

## GO DOWN, MOSES: AN ESSAY IN (EXTENDED) COHERENCE

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It is easy enough to identify many defining elements of the particularly southern experience in *Go Down, Moses*. But we might achieve a more sympathetic and satisfactory reading of the book if we try to understand it as an attempt to *embody* Southernness itself, to express the essence of the South in a consciously, and necessarily, experimental form. Composed of diverse stories taken from various sources and reworked to fit into a new framework,<sup>1</sup> this novel is, in a certain sense, Faulkner's Bible, or better still, his «Old Testament vision» of the history of the South.

By adopting this perspective, we shall, perhaps, discover that the structure of the book, which has stimulated much debate among critics and scholars, actually does convey a valid sense of coherence.<sup>2</sup> This coherence, though, stems from the subject matter itself; it is not imposed on the subject by some preconceived notion of what a novel

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1. See James Early, *The Making of Go Down, Moses* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1972) for a detailed account of this process. John Pilkington, in *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 243-9 also gives a good summary of the publishing history of the stories that make up the book, as well as pointing out many of the changes Faulkner made to fit them into a unified structure.

2. In this respect, Faulkner's attitude to the genre of the novel might profitably be compared with Shakespeare's attitude toward the classical dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy. So many scholars have been able to argue over the identity, and nature, and internal coherence of Shakespeare's so-called «problem plays» simply because Shakespeare himself was interested in stretching the limits of his medium, in mixing elements of the two formulas he had inherited, i.e., in seeking out new modes of expression. Faulkner obviously does the same with the novel—a similarity in creative strategies which must ultimately lead us to the contexts in which they lived and worked. That is, their mutual need to question older forms, or to discover new ones, may well be symptoms of a similarity between the cultural and intellectual demands of the twentieth century and those of the Renaissance.

should be. Like all effective experimental art, *Go Down, Moses* violates our expectations and, in doing so, challenges us to find new attitudes, to try out new approaches to the artwork and, by implication, to the world in which we live.

Any novel, though, however experimental it may be, must have characters. A novel of the South, of course, requires both black and white characters, in their intimate relations with each other and with the land that so richly sustained them for so long. And that relationship with the land inevitably evokes the Indians, from whom the land was pre-empted, from whom its ownership was, if possible, obtained. These elements then—land, Indian, black man and white—are those upon which the complex structure of *Go Down, Moses* depends. This is why the book has three «central»—or essential—characters, Isaac McCaslin, Lucas Beauchamp and Sam Fathers, whose individual stories intertwine like threads through the fabric of the history of the South. Each one represents one of the races; they are all, to some degree, bound up into the same family; and each one exemplifies his own race's particular relationship with the land.

As though to underscore this complex interweaving of elements, the book contains a number of passages which, focussing on one of these central characters, suddenly telescope, in Faulkner's dizzying style, from the known present to the almost mythical past. Early in «The Fire and the Hearth,» for example, we have this description of Lucas Beauchamp:

. . . he felt that the pursuit of rabbits and 'possums for meat was no longer commensurate with his status as not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation, the oldest McCaslin descendant . . . almost as old as old Isaac McCaslin who lived in town . . . almost as old as old Isaac, almost, as old Isaac was, coeval with old Buck and Buddy McCaslin who had been alive when their father, Carothers McCaslin, got the land from the Indians back in the old time when men black and white were men.<sup>3</sup>

There are two important things to notice here. One has to do with tone. This sudden digression has the air of an Old Testament genealogy. It traces the generations of the McCaslin family, lifetime by lifetime, back to the point of genesis, when old Carothers McCaslin, the patriarch of the clan, «got the land from the Indians.» And the second has to do with content. This movement of the memory from present to past, and subsequently back again, is an attempt to *comprehend* (that is, to include and to account for) those four elements—land, Indian, black man and white—that compose the identity, or the consciousness of the South. And in this sense, the passage has the same function

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3. William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 36-7. (All subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page numbers included in parentheses in the text.)

as a Shakespearean image-cluster. On this small scale, it recapitulates, or reinforces, both the content and the form of the work as a whole. It provides, in fact, a kind of pattern for the structure of the novel, which begins, very importantly, with an act of memory once removed.

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«Was,» as we learn in its first section, is remembered by Isaac in his old age—when he has already become «Uncle Ike.» But it is not remembered directly. The events narrated here happened in 1859, seven years before his birth. What he remembers, then, had already become a story when he was a child, a story that his older cousin, McCaslin Edmonds (Cass), told him sometime in the past. «Was,» therefore, defines a limit of memory in Isaac's compulsive need to understand his heritage. Both «story» and «history,» it reaches back toward the source of that heritage, old Carothers McCaslin himself, but only back to a certain point. Notice that what we have on the page, «out of the old time, the old days,» is Isaac's old-age version of McCaslin's adult version of one of his (McCaslin's) childhood experiences. Living memory, in this case, can go no further. This complicated set of narrative filters, or mental lenses, implies that «Was,» on at least one level, is *about* the past, the past as a perpetual presence in the mind. The contents of the story are the earliest contents of Isaac's memory (received, second-hand, from McCaslin), of the book's memory and, symbolically, of the consciousness of the South.

It is important to note that old McCaslin never actually appears in the book, even though his spirit is present throughout. Like Issetibeha, from whose line Sam Fathers traces his heritage, old McCaslin is a nebulous, half-perceived figure who exists in the minds of his descendants as a kind of primeval (or, in terms of the consciousness of the South, almost prehistoric) force. But he is the sire of the two principal lines, the McCaslin/Edmonds family and the Beauchamp family, that inhabit the book. His character, his seed, are like the *Urstoff* of which Faulkner's South was created. This idea, that blacks and whites are both included in one family, are really two related strains of the same blood, is a crucial one for Faulkner. One of the central purposes of *Go Down, Moses* is to explore this essential and paradoxical *relatedness* of the two races.

And this, in turn, explains why «Was» is a comedy. This story is not simply an apologetic reversal of the slave hunt, a practice that was as vicious and inhuman as slavery itself. And it is certainly much more than «a spoof of the Sir Walter Scott gentility affected by some members of the planter caste.»<sup>4</sup> No, «Was» must be put into the

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4. As claimed by Marvin Klotz, «Procrustean Revision in *Go Down, Moses*», in Budd, Louis J. and Edwin H. Cody (eds.), *On Faulkner: The Best from American Literature* (Durham: Duke UP, 1989), p. 32.

perspective of the novel as a story of dual courtship and marriage—between Tomey's Turl and Tennie Beauchamp and, at a rather slower pace, between Sophonsiba Beauchamp and Uncle Buck.

