subjects being aware of it, tends to deviate from an attempt to establish and compare facts objectively in order to achieve an understanding of a man's life. They are rather "creating" a story satisfying to themselves: one produces a story by "strong misreading," and the other constructs a "stronger" one (Bloom xxiii). This terminology proposed by Bloom has been motivated by the critic's advocacy for the Romanticism, and the two narrators' endeavor is also Romantic, reminiscent of the author's lifelong Romantic orientation (Brooks 51) and Ike's reading and interpretation of the ledgers in *Go Down, Moses*. Quentin's narrative is a way of dealing with his own

obsession as a Southerner by understanding Sutpen's story as a tragedy of the South. Shreve's narrative, on the other hand, can be justified as a product of an interest in a culture different from his own; for him the South is an alien region in the United States, which itself is a foreign country. Their narrative, however, fails to pay due respect for Otherness, and they do not question how they are justified to tell a story of the Other; they keep on telling versions of a story of the Other in a dormitory room at Harvard College of the early twentieth century, where white men of ruling class are educated, and for that reason they are culpable for their "inappropriate" attitude toward the Other.

Conclusion

Just after the beginning of the narrative in chapter 7, Shreve disproportionately pays attention to an inaccurate detail of Quentin's words, which is trivial in reference to Sutpen's story:

> ". . . Because he [Thomas Sutpen] was born in West Virginia, in the mountains where —" ("Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. "—What?" Quentin said. "Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. "Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808 because —" "All right," Quentin said. "—West Virginia wasn't admitted —" "All right," Quentin said. "— into the United States until —" "All right all right all right," Quentin said.) . . . (179)

Quentin's reply, "All right all right all right," is the same as Shreve's response to the former's correction of the latter's appellation "Aunt Rosa"; Quentin's annoyance, however, is natural and understandable while Shreve's attitude seems insensitive to the feelings of his roommate from the South. Shreve correctly points out the historical fact that West Virginia was admitted to the United States in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, but the fact concerning the name of the

administrative division and its borders has little relevance to the experiences of Sutpen as a young man.

This trivial mistake on Quentin's part, at the same time, reminds us of the problem of mistaking what is "evident" for oneself for a "universal truth." It is "evident" for us today that the southern half of North America is the United States, a big powerful country consisting of fifty states (including West Virginia). We, however, often make the mistake of anachronism, in the sense that we tend to forget to pay due respect to the life-world (as the notion is proposed and defined in Husserlian phenomenology) experienced by the Other in another time, space, or culture, for whom what are "evident" for us may be far from self-evident. Quentin hardly takes into account the possibility that Sutpen might have undergone experiences in the life-world grounded in a framework incompatible with what are "evident" for the young Southern gentleman, such as the dichotomy of the South and the North as well as the autonomy of the "South" as a cultural entity. In consequence, he, according to what are "evident" for him as a Modern "subject," "actively" reworks Sutpen's life, which might have been grounded in the framework of the "Extended Caribbean" transcending the boundary of the United States and stretching out to Caribbean (Hulme 3-4),[3] the world not confined within the borderlines of the country (Owada 27-64).[4]

Absalom first portrays narrative acts restoring a story of the South by specific and concrete descriptions that imply confidence in the physical level of "things" embodied in Modern Realist novels, and then portrays narrators deviating from such positivistic style as a result of the desire of literature to grasp the Other's experiences in the sort of life-world that cannot be fully articulated only by references to such "objective facts." Quentin's interior monologue at the end of the novel (303), in response to Shreve's question following the latter narrator's conversion of Jim Bond into an eschatological metaphor, sums up their failure resulting from their lack of recognition of their own privileged position: being an "independent individual" as proposed by the Romantics is not a

"universal" quality of a human being but a socially determined condition that has much to do with being a white man of a ruling class (especially for the Southerner). This abrupt juxtaposition of the "universal" vision and the ambivalence to the South, a specific feeling of the young Southerner, also illustrates the narrators' moral predicaments from the standpoint of the frame of reference inherent in the "novel": there is the realm where "subjective" earnestness or seriousness is powerless in avoiding being ethically "inappropriate"; modernity has involved the fundamentally twisted contradiction in the sense that it impertinent tends to claim "universality" by "inappropriate" silencing and taking away the "voice" of the Other, but at the same time the Realist novel, a prominent genre of the era, entails, as its characteristic, persistent interest in and high esteem of specific and concrete aspects of reality. This weird ending, therefore, includes criticism of such inconsistency of modernity by means of the novel's thinking.

Notes

1. Modernism in literature, in contrast with that in architecture or design as a movement to pursue values of modernity such as rationalism and functionalism, is an attempt to confront and deal with the crisis of the principles of modern Western civilization, which was made manifest by World War I; when literary Modernism is defined in such a way, it has much in common with Postmodernism. I, therefore, do not agree with Suwabe's opinion of the term suggested in his view of *The Sound and the Fury* as a Modernist novel in its consistent formal perfection with everything "in its ordered place" (Faulkner, *SF* 321) (although I agree with most of his arguments in his book, with the exception of his opinion of this work). I would rather regard it as a methodological movement to rework frames of reference of the nineteenth century that laid emphasis on rationalism and consistency, involving confusion and fragmentation in views of the world and in literature.
2. The characteristics of the novel embodied in her style consist, first, of her

reenactment of the convention of "confession" that has brought about the inner "self" of a modern individual in chapter 1, and, second, of her grandiose way of beginning the confession including invitation of Quentin by a letter (5-6) that reminds the reader of the genre of the epistolary novel, which is one of the origins of establishment or discovery of such an inner "self." Her "confession," however, brings about an effect contrary to the one normally to be expected from the act, which usually ensures veracity of what are confessed. Felman points out the contradiction between such an expression of one's inner "self" and the nineteenth-century positivism (namely, confidence in the physical level of "things") (Felman 81-82).

3. This notion proposed by Hulme is based on Wallerstein's concept of the "World System," which lets one transcend the view of the United States as a self-sufficient nation-state and take into account its relation to and dependence on the trans-Atlantic socio-economic network. Reiichi Miura aptly pointed out that multiculturalism conceals global capitalism at the symposium of the twelfth national conference of the William Faulkner Society of Japan. The shared narrative of Quentin and Shreve, which establishes Sutpen's story on the assumption that the South is a self-sufficient distinct region, likewise obscures the fact that the Southern plantation economy and the Civil War can only be properly understood when one takes into account the region's relations to the World System; their narrative creates an illusory image of the idealized South.

4. I have attempted to unveil the extensive world of the "Extended Caribbean" repressed in the narrative of Quentin and Shreve in the text in the paper "*Absalom, Absalom!*-ni Okeru America / the South — "Carib-kai-sei" Yokuatsu-no Politics" ["America / the South in *Absalom, Absalom!*: Politics of Repressing the "Caribbean-ness"] presented in October 1996 at the thirty-fifth national conference of the American Literature Society of Japan.

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