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William Faulkner and the oral text

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WILLIAM FAULKNER AND THE ORAL TEXT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

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by

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ABSTRACT

The disjunction between the oral and the literate in the works of William Faulkner reveals the different ways these distinct modes of organization combine to structure a text. The oral in Faulkner's fiction makes its presence known not only as offset speech but also as a mode of action and narrative whose logic is conjunctive rather than disjunctive. According to the literate mode, a form organizes novelistic matter. According to the oral mode, forces that function as signs rather than organizers of their form rule the action and narrative. When the disjunction between the oral and the literate is so complete that oral experience may be displayed and contained but not spoken, the result is the disorienting structures of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Yet examination of each of these novels in terms of the relationship between the oral and the literate reveals their apparently unstable structures as ordered nonetheless. *Go Down, Moses* presents the problem of story and its transmission at a meta-narrative level, according to which each chapter is the part of a whole whose interrelations remain unmediated either by the oral or the literate. As a result, the message transmitted from the past to the present remains embedded within a collage that cannot itself speak it. At the same time, *Go Down, Moses* contemplates the matter of the oral and the literate at the level of story more explicitly than in the earlier novels, revealing Faulkner's growing respect for an orality that obtains in a literate world. Finally, in *The Reivers*, Faulkner presents a text in which the literate and the oral are

triply enfolded within a narrative technique that allows for the articulation both. And while this technique preserves the fundamental ordering principle of each, it ironically comments upon the limitations of either revealing, in the end, that for Faulkner the literate text is always already oral.

INTRODUCTION—ORAL PRESENCE IN THE LITERATE TEXT

William Faulkner's novels and short stories have long been noted for their formal and structural peculiarities at least as much as for their dark themes of race and gender and their problematic portrait of the South. They have attracted a wide range of both popular and critical attention, much of which has focused upon narrative experimentation in Faulkner's attempt to express what he referred to as, in the *Address Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature*, the "human heart in conflict with itself" (*Address* 723). This conflict reflects itself in Faulkner's texts in a variety of ways, but especially in terms of his formal style. That style, the subject of nearly countless numbers of theoretical approaches and critical analyses, is the result of the combination in Faulkner's texts of two of the fundamental aspects of the novel—the oral and the literate.

Orality and literacy have been much discussed across a wide range of disciplines at least since the publication of Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* in 1982, a synthesis of much of his earlier work, beginning with *Ramus and*

the Decay of Dialogue. Ong's work is especially notable for positing primary orality, literacy, and secondary orality as three stages of consciousness typified in the following ways. Primary orality exists for Ong in cultures completely untouched by writing and the language of primary orality is characterized (in contrast to writing) by greater frequency of repetition, greater audience participation, heavier dependence upon non-verbal contextual clues, formulae, mnemonics, and impermanence as a crucial feature in its transmission not only of information but of values and attitudes in culture and society.

Literacy shifts the oral/aural of primary orality to the visual/spatial, moving language from the medium of mouth and ear to that of eye and hand. Ong argues that the rise of literacy coincides and participates in the rise of new kinds of abstract thought, objectivity, and generalization. In addition, writing makes possible greater historical accuracy in its arresting of the word upon the page, stabilizing language so that it might be studied, reproduced exactly, and scanned in two directions rather than only one. Writing also makes possible large-scale rhetorical structures in language, such as lengthy arguments, and complex logical constructions and sequences not possible in primary orality. In addition, literacy is less ritualized than orality, removing from it some of its magical qualities and encouraging a kind of doubt, discussion, and disagreement about established communal norms and so can lead to social change.

Secondary orality is distinguished by Ong as a specialized adaptation of the oral to the new technologies made possible in the electronic age, beginning with the telegraph, and including radio, audio recording, television, and film. This secondary orality constitutes a language that originates and is uttered according to the instruments of

primary orality, the mouth and ear, but takes on the literate aspects of permanence and the possibility of repetition without alteration. It is secondary orality that interests the theories, for instance, of Marshall McLuhan who argued that the rise of the electronic age signaled the birth of a new kind of global tribalism that would replace the individualism, the fragmentation, and the isolation of the world as it had been dominated by the technology of writing.