But notice how the themes of the inverted hunt, the hunt as courtship, and the relatedness of the races are already intertwined here. There are at least three hunts, of varying degrees of intensity, going on in «Was.» Uncle Buck and McCaslin are after the escaped slave, Tomey's Turl. Tomey's Turl, for his part, is after Tennie, a slave on the Beauchamp plantation. And Sophonsiba Beauchamp is after Uncle Buck. In every case, though, the assumed terms of pursuit are invalidated by the implicit cooperation between pursuer and pursued, a fact which turns these «hunts» into a kind of ritual, or even, perhaps, a complicated mating dance.

The symbol for this state of affairs is the short chase that opens the narrative proper. In a comic hullabaloo, the hunting dogs are «running» a fox through the cabin. But we learn soon enough that this fox is no real quarry at all, for when it «trees» behind the clock on the mantel, «Uncle Buck got the necktie from the drawer and kicked the dogs off and lifted the fox down by the scruff of the neck and shoved it back into the crate under the bed and they went into the kitchen . . .» (5). That one word «back» is tremendously significant for our whole understanding of the story. For if this little chase symbolizes the various hunts in «Was,» the fact is that the fox, the quarry, is already «in the bag,» and has been all along. And the same thing applies to every one of the chases to come.

The hunt for Tomey's Turl is a ritual, as Faulkner makes clear, which is repeated «every time he could slip off, which was about twice a year» (5). Moreover, it is not a hunt at all, since everyone knows that he is going straight to the Beauchamp place to see Tennie. And of course, as we find out later in the book, Buck and Buddy have already freed their slaves anyway, or at least proffered them an implicit freedom in granting them the unfinished «big house» and letting them roam at will over the countryside at night. And finally, as we also later learn, Tomey's Turl is their half-brother, descended by way of Tomasina and Eunice, slaves, from old McCaslin himself. He is literally a member of the family.

So it is not so much that Tomey's Turl «controls the situation from beginning to end,» as Cleanth Brooks has suggested.<sup>5</sup> The fact is that Uncle Buck and Hubert Beauchamp already know, more or less, where he will go and what he will do. And he knows the same of them. In this «hunt,» both parties seem to follow an implicit «code» of behavior, based on mutual understanding—almost a kind of trust. The only real surprise, and anything resembling violence, occurs when Buck and McCaslin unexpectedly «tree» Tomey's Turl in the slave quarters. And the only minor injury falls

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5. Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966), pp. 246-7.

on the pursuer, Uncle Buck, because, importantly, he momentarily forgets a part of the tacit code.

Afterward, Uncle Buck admitted that it was his own mistake, that he had forgotten when even a little child should have known: not ever to stand right in front of or right behind a nigger when you scare him; but always to stand to one side of him. Uncle Buck forgot that. He was standing facing the door and right in front of it .... (19)

So he is, of course, knocked down when Tomey's Turl runs out. But these are half-brothers, and they share a certain degree of empathy. Tomey's Turl would have been counting on Buck's *remembering* not to stand too near the door, and he is, in fact, careful to protect Uncle Buck from any serious harm:

He never even bobbled; he knocked Uncle Buck down and then caught him before he fell without even stopping, snatched him up under one arm, still running, and carried him along for about ten feet, saying, «Look out of here, old Buck. Look out of here, Old Buck,» before he threw him away and went on. (19)

Certainly, Tomey's Turl is already «in the bag.» Far from wanting to escape, all he wants to do is to obtain Tennie Beauchamp and bring her back to the McCaslin place as his bride.

Which he finally does. And in this sense, Tennie is the least ambiguous of the three «quarries.» There is not even the appearance of flight in her case. She simply waits to be «captured,» and wed, by her suitor.

But the same cannot be said for Uncle Buck. He, in contrast, is the most ambiguous of the three quarries. For while he seems to shun Miss Sophonsiba's pointed intentions, the truth is that, all the way through, he actually complies with his role—that of the reluctant but ultimately obtainable bachelor—in this ritual mating dance. Indeed, his first action in the narrative, which Faulkner is careful to mention twice, in successive sentences, underscores this ambiguity: «When he and Uncle Buck ran to their room to get Uncle Buck's necktie, the fox had treed behind the clock and the mantel. Uncle Buck got the necktie ...» (5). Why, we might ask, if he has no real interest in Miss Sophonsiba, would Uncle Buck go to the trouble of putting on his necktie for a nominal slave-hunt?

The answer, presumably, would be to comply with social conventions, since the «hunt» for Tomey's Turl always leads straight to the Beauchamp place. But that is precisely the point. The time is 1859 and we are, in effect, on the western frontier. And while Sophonsiba does make an exaggerated effort to maintain social decorum, no one else in the story does—certainly not Mr. Hubert, who entertains his guests «in the spring-house with his boots off and his feet in the water, drinking a toddy» (9). Uncle Buck's

necktie really expresses an acknowledgement of, and a certain respect for Sophonsiba—as do his permitting her to sweeten his «Mississippi toddy like . . . a Mississippi lady» and the fact that he always «drags his foot» at the appropriate time.

And, most interesting of all, when he is finally «treed» himself, it is because he ignores those conventions which he has, until then, so scrupulously observed. He walks into a bedroom in a strange house without even knocking and eases into the bed. Of course, for Cass's benefit, he rationalizes his act: «Likely hers will be at the back . . . where she can holler down to the kitchen without having to get up. Besides, an unmarried lady will sholy have her door locked with strangers in the house» (20). What is this, though, but an admission that he is aware of her presence, aware that she is there in one of the beds? And he is obviously aware of her intentions; she has sent him, after all, a red ribbon that had graced her neck as a token for «success» in the hunt. The point is that here, as in all the other situations, Uncle Buck could have done much more to *avoid* Miss Sophonsiba. He could have knocked on the door. He could have had McCaslin check the bed before he got in. But he chooses not to. And this is why Hubert's wryly-made observations on Buck's «accident» go directly to the quick:

You come into bear-country of your own free will and accord. All right, you were a grown man and you knew it was bear-country and you knew the way out like you knew the way in and you had your chance to take it. But no. You had to crawl into the den and lay down by the bear. And whether you did or didn't know the bear was in it don't make any difference . . . Yes, sir. She's got you, Filus, and you know it. You run a hard race and you run a good one, but you skun the henhouse one time too many. (22-3)

Of course, there is still more resistance left in Uncle Buck, as the remainder of the story reveals. And he does finally manage to escape, this time. But not in the long run.

For Buck ultimately does marry Sophonsiba, and they give birth, eight years later, to Isaac, the central consciousness of *Go Down, Moses*. Tomey's Turl's fulfillment is more immediate. He wins Tennie, and they give birth to Tennie's Jim in 1864, to Sophonsiba in 1869 and, most importantly, to Lucas Beauchamp, the black consciousness of *Go Down, Moses*, in 1874. So «Was» is appropriately a comedy, a story of marriage and the promise of birth. It is, indeed, on a larger scale, the inception of those two lines, those two branches of the same family, black and white, that embody the two connected poles of the society of the South.

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When contemplating the publication of *Go Down, Moses* as a book, Faulkner described its general theme, in a letter to Robert Haas, as the «relationship between

white and negro races here.»<sup>6</sup> This is an important declaration, which sheds some light on my reading of the hunt for Tomey's Turl as an informal rite of mutual cooperation performed by members of a single family. And it gives us, as well, a clue to understanding the second story in the novel, «The Fire and the Hearth.» For while this story is nominally about Lucas Beauchamp's «hunt» for buried treasure, the plot really serves as a pretext for a detailed and astute psychological study, not only of Lucas' complex relationship with Roth Edmonds, the owner of the plantation in 1940, but also, by way of an extended flashback, of his earlier struggle with Roth's father, Zack, who was McCaslin's son.

The import of the story would seem to be that this complex relationship, which has both its deadly serious and its comic aspects, is a historical constant, a condition, like old McCaslin's blood itself, that each generation inherits from its forebears. In this respect, the narrative technique is pertinent. The story has an omniscient narrator and many characters, but Faulkner chooses to give us access *only* to the thoughts of Lucas, Roth and Zack, the bearers of the McCaslin blood. All other characters are observed from the outside, often from one of these three's point of view. This indicates to what extent the novel is an investigation of the consciousness engendered by that blood.

Far from being a helpless «nigger,» Lucas Beauchamp seems to be in complete control of his life, and to have an unshakeable belief in his own superiority. From the very beginning it is he who moves the action. He is planning to eliminate George Wilkins, both as a competitor in his moonshine whiskey business and as a prospective son-in-law. And the success of that plan depends on his knowledge of Roth Edmonds's character. His attitude toward Roth is one of magnanimous condescension—almost of *noblesse oblige*. For Lucas is 25 years his senior, intimately knows the land that both of them live on, and, as we have already seen, glories in his direct *male* descent from old McCaslin. Like his father, Tomey's Turl, he takes the initiative; and he has complete faith in his plan: «Then he would approach Edmonds and speak his word and it would be like dropping the nickel into the slot machine and pulling the lever: all he would have to do then would be just to watch it» (36).

But of course, no matter how much he wants to believe it, Lucas is *not* in complete control, as the rest of the story shows, nor has he ever been. Indeed, the main purpose of the first flashback is to make this clear. Here we learn about a much more serious confrontation between Lucas and Zack, Roth's father, in which Lucas fights for and attains his sense of independent manhood.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Quoted in Pilkington, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

7. John T. Matthews, in *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982), p. 230, is right when he refers to this incident as «an initiatory struggle with his white cousin». Also see Walter Taylor, *Faulkner's Search for a South* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1983), pp. 137-9, for an opinion of Lucas' character that agrees in many points with my own.

When Roth was born, Zack's wife died, and Zack sent for Lucas' wife, Molly, who had just had a baby herself, to care for the child. Under these circumstances, Molly and her son simply stay in the house with Zack, a situation which Lucas perceives as a personal affront, especially when it lasts for six months. Both his sense of control and his sense of manhood—qualities normally denied to the southern black—have been called into question. And while it seems from the narrative that Zack did not sleep with Molly, Lucas still finds it necessary to assert his manhood, black man to white, and demand that his wife come home.

Although Zack almost immediately accedes, Lucas still feels compelled to fight him to the death in order to defend his concept of honor. For Lucas' ideal of manhood is his own very personal image of old McCaslin. Lucas has no doubt that *he* would have slept with a woman in such a situation. Nor does he doubt that McCaslin would have killed any man who slept with his wife. This is, in more ways than one, a conflict inherent in his very blood.

In the tense, climactic struggle between Lucas and Zack, Faulkner's narrative technique reaches its peak. For while the flashback, too, seems to be told from Lucas' point of view, when they finally come together in Zack's bedroom, we see what each one is thinking, how each one is constantly sizing up the other. This scene, in a certain sense, recapitulates the poker games in «Was.» Only here, the stakes are life and death. Each man is «betting» on his knowledge of the other's character, on how far he can, or will, be pushed.<sup>8</sup> And in this sense, it is Zack who overplays his hand, since he pushes Lucas too far, calling him not «even a woman-made McCaslin but just a nigger that's got out of hand.» At this point, the spirit of the patriarch of the clan is almost palpable between them; for Lucas cries, «and not to the white man and the white man knew it ... 'I tell you! Don't ask too much of me'» (55), and they clasp hands over the pistol on the bed.

This is the intensest point of many in the book that symbolize the simultaneous empathy and incomprehension which Faulkner conceives as the heart of the «white and Negro relationship.» As they fight on the bed, «Lucas clasped the other with his left arm almost like an embrace» and forces the gun into Edmonds' side. He pulls the trigger, but the bullet fails to fire.

He is, at this moment, ready to kill McCaslin blood in white veins to assert the McCaslin blood in his own. But not only that. As he realizes later, he wouldn't have shot himself afterward. He would, instead, have waited for the inevitable lynching. He would, in his own word, have «paid»—paid, that is, for having killed his cousin by blood, and the man he had grown up with as a brother.

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8. Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) gives a similar reading of the struggle between Lucas and Zack, describing it, on p. 154, as «the rivalry between two strains of Carothers McCaslin's blood» in which «each of its heirs tries to bluff the other into violating the honor that descends with it.»

Now it is actually the same drama, treated in comic terms, that is repeated in the present with Roth Edmonds. Theirs is also a confrontation of the same blood in black and white veins, and it is still a question of how much control over his own life Lucas can maintain.