It is important to note that Ong does not divide orality and literacy into binaries mutually exclusive of each other. They constitute consciousnesses that employ and organize the stuff of their linguistic universes differently from each other, but the successive advent of these consciousnesses does not efface any of the others. That is, the rise of literacy does not spell the doom of primary orality. Orality is still present within literacy, as literacy is still present in secondary orality. Ong writes:

The interaction between the orality that all human beings are born into and the technology of writing, which no one is born into, touches the depths of the psyche. Ontogenetically and phylogenetically, it is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society. Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising. (*Orality and Literacy*, 178–9)

By the same token, we might say that secondary orality assumes all of the features of primary orality even while it takes advantage of the features of literacy available to it through new electronic technology.

Hence, in the following pages, I write of orality not simply as the appearance of speech or speech utterance within the Faulkner's texts. Nor does literacy merely designate one who can read or, more generally and metaphorically, one with the capacity to decode texts or manage abstract sign-systems. Nor does the literate merely designate the written word. Rather, orality is meant to refer to a kind of consciousness that organizes its linguistic material according to a certain kind of logic, the features of which include but are not reduced to aurality, impermanence, fluidity, immanence, temporality, and communality. In this sense, I use the term orality (or the oral) to designate a "logic" that is roughly analogous to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in another context call "rhizomatic." At the same time, literacy constitutes a different way of organizing the linguistic material of a text and can be distinguished—but never wholly separated—from orality. The logic of literacy may be seen in such features as the visual, spatiality, permanence, fixedness, atemporality, detachment, and individuality. Roughly speaking, literacy (and the literate) refers to a logic that in Deleuze and Guattari is "tree-like" rather than rhizomatic. But the oral and the literate in Faulkner do not constitute a binary according to which one or the other term is necessarily privileged, even if the implication of privilege may sometimes be felt at the level of the content of his stories. Rather, orality and literacy as modes of consciousness exist simultaneously within the texts of Faulkner, and the structures of his novels reveal their mutual relationship.

Though Marshall McLuhan's interest was not the *novel* in and of itself, since his critique of cultural change centered more specifically upon the transition from a print culture to an electric one, he still found occasion to offer up Faulkner's writing as an example of one of the many permutations of the confrontation between the oral and the literate as informing technologies for human expression. In *Explorations in Communication*, McLuhan writes of the apparently liberating effect of the return to orality upon literate narrative style. After citing Henry James' use of the Dictaphone in producing *The Golden Bowl* and the transformation in narrative style of Wyndham Lewis after his becoming blind and having to rely upon dictation to produce his texts, McLuhan writes:

Most prominent among American representatives of the oral manner in prose is William Faulkner, whose latest novel *The Town* (volume two) opens:

'I wasn't born yet so it was Cousin Gowan who was there and big enough to see and remember and tell me afterward when I was big enough for it to make sense.'

The oral tradition of the South is a world in which past and present concert in a babble of chat and memories and observation and complicated kinship relations. An oral world keeps multiple blood relationships in easy acoustic focus in the same way as a pre-literate people have no trouble managing complex word formations and inflections. (*Essential McLuhan* 198)

McLuhan seems to link what he calls the "oral manner in prose" in Faulkner's fiction to a sense of its connection (one he explicitly ties to a "pre-literate" imaginative grasp of

language) to an oral tradition in the South for which time and kinship relationships figure prominently as the subject matter of narrative as well as a means to communicate it.

McLuhan underscores that which in the passage fixes upon the relationship between the narrator and the matter of his talk as mediated through both time and kinship as intimately tied to each other and to the speaker's authority as narrator—suggesting that the “oral manner in prose” collapses the two as a matter of its (oral) discursive practice.

The linking of time and kinship relations as grounds for telling authority is a familiar trope in the fiction of William Faulkner. But it is also a trope that he conflicts as often as not. In the novels *Go Down, Moses* and *The Reivers*, the linkage is plainly stated. “Was,” the first section of *Go Down, Moses*, after a short descriptive statement regarding Isaac McCaslin's identity, begins “this was not something participated in or even seen by himself, but by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, grandson of Isaac's father's sister . . .” *The Reivers* begins more simply: “Grandfather said.” The second section of *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin's section, begins “When the shadows of the curtains appeared on the sash it was between seven and eight o'clock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. It was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said . . .” The second chapter of *Light in August* begins “Byron Bunch knows this: it was Friday morning three years ago,” referencing an identity and time, but no kinship—significantly within a novel that explores those connections that stand in for identity as connected to time and to kinship.