Faulkner does much with the quality of «impenetrability» that Lucas seems to be able to summon at will. Time and again, when Roth contemplates Lucas in their recurring face-to-face encounters, the word appears. When, for example, after Roth has had three weeks to conquer his rage over the two stills that have suddenly turned up on his property, and he sees Lucas again, we have this description:

Now the white man leaned in the window, looking at the impenetrable face with its definite strain of white blood, the same blood which ran in his own veins, which had not only come to the negro through male descent while it had come to him from a woman, but had reached the negro a generation sooner—a face composed, inscrutable, even a little haughty, shaped even in expression in the pattern of his great-grandfather McCaslin's face. (70)

This passage does several things. It is an example of that narrative technique that gives us some insight into Roth's *awareness* of Lucas. It is, at the same time, an example of the omnipresent awareness, within all of its carriers, of the McCaslin blood. And it links that blood-awareness with Lucas' impenetrability. It is worth noting that this is another, though minor, climax in the story, for at this point Roth asks Lucas point-blank if the second still was his. But this kind of questioning, like Zack's earlier treatment of Lucas—co-opting his wife for six months and then calling him «just a nigger that's got out of hand»—is a transgression of the tacit code that exists between them. So we have, very soon after the previous quotation, a repetition of the same image-cluster:

«Was that your still, Lucas?» Edmonds said. They looked at one another. Yet still the face which Edmonds saw was absolutely blank, impenetrable . . . He thought, and not for the first time: *I am not only looking at a face older than mine and which has seen and winnowed more, but at a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years when my own anonymous beginnings became mixed enough to produce me.* (71)

Lucas very calmly replies, «'Do you want me to answer that?'"» and Edmonds suddenly realizes that he has gone too far: «'No!' Edmonds said violently, 'Get in the car!'"»

The important thing to notice in «The Fire and the Hearth» is exactly how much Edmonds really does put up with from Lucas. We know from the beginning that he has always permitted Lucas to ignore his advice on cultivating the land. And rather than

carrying out his unspecified threat toward any man, woman or child that made or drank moonshine whiskey on his place, he actually chauffeurs Lucas, George and Nat to the hearing and *accedes* to Lucas's wishes when there. He permits Lucas to hunt for the buried gold and even swallows his anger when Lucas steals one of his mules to pay for the divining machine.

The truth is that Roth seems to understand the code better than his father did. This makes sense, though, as Molly was the only mother he had ever known and Lucas was, by extension, a kind of second father for him. But there is more to it than just respect for age and for McCaslin blood. Roth has had the advantage of learning from his father's mistakes. And what he learns is that Lucas is much more than a «nigger»—he is, in fact, a complex, proud and sensitive human being.

To appreciate this dimension of Roth's character, it is necessary to consider the narrative's second historical «digression,» which details his emotional development. At that inevitable moment in the southern child's growth when he realizes that black and white are not the same, and that white is supposedly better, Roth naturally begins to wonder about Lucas' refusal to be slavish, especially in his peculiar relationship with Zack. At this point in his life, though, his father's explanation is necessarily rather ambiguous:

«You think that because Lucas is older than I am ... and is a descendant of the people who lived on this place where we Edmonds are usurpers ... is not reason enough for him not to want to say mister to me?» his father said. «We grew up together, we ate and slept together and hunted and fished together, like you and Henry. We did it until we were grown men. Except that I always beat him shooting except one time. And as it turned out, I even beat him then. You think that's not reason enough?» (114)

Only much later, in his late teens, does Roth come to perceive what his father was vaguely describing, that he and Lucas had fought over a woman, a black woman. And although Roth believes, then, that Lucas must really have beaten his father, the point is that Roth is still only «almost a man,» still too young to understand completely. For who, if anyone, did «win» their battle? Lucas may have defended his honor, but he can never finally know whether Zack had slept with his wife or not—another of those questions that the code does not allow to be asked. On the other hand, if the gun had gone off, not only Zack, but Lucas as well would have died. And it is Zack, in the end, who should have gained, since he would have learned one more of those boundaries beyond which he could not go. This is what Roth, by then of age 43, must finally have realized for himself. As Zack says at the end of their conversation about Lucas, knowing that his son will someday comprehend, «'I'll make a trade with you. You let me and Lucas settle how he is to treat me, and I'll let you and him settle how he is to treat you'» (115).

This last phrase actually describes the complex interaction between Lucas and Roth that «The Fire and the Hearth» depicts. For each one seems to know the limits to which the other can be pushed, maneuvered, cajoled or manipulated. This story, too, becomes a complicated ritual based on mutual understanding and repressed affection. But in this case, it is finally Lucas who goes too far. For his obsession with hunting for the gold drives Molly to take the divining machine out into the swamp, where she collapses. Molly, remember, is Roth's black mother (a relationship clearly based on Faulkner's own with Caroline Barr), and he has a great deal of unspoken love for her—as much, in fact, as the code will permit. When Lucas' actions endanger her, Roth's patience suddenly runs out. Now, he complies with *her* wishes and helps her to file for divorce.

The divorce scene, though handled in a comic style, is actually a fitting and very moving climax to the story. Up until now, Edmonds has done all that he could to accommodate Lucas *and* to resist Molly's request for a divorce—in other words, to hold the family together. And it is here, almost predictably, when his exasperation with Lucas has reached its peak, that their tacit mutual empathy is explicitly acknowledged. At the last minute Lucas loses his nerve and contests the divorce:

«We don't want no voce,» Lucas said. «I done changed my mind.»

«Are you the husband?» the Chancellor said.

«That's right,» Lucas said.

. . . He looked at Lucas. «You have waited too late. This bill has been presented in due form and order. I am about to pronounce on it.»

At this critical moment Faulkner manifests their essential interdependence, their support for one another:

«Not now,» Lucas said. «We don't want no voce. Roth Edmonds knows what I mean.»

. . . Edmonds moved forward quickly, still holding the old woman's arm. The Chancellor looked at him

«Yes, Mr. Edmonds?»

«Yes, sir,» Edmonds said. «That's right. We don't want it now.» (128-9)

Under no other circumstances would Lucas ever make such a telling admission: «Roth Edmonds knows what I mean.» But, in spite of Lucas' air of impenetrability, Roth does. It is impossible, at this point, to tell whether Roth is controlling Lucas, or Lucas, Roth. In fact, they are simply acting together, as the «we» they both use evinces. That «we» includes all three of them, Lucas, Molly and Roth, who is holding her arm—a family unit who understand and need each other.

Of course, as soon as they leave the court, Lucas reasserts his ancient

prerogatives, and the customary patterns are established again. When they are ready to drive away, Lucas tells Roth to wait a minute. «‘Wait a minute?’ Edmonds said. ‘Hah!’ he said. ‘You’ve bankrupted your waiting. You’ve already spent—’ But Lucas had gone on. And Edmonds waited» (129). And as he waits, contemplating the proud old black man, what he feels is neither anger nor frustration:

He stood beside the car and watched Lucas cross the square . . . erect beneath the old, fine, well-cared-for hat, walking with that unswerving and dignified deliberation which every now and then, and with something sharp at the heart, Edmonds recognized as having come from his own ancestry too as the hat had come. (129)

What, indeed, is that «something sharp at the heart» if not some kind of complex, unspoken love?

Lucas Beauchamp is hardly conceived as a merely comic character. He is, perhaps, excessively proud and willful, but he is also an intelligent and sympathetic human being who has developed his own successful way of manipulating a social reality that is intended to strip him of his power and dignity.<sup>9</sup>

And this explains the significance of the story’s plot-device, the treasure-hunt. At the ripe old age of 67, Lucas is on the point of losing everything that defines him as a «success»—his independence, his self-possession, his moonshine business and, most importantly, his lasting relationship with Molly—as a result of greed. That is, he is touched, given an admonitory nudge, as the description of the discovery of the gold-piece makes clear, by the very same temptation to sin that originally corrupted old McCaslin and his ilk, the desire to *possess* the innate wealth that the land, the earth, contains.

Of course, the true dimensions of this sin do not become clear until we read of Isaac’s discovery of his own «heritage» in «The Bear.» But Lucas—perhaps because he is a McCaslin, or perhaps because he is a man—is also susceptible to the blinding force of greed. Can we, in this sense, view the final section of this story, the conversation between Lucas and Roth about the divining machine, as a foreshadowing of the longer conversation between Cass and Isaac in «The Bear»? Roth urges Lucas to keep the machine, Cass urges Isaac to keep the land. Yet both of them renounce. Only in the light of Isaac’s larger act, though, can we fully appreciate the weight of Lucas’ half-comical

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9. Javier Coy makes more or less the same point, although in a different context, in his perceptive Introduction to the Spanish translation of *Go Down, Moses, Desciende, Moisés* (Madrid: Cátedra, Letras Universales, 1990). On p. 16, he writes that «Lucas, un miembro de la raza subyugada, utiliza su conocimiento de la historia (incluso si se trata sólo de la historia de su propia familia) . . . para afirmar abierta y decididamente su propia integridad y su propia dignidad, que el pasado y la otra raza han tratado de corromper y destruir . . .»

but deeply serious renunciation of the phantom of wealth, a renunciation that, significantly, restores the fire to his hearth.

§ § §

The next story has, almost certainly, incited the most objections from the detractors of *Go Down, Moses*. And yet, it is precisely what they object to, the fact that it does not deal with members of the McCaslin clan, that really explains its place in the scheme of the novel. John Pilkington is probably more perceptive than he himself realizes when he says that «Pantaloone in Black» is «a powerful treatment of the failure of understanding between the two races in the community.»<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the aim of the story seems to be to contrast, in exactly those terms, with «The Fire and the Hearth,» to show the other side of the coin, the potential for isolation, incomprehension, insensitivity, and finally violence, between the two races. It is pertinent, in this regard, that Rider (whose real name, whose identity, we never know) is not of the McCaslin blood, nor is the nameless deputy sheriff whose description of Rider's death ends the story.

And notice how its partitioning into two separate sections, each one centering on one of these characters, echoes, in a negative sense, the narrative technique of «The Fire and the Hearth.» Each section makes us witness to the thoughts of its protagonist. But what is revealed is an almost total alienation—an inability to communicate or to understand human needs.

Rider is, by nature, inexpressive. Faulkner's portrayal of his confused state of mind makes it clear that the anguish he feels at the death of his young wife is more than he can even comprehend, let alone explain to others. His actions baffle everyone in the story, black and white alike. It is obvious to the reader, though, that his unbearable grief compels him to seek out his own death by killing Birdsong.

And the words of the deputy sheriff, who, importantly, has no real communication with his wife either, sum up the meaning of «Pantaloone in Black»:

«Them damn niggers,» he said. «I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they ain't human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a herd of wild buffaloes.» (154)

Of course, after the tremendously tender «wawkin» scene, where Rider tries to control his own fear in order not to frighten the ghost of his wife, this assessment takes

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10. Pilkington, op. cit., p. 259.

on an overwhelming irony. The deputy simply cannot understand that Rider's «human feelings and sentiments» have grown too great for him to contain, that he *wanted to die*, in order to escape them. And this irony of incomprehension is only aggravated by the reaction of the deputy's wife, who is not listening at all, and only wants to clear the table and go to the movies. The difference between this, and the ending of «The Fire and the Hearth» should speak for itself.

Faulkner would have been false to «white and negro relationships» in the South had he failed to include this story in *Go Down, Moses*. It represents one very important aspect of those relationships—but perhaps the simplest, and certainly the most inhuman one. That, however, is not his principal interest in the book. Faulkner is much more interested in the ways that the races are *related*, in the complicated strategies that some Southerners, black and white, evolved over time in order to survive.

§ § §

The following three stories, «The Old People,» «The Bear» and «Delta Autumn» are often considered together, as a unit. They touch on what William Van O'Connor has called «the wilderness theme» of *Go Down, Moses*,<sup>11</sup> and they also focus on Isaac McCaslin, the central consciousness of the book. This small trilogy begins with Isaac's complicated rite of passage into manhood—in other words, the formative process of that consciousness. For many readers, this is another point where the novel's structure seems to fail, since the primary relationship here is that between Isaac and Sam Fathers, and, through Sam, between Isaac and the land itself.

But these two relationships are crucial to Faulkner's vision of the South. The fact is that Sam Fathers is, in some ways, reminiscent of Lucas Beauchamp. This is appropriate, since they represent the two dark races, the two «other» blood consciousnesses that impinge on the character of the South. While Lucas carries both black and white blood in his veins, Sam carries both black and red. And of course, the importance of «The Old People» is that Isaac's initiation into manhood, when he kills his first stag, is also a spiritual initiation into the doomed lineage of the Indian race. To appreciate this relationship, a rather long quotation from early in the story should be taken into account:

They were the white boy, marked forever, and the old dark man sired on both sides by savage kings, who had marked him, whose bloody hands had merely consecrated him to that which, under the man's tutelage, he had already accepted,

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11. In his article «The Wilderness Theme in 'The Bear'», in Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 322-30.

humbly and joyfully, with abnegation and with pride, too; the hands, the touch, the first worthy blood which he had been found at last worthy to draw, joining him and the man forever ...—the child, not yet a man, whose grandfather had lived in the same country and in almost the same manner as the boy himself would grow up to love, leaving his descendants in the land in his turn as his grandfather had done, and the old man past seventy whose grandfathers had owned the land long before the white men even saw it and who had vanished from it now with all their kind, what of blood they left behind them running now in another race and for a while even in bondage and now drawing toward the end of its alien and irrevocable course, barren, since Sam Fathers had no children. (165)

What Faulkner is getting at here is the paradoxical relationship with the land, with nature itself, which has been an essential aspect of the American consciousness at least since Cooper, if not since the first arrival of the Puritans on the eastern shore. It is, also, the paradox inherent in the American Dream: to «civilize» the New World means, ultimately, to destroy it. And this destruction is first made manifest in the genocide of the Indians. A people who live in harmony with nature, who form a part of nature, they are of course at risk when that harmony is violated by the incursions of white, European, «civilization.»