The relationship in Faulkner's texts between the oral and the literate, as well as time and kinship, however, is often established negatively—by the absence of those very

markers cited by McLuhan. The first section of *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy's section, begins, "Through the fence, through the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting." It is followed by a disorienting impressionistic narration of Benjy's sense of reality, which connects neither to time nor kinship in any way that can establish the "narrator's" relationship with the text. So disorienting is this effect in the first section, indeed, that the entire novel must be read to figure out the relation of the first section to the rest. Yet the connections in terms of the "oral manner in prose," whether by their presence or absence, are established over the course of the entire novel by the date markers that head each section and the story's involvement with the experience of members attached directly and indirectly to a single family, the Compsons. Jason's section, the third in the same novel, begins with what looks like the direct transcription of speech or thought—but without graphic markers to identify it as one or the other or as neither: "Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say." The following section, Dilsey's, begins literately, with conventional third person omniscient narrative description of the scene (which, in this case, is linked to the time of day): "The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of gray light out of the northeast" If Faulkner's texts in the end are about the "human heart in conflict with itself," they are also, at the least, in the form of language in conflict with itself.

To identify Faulkner's novels with language in conflict with itself is to relate his texts to the conflict in the novel from its very beginning with the relationship between the oral and the literate as media that organize and express meaning. The novel has been consistently linked as an art form with the effort to communicate cultural mores of a society through time. Faulkner's works, quite often, not only take up this subject as a

matter of content and theme explicitly, but also problematize it by seeming deliberately to call attention to its transmission through time. If the fragmented nature of the form of *The Sound and the Fury* suggests something of the futility of making such connections, especially in terms of a single family within the context of the disintegration of the illusion of those values which might hold it together, then *Absalom, Absalom!* quite deliberately takes up the matter of the transmission not merely of information but meaning through time, as Quentin struggles not only to come to terms with the Sutpen story, but also adequately to *express* it.

That language is in conflict with itself in the texts of Faulkner is obvious not only from the content of his stories, but also from the apparently disordered structure (as *The Sound and the Fury* stands as an important example) of his texts. Regardless of theoretical or critical orientation, Faulkner's narrative form and style has from the very beginning been an issue of both negative and positive concern. Interest in the structure of Faulkner's novels has been apparent at least since Malcolm Cowley's "Introduction" to *The Portable Faulkner* precipitated a refocusing of serious attention to his work. In 1966, for instance, Robert Penn Warren collected a sampling of Faulkner criticism to that date that shows that Faulkner's style, what some call form, was early on a prominent issue in the reception of his work. Two thirds of the essays in Warren's volume treat the matter of the structure and order of his texts. In his introductory essay, Warren mentions Faulkner's impact despite the fact that his greatest images "spoke in their own always enigmatic and often ambiguous terms," arguing that first impressions are by "intuition" rather than

through critical analysis (2).¹ Conrad Aiken, in “William Faulkner: The Novel as Form,” begins with the assertion that Faulkner's “astounding” style is such an issue that “some never get beyond it” (46), while Warren Beck points out that “all but the most idolatrous of Faulkner's admirers must have wished he had blotted out a thousand infelicities” of style (55). Michael Millgate's “*The Sound and the Fury*,” in great part, is a fulmination regarding structure in terms of chronological order and the relationship of one section of the novel to another (94-108), while other essays, including those by Alfred Kazin, Hyatt Waggoner, and R.W.B. Lewis, similarly treat Faulkner's narrative technique in terms of structure or form.² Though not included in Warren's survey, Olga Vickery's 1959 work, *The Novels of William Faulkner*, claims correctly, “*The Sound and the Fury* was the first of Faulkner's novels to make the question of form and technique an unavoidable critical issue,” going on to argue that the novel is organized for each narrator around the events that occur on the night of Damuddy's funeral (Vickery 28).

At roughly the same time, Faulkner's fiction received similar appraisals based upon the especially the structure of his narratives in the popular press. Quite often, reviewers complained about the seemingly deliberate incomprehensibility of Faulkner's texts, his morally repugnant characters, plots, and themes. Even when Faulkner's stories were praised, his technique got him into trouble. As Walter Yust wrote in his review of *The Sound and the Fury*: “I can't, for the life of me, understand, however, why so able a

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers in the following paragraphs refer to *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (1966) edited by Robert Penn Warren.