This is why the issue of ownership becomes the central question of the book. That act of taking control over the land—of *converting* the land into «property,» into something to be appropriated, manipulated, controlled and exhausted by man—is the primordial act, the inception of the American identity. It is also, for us, the Original Sin.

Or for the Indians themselves—at least those who, like Ikkemotubbe, believed that the land was theirs to sell. This is the profound knowledge that Isaac takes on with his spiritual initiation into the lineage of the old people, of whom Sam is the last representative. Isaac not only learns to hunt—hunting is, after all, a *participation* in the eternal cycle of life and death. He learns from Sam, an authentic elder, of the old times and the old awareness; he acquires the consciousness of Sam's race, which is, at the same time, a consciousness of nature itself. This is why Isaac knows, as no other white character in the book, that although the land

had been his grandfather's and then his father's and uncle's and was now his cousin's and someday would be his own . . . their hold upon it actually was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the chancery book in Jefferson which allocated it to them and that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Father's voice the mouthpiece of the host. (171)

It is not that man cannot own the land, he obviously can. But, like all moral questions, it is a matter of choice. The choice to own it entails its spoilage and eventual destruction, which is the deepest theme of «The Bear.»

If Sam Fathers is the human voice of primeval nature, Old Ben, the bear, is its animal symbol. And the truth is that both of them, and Isaac as well, sense that their time is rapidly drawing to a close. Thus, these three stories form a climax and a denouement of the inverted hunt motif that is one of the structuring principles of the book. Like Tomey's Turl, and Tennie, and Uncle Buck, and even Rider, Old Ben actually cooperates with his «pursuers.» This hunt, too, is a rite of mutual understanding. For civilization, in the form of the lumber company, is already gnawing away at the edges of the woods, and all three of them know that the primordial spirit of nature, the consciousness of the old people, must have a dignified and worthy death. «The Bear» is a powerful and resonant choreography of that other rite of passage—the passage of the timeless natural world into time, into history, occasioned by the irrevocable onslaught of the temporal, historical consciousness of civilization.

This is why Lion inexplicably appears out of nowhere, out of the very texture of the woods; only another natural animal force could properly bring Old Ben to his end. Sam immediately recognizes Lion for what he is and cooperates with fate by preparing him for his role in the drama. And this is why Isaac does not hate and fear the savage dog. As Faulkner tells us:

It seemed to him [Isaac] that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too. (226)

Indeed, Sam and Isaac are the only human beings worthy of *witnessing* this spectacle, but even they do not take part. Only Boon Hogganbeck is granted that privilege, as he is closer to nature, in a more immediate sense, than they. Like Sam, he also has Indian blood, but not from a noble line. Further, he is somewhat mentally retarded, and thus more a child than a man. And most important of all, he is such a bad shot that he cannot kill anything with a gun. Both Lion and Boon converge on the bear in its intimate, glorious death—the dog with its teeth in Ben's throat, and the man working and probing his knife—a sexual metaphor here—to pierce the old bear's heart. Sam of course, has known all along that Ben's death implies his own, so it should be no surprise that he collapses during the strife. And it is meet and proper that Boon, whom Isaac had already perceived as being like Sam's spear-carrier, should finally kill Sam as well.

The hunt depicted in «The Bear» is an exquisite rendering of the symbolic passing of an era, an era whose spirit only remains alive in Isaac McCaslin's memory. But embedded in this hunt is a second, even more personal one for Isaac, the hunt for his familial, rather than his spiritual, heritage, one that takes him through the *written* words that compose the genesis, before «Was,» of the McCaslin lineage. Faulkner himself pointed out that this long section, the fourth, was intended to be part of the novel, but

not a part of the story when read on its own.<sup>12</sup> It should then, be considered as a link between the two apparently disparate parts of the book—the two themes of black-white relations and the ownership of the land.

What Isaac discovers in poring over the old family ledgers, digging back into the family history, is that terrible truth about his grandfather that ties Isaac to Tomey's Turl and all of his offspring. Like so many slave-owners in the old South, McCaslin had fathered a child on one of his Negroes. Eunice, a slave, gave birth to his daughter, Tomasina, in 1810. But that is not all. Some twenty-two years later he compounded rape and incest by fathering another child on Tomasina. This time the issue was a son, named Terrell, or Tomey's Turl, more of a McCaslin than Isaac himself, since the old patriarch was both his grandfather *and* father.

It is this, the recognition of rape, incest and indirect murder (Eunice committed suicide just before Tomey's Turl was born; Tomasina died in child-birth) that Isaac inherits from old McCaslin with the land. His heritage, then, is a full acknowledgement of the inhumanity and injustice implicit in the institution of slavery.

It is just here that the white European's «original sin» of violating the land is echoed in his further sin of violating the humanity of another race. Not only has the white man converted nature into property, and thus contributed to its spiritual death, he has also converted human nature, a whole people, into property, something to be used and abused at will. It is this spiritual death, this dehumanization—epitomized by the word «nigger»—that Lucas Beauchamp is constantly battling to avoid. In fact, as I have suggested, his complex character can only be fully appreciated in the light of this understanding.

What Isaac learns about his grandfather only serves to reinforce what he had already learned, or inherited, from Sam, his spiritual father: to respect and love the land, the bedrock of nature.<sup>13</sup> To own it, to take power over it, is ultimately to destroy it, as the lumber companies are doing at the end of «The Bear.» As he explains to Cass, in another one of those generational chains that stretches back to the primordial past:

I can't repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather's to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe's to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered,

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12. Cited in Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

13. For an interesting discussion of the conflicting influences on the formation of Isaac's character, see Annette Bernert, «The Four Fathers of Isaac McCaslin», *Southern Humanities Review* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1975), 423-33.

realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing. (256-7)

Of course, the same thing applies to human beings. And that explains the other part of this long digression, where we see how much trouble Isaac took to insure that Tomey's Turl's living children, Tennie's Jim, Sophonsiba and Lucas, should receive their \$1,000 inheritance as McCaslin descendants.

But a very important part of Isaac's complicated burden is the knowledge that his renunciation is probably hopeless. He knows that the land as a living entity, at least the living entity that it was, is doomed. After all, he has presided in a way over the death of the spirit of the Great Woods. And although he may renounce ownership of the land, others cannot share the primeval wisdom he has garnered from Sam. He must therefore be aware that his consciousness, his memory, will become the last refuge of that complex living organism that was embodied in Old Ben.

And this is what has happened in «Delta Autumn.» Here we return to the «present» of the book, around 1940, and focus on the very old Ike, and Roth, the younger owner of the plantation whom we have already seen in «The Fire and the Hearth.» This story does, to a certain extent, show Roth in a bad light. In his treatment of both Isaac and the woman who has had his baby, he seems a less humane and tolerant person than he was in his relations with Molly and Lucas. But I do not believe that Faulkner's purpose in this story is to suggest a sense of fatality, to imply that the younger generations must necessarily repeat the errors of their elders. In fact, this apparent repetition of the family sin is deeply ironic, in that it actually *contrasts* with old McCaslin's transgressions.

While we can safely assume that his forebear never «loved» either Eunice or Tomasina, we are not told here exactly what Roth feels for the woman who has had his child. What we do know is that he is very upset, and that he may have acted differently if he hadn't felt constrained by the rules of society, what she herself refers to as «his code.» But even more to the point is the fact that this woman is not a slave. Roth has neither used her nor violated her freedom. As her conversation with Ike makes clear she acted of her own free will and in full knowledge that Roth did not intend to marry her. Indeed, she acted out of love for Roth, and continues to do so. And finally, Roth does not know that she is Tennie's Jim's granddaughter. Hers is not a constant struggle, like Lucas's, to assert her freedom. She simply has it, and manifests it, in her choices and her way of life.<sup>14</sup> The entire incident, in the final analysis, serves only to show how much the situation has changed, not that it remains the same.

Ike's ambivalent reaction to her confuses most readers, but it need not necessarily

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14. In his discussion of this story, Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 105, also underlines the independence of Roth's mistress. He describes her as «a strong-willed, dedicated woman» who «had taken the responsibility of not telling Roth they were cousins» and «borne the child knowing that because she was black Roth would never marry her.»

do so. Remember, in the first place, that he is in his seventies, tired and half-asleep when he is suddenly confronted with this surprising, if not shocking, chain of events. And recall, in the second place, that he has been nurtured within the same code that Roth is obeying, which constitutes a large portion of the «relationship between white and negro races here» that the book was intended to depict. That code was, if anything, ambivalent. But one thing it did not permit was interracial marriage. Ike simply is not able to recognize the progress toward independence that this strong-willed woman embodies.

However, as his mind clears and he begins to comprehend the significance of this completely unexpected apparition, he does recognize—this «widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one»—what the baby embodies: the final re-joining of those two separate branches of the family tree, the final confluence into the same body of the two strains of old McCaslin's blood. In a deceptively simple act of acknowledgement of the ghosts of the family's past, Isaac touches her hand when he persuades her to take Roth's money:

She came back to the cot and took up the money; whereupon once more he said, «Wait:» . . . and he put out his hand. But, sitting, he could not complete the reach until she moved her hand, the single hand which held the money, until he touched it. He didn't grasp it, he merely touched it—the gnarled, bloodless, bone-light bone-dry old man's fingers touching for a second the smooth young flesh where the strong blood ran after its long lost journey back to home. «Tennie's Jim,» he said. «Tennie's Jim.» He drew the hand back beneath the blanket again . . . (362)

This scene is a masterfully written evocation of deep human emotion. How much unspoken feeling is contained, for this lonely old man who is now very little more than his own memory, in the eloquent repetition of that name, «Tennie's Jim»? The attentive reader will have noticed and remembered the unobtrusive but integral and almost constant presence of Tennie's Jim in «The Bear.» Is Isaac, at this moment, also remembering Jim's part in those great events, events whose memory will die when Isaac does? His own childlessness, his nostalgia for Tennie's Jim and the fact that the child shares his blood all explain why he gives her General Compson's hunting horn for the boy.

In the inevitable destruction of the woods that it laments, «Delta Autumn» marks a climax of the «Caucasian» sin against nature, and thus the passing of an epoch. It is proper, then, that this story marks, as well, Isaac's «death» from the novel. Just as Sam Fathers must pass away along with Old Ben, Isaac too, (and his consciousness of a doomed past) gradually diminishes as the woods do. The knowledge that Isaac had absorbed from Sam, which had permitted him to renounce his own claim to the land, also permitted him to understand the destructiveness of racial inequality and so to harbor some hope for an eventual improvement. We cannot really blame him if, after seeing his own renunciation come to nothing, he is unable to perceive that that hope may be closer than his experience—and the code—allow him to accept. Yet, his complex heritage,

represented by the hunting horn, a symbol for him of everything he has given his life to commemorate, is finally passed on to the baby, who literally carries in his veins at least the promise of a future where the races come together.

§ § §

Now that the McCaslin blood is reconciled in Roth's nameless son, we can assume that the epoch to come will be personified by a different set of names. So, just as the book began with the marriages that presage the black and white blood lines that define the poles of the particular consciousness of the South that it expresses, it ends appropriately, with the extinguishing of these two separate lines.

In the last story, «Go Down, Moses,» the end of the McCaslins and Edmonds is tacit, they simply disappear as a central element. We are concerned here with a death in the Beauchamp family, that of Samuel Worsham, Lucas and Mollie's grandson, and how that death impinges on the white population of Jefferson. So this story too, take up the theme of implicit cooperation between the races. Here Gavin Stevens's role, in relation to Mollie, is similar to Roth's in «The Fire and the Hearth,» with respect to Lucas. Stevens does much more than might be reasonably expected of him to support Mollie in her grief.

«Go Down, Moses» is another portrait of that contradictory family of black and white engendered by the peculiar institution of slavery in the South. In this case, the black who had been owned by the Worshams have literally become a part of the family. Mollie's brother, Hamp, lives with Miss Worsham as a nominal butler, but actually functions more as a brother. And her concern for Mollie is undoubtedly that of one sister for another. As she explains to Gavin Stevens: «'Can nothing be done? Mollie's and Hamp's parent belonged to my grandfather. Mollie and I were born in the same month. We grew up as sisters would'» (375). She communicates that concern to Stevens, who, in turn, rallies much of the community to the effort to bring the young man's body home with dignity.

But once again, that complex mixture of compassion, understanding and difference holds in this relationship, as is made plain when Stevens visits the Worsham house to pay his respects. He finds the three of them, Mollie, Hamp and the white Miss Worsham sitting in a small room about a fireplace. Faulkner's description of the scene is a climate of another one of those motifs that run throughout the book—the hearth:

Then he sat too, so that the four of them—himself, Miss Worsham, the old Negress and her brother—made a circle about the brick hearth on which the ancient symbol of human coherence and solidarity smouldered. (381)

But while the two whites and the two blacks do form a sort of symbolic family circle, the specific nature of their mourning becomes much too intense for Steven himself to bear. Mollie begins to complain that it was Roth Edmonds who «Sold my

Benjamin,» who sent her grandson to the fate he had received. Stevens sees things differently and tries to explain to her:

«No,» Stevens said. «No he didn't, Aunt Mollie. It wasn't Mr Edmonds. Mr. Edmonds didn't—»*But she can't hear me*, he thought. She was not even looking at him. She had never looked at him. (380)

Is it merely a coincidence that Stevens' insightful perception at this juncture is almost an exact echo of Zack's insight into Lucas' state of mind during their climactic struggle: «*He can't even see me right now*» (56), and one page later, «*He can't see me again*» (57)? The two races come closest together at these moments of extreme tension or emotion and, at the same time, recognize the limits of their mutual understanding—appreciate their difference. Just as Mollie cannot really «hear» Stevens's rational version of the reasons for Samuel's death, he cannot bear the emotional intensity in the room and rushes out, gasping for air and space. Yet, when he apologizes to Miss Worsham, who is a more integral part of the «family,» her reply is once more indicative: «It's all right ... It's our grief.»

And so, in the end, the incongruent funeral procession makes its way through the town which has paid to bring home the body of what must surely be one of its blackest sheep. And a large number of townspeople—whether out of mere curiosity, forbearance or compassion—watch the hearse pass by, in a silent acknowledgement of Mollie's and Miss Worsham's fragile human dignity. Mollie Beauchamp's loss, thus, belongs to the town as well; the town at least accepts her grief, in a very stark contrast to the attitude of the white community toward the grief, and the death, of Rider.

This idea of acceptance is, finally, the context for Mollie's insistence that everything, «All of hit,» be published in the paper. For in that way both her and her grandson's place as members of the community is confirmed. No matter that she cannot read it: «Miss Belle,» she says, «will show me whar to look and I can look at hit» (383).<sup>15</sup> It seems that the editor does not understand her motives, nor does Stevens, at first. It is important to note, however, that the story—and the book—end with another act of insight, another perception of one mind into another:

«Oh,» Stevens said. *Yes*, he thought. *It doesn't matter to her now . . .*

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15. To assert, as James Early does, *op. cit.*, p. 105, that her need to know that the death has been reported in the paper, and her expressing this need in her own language, is «a final comic twist which pretty much erases any serious effect her mourning has on the reader», is a lamentable misreading of the story. No moderately sensitive person who has had anything more than the most superficial acquaintance with southern blacks of an older generation would ever claim that «heavy dialect» automatically equals comedy. Faulkner, as usual, is simply being true to the kind of human reality he knew so well. Such statements reveal much more about the critic's «blindsports» than the author's.

*now that it's all over and done and finished, she doesn't care how he died. She just wanted him home, but she wanted him to come home right. She wanted the casket and those flowers and the hearse and she wanted to ride through the town behind it in a car. (383)*

In other words, she wants to assert her right to human dignity within the community where she lives. And, in this case at least, the community respects that right.

§ § §

Now I am fully aware that this reading of the book leaves me (or Faulkner) liable to the old complaint: that it apologizes for the southern white and patronizes the southern black. But the very complexity of *Go Down, Moses* should argue against such a simplistic response. It seems evident that Faulkner's aim in this book is to project the human nature of the South he grew up in. This was a South that, for many people, included the violence and incomprehension reflected in «Pantaloons in Black.» But it was also, for many other people (and Faulkner was obviously one of them) a society in which race relations were based on a complicated set of tacit assumptions that had developed and evolved from the time of slavery itself. Within the terms of this code, perhaps the only feasible attitude for white persons of good will necessarily involved a certain degree of patronizing behavior.

Might this really be the ultimate significance of «Delta Autumn»? Isaac represents the consciousness, whose roots reach back into slavery, of the white race's guilt toward the black. Yet even the resulting sense of responsibility often entails the assumption of some degree of superiority. But Isaac is close to death here. Couldn't the conjunction of the extreme old age and the newborn baby be meant at least to suggest another change, the possible end of the limitations inherent in his mentality and a further growth of awareness?

In Isaac's last, and very ambiguous, rumination on the Delta, the book's two central themes of race relations and the destruction of the wilderness do finally come together.<sup>16</sup>

*This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in t*

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16. Michael Millgate, in *William Faulkner* (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 77, argued that «the fact that the two themes have not been successfully fused does not mean that the book falls apart, simply that it is a less unified novel than Faulkner tried to make it.» Millgate's argument brings us back to my own starting-point in this paper. He was probably right, for the critical view of 1961. I would argue, though, that by now we have developed a different, less rigid or fixed concept of what unity itself may be and, simultaneously, more fluid schemes to explain what are. Faulkner was simply one of many artists who perceived this emerging change and provided us with opportunities, like *Go Down, Moses*, to «practice» the revision of our mental habit-constructs.

*generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grown man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares . . . (364)*

The final evolution of Isaac's mind (which is not necessarily to be confused with Faulkner's) brings him to understand that the voracious greed of white civilization not only destroys the woods, but also all racial distinctions, leaving in its wake only two faceless classes: the very rich and the very poor. «No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge.» This blind destruction of complexity—both in nature and in human nature—is tantamount to destroying ourselves. Whether, however, Isaac is right or wrong (and perhaps he is both) is a futile question to ask.

The considerable power of this novel lies in its refusal to deny the rich ambiguity of human experience. What clearly-thinking person has ever claimed that the human heart was logical, or easy (or even possible) to understand? Certainly not the young Isaac in his long debate with McCaslin in «The Bear.» Speaking of the stories of Isaac and Lucas in *Go Down, Moses*, Javier Coy writes that

Faulkner da a sus lectores dos biografías, diferentes, pero estrechamente relacionadas, que, puestas una junto a la otra, proporciona y profundiza en sus complejas personalidades y finalmente los transforma en los casos paradigmáticos y trascendentes que nos ofrecen en pocas palabras la esencia de la vida en el Sur, o, al menos, una parte de ella significativa y muy auténtica, a la vez que una visión profunda, rica y convincente de determinados aspectos de la naturaleza humana de valor universal.<sup>17</sup>

To expect Faulkner to write a tract on Civil Rights is to demand that he be much less than the great artist that he was. *Go Down, Moses* spans the time from the eve of the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, to the eve of World War II. Thus, it covers a sort of intermediate period, when race relations were in a slow process of transition from one «condition» to another. The book must finally be read as an investigation of a curious, and often irrational, system of accommodation within the limits of a certain historical situation. Can we really ask any more of a novelist than that he give a humorous,

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17. Coy, op. cit., p. 15.

serious, profound, exciting, emotionally compelling and intellectually challenging depiction of the large, complex and contradictory variety of men and women who inhabit the world he lives in? Can we, by this criterion, deny this book its proper place as a historical novel of the highest rank?