² See Alfred Kazin's “The Stillness of *Light in August*,” (147-8); Waggoner's “Past and Present: *Absalom, Absalom!*,” (175); and Lewis's “William Faulkner: The Hero in the New World,” (205).

story teller will waste so much ingenuity and time trying to make a fine story a puzzle and a burden.”³ Often Faulkner’s novels were either praised or disparaged for the same reason: they seemed hard to read. David Vern expressed what had by then already developed into a divided criticism in his review of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936: “One might expect by now that an attitude towards the man had begun to crystallize But every new Faulkner book is received like a first novel. All judgments are tentative pending . . . ah . . . surprise. The whole matter resolves itself, finally, very simply indeed. You are either for Faulkner, or against him” (Inge, 155-6).

Even after Malcolm Cowley’s revival of Faulkner and his reception of the Nobel Prize, the notion persisted that Faulkner was needlessly difficult and wrote only for the hypereducated. Against this preconception Charles Poore wrote, in 1954, Faulkner was hardly least among the popular writers of America. A survey made for this morning’s column reveals that his publishers have sold more than 600,000 copies of his books in the Random House and Modern Library editions. And New American Library reports that the total sales of nine Faulkner titles in paperback editions are nearing 5,000,000 copies. A roundish sum. Furthermore, the fact that three of his stories in his new anthology, *The Portable Faulkner*, appeared first in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1932, 1942, and 1943, calls for a certain amount of revision in the cultists’ theory of his abounding obscurity.

³For the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*, October 4, 1929 (Inge, 36).

Would it not be fair to say, then, that—among book readers—those who find this distinguished . . . author hard to understand are in the minority? Those who think he is hard to read underestimate the intelligence of Americans. Anyone who can follow the punctuationless cadence of a telephone conversation can follow Faulkner. (359)

To identify the basic comprehensibility of Faulkner's style or technique with the ease with which we understand the normal cadences of speech, as Poore points out, is to signal something about the tradition to which not only Faulkner but also the novel as a medium belongs. The novel as print-form has always existed, curiously, between speech and writing. At the same time, as the above citations indicate, it has straddled the worlds of the academic and the popular, illustrating that the novel itself occupies a conflicted position between post-print rise of the letter as an indication of authority, and the residual oral popularity of the story as the vernacular means of the transmission of culture. The novel seems ever to have had to negotiate a landscape that bridges the gap between. Print as a social technology at once establishes the authority of writing as it imposes its authority in, for instance, religion, law, and society, even as it participates in and foments the popularization and democratization of writing. From early on, the novel as a print form has explored the vernacular and folkways of orality, as in the works of Mark Twain, for instance, but at the same time increasingly gravitated toward the direct portrayal of the patterns of consciousness, as in the works of Henry James. William Faulkner's works, of course, combine the novel's interest in the vernacular with the representation of consciousness as matters both important to the transmission of meaning through time.

Faulkner's texts very frequently include the vernacular language and folkways of orality even while their literate narrative forms attempt to represent the patterns of consciousness (or the unconscious). The inclusion in his texts of these two intimately related aspects of the novel as a medium of language accounts for the very peculiarity of structure and form for which his works have been so often noted. The combination of the oral and the literate in the texts of Faulkner has belied attempts to account for his style precisely because that style includes aspects that have been heretofore often described as antagonistic to each other. A brief example from Michael McKeon's recent *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, might suffice to illustrate how the oral and the literate as intimately bound up in the novel as form have been variously and contradictorily treated.

McKeon describes Walter Benjamin's suggestion that storytelling "occupies the place of pristine narrative practice." The novel, McKeon writes, describing Benjamin's theoretical view, lies on the

other side of the great historical watershed between tradition and modernity whose force Benjamin suggests through a series of powerful antithesis: intelligence versus information, experiential wisdom versus empirical verification, chronicle versus history, interpretation versus explanation, reminiscence versus remembrance. Accompanying these conceptual pairings are their sociomaterial conditions: community versus solitude, face-to-face craftsmanship versus mechanical reproduction, the artisanal versus the middle class. Benjamin's interest is therefore

historical: concerned both with the temporal persistence and with the structural relationality of discursive form. (71)

As McKeon points out, for Benjamin, the “definitive generic differential in both these senses . . . pertains to the technology of cultural production and preservation . . . [to] the differential between orality and print” (71).

The “differential between orality and print” for Benjamin signals the eclipsing of the function of the storyteller—to pass wisdom from one generation to the next—by the function of the novel, to “explain” the “meaning of life.” Yet McKeon points out that Ian Watt⁴ cites the isolation and particularity of the novel—a form produced, according to Benjamin, by a solitary individual for a solitary individual whose consumption leaves nothing to pass on—as the novel’s chief virtue in “formal realism.” For Watt, in the inclusion of language that situates “individual experience . . . in its temporal and spatial environment,” the novel, in its immediacy, in the appearance of quoted dialogue and its drive toward intimacy, participates in the reoralization of language not attended to in Benjamin’s differentiation between the story and the novel. This is perhaps the result of Benjamin’s understanding of that differentiation as being a matter of the “what” of each form, while Watt’s attention is to the “how.” For Benjamin the oral storyteller functions to pass wisdom from generation to generation by telling stories the morals of which are left to the auditors to appropriate and assimilate in the act of listening itself and then,

⁴ McKeon neither juxtaposes nor implies a comparison between Benjamin and Watt. Nor does Watt take up any of Benjamin’s terms in his theory of the novel. I choose these two as examples from McKeon’s survey to illustrate how similar aspects of the novel as form are taken up and interpreted differently and often contrarily. I

presumably, to pass on in turn. For Benjamin, the very particularity of the novel precludes such a cultural mechanism for the passing of wisdom from one generation to the next. For Watt, by contrast, one crucial aspect of the novel as a form is that its “realism does not reside in the *kind* of life it presents, but in the *way* it presents it” (364, emphasis added). While Benjamin’s critique is founded in an understanding that sees the technological fact of the novel as a form participating in the eclipsing of the art of the storyteller, according to McKeon, Watt “situates the emergence of the novel” in a time when the unified worldview of the Middle Ages was overtaken by the Post-Renaissance worldview of “an aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places” (355). This time witnesses the rise of the novel, for Watt, as the result of the breaking up of one worldview as another quite different one takes its place. Such a breaking up leads to the isolation and fragmentation of modernity and Watt sees the novel in some ways to ameliorate the effects of the ensuing change.

The varied reception of Faulkner’s work—from high praise to disgust—seems ever to circle around this issue of his style as specifically related to the oral and the literate, even when these terms themselves are not employed. But it is chiefly Faulkner’s style that has so interested his critics and the feature that puzzles is the order of the linguistic material of his narratives and the structure that such ordering informs. There appear to be two approaches to this issue in Faulkner studies in this regard, examples of which will be considered throughout this work as they are related to this or that text. On the one hand, there are those who find in the instability of form a failure of craft. On the other hand, there are those that find it to symbolize the ultimate indeterminacy of

language itself and so to stand as ironic comment upon the attempt to convey or apprehend a meaning that itself is perched upon a horizon that language approaches but never reaches.

More recent views, for instance, include analyses of discourse, rhetoric, inter- and intratextuality, narrative, speech, writing, voice, and text in Faulkner's fiction. John Irwin's approach, in *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (1975), sees in the patterned repetition in Faulkner's narratives the oedipal struggle, specifically, for instance, in Quentin Compson's attempt to wrest narrative authority from his father in *Absalom, Absalom!* (114). Donald M. Kartiganer's *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* (1979) accounts for the fragmentary nature of the major novels as Faulkner's attempt to create new ways to image and tell reality, resembling the structure of the subconscious as his novels break up the "conventionally known world" into "the vital reality of its separate pieces" before making "its own recovery, [in] its struggle for a comprehensible design" (xv). In *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss: A Study in Perceptions and Meaning* (1983), Gail Mortimer reads the recurrent blurring of boundaries in Faulkner's fiction, in such themes as "miscegenation, necrophilia, incest, androgyny, cannibalism, and homosexuality," as itself forming a rhetoric through which the meaning of his texts may be interpreted (81). Judith Lockyer, in *Ordered by Words: Language and Narration in the Novels of William Faulkner* (1991) traces Faulkner's concern for the power of language not only to "organize reality" but to "direct behavior" as a matter of concern not only for him as an author but also for certain of his male character/narrators who become figures for

Faulkner's (gendered) anxiety about what "language can and cannot do" in his desire for the "absolute word" (*ix-x* and *passim*).

Other approaches similarly make linkages between Faulkner's language and the structure of his novels, though without explicitly mentioning any aspect of orality or literacy, yet still entailing the issues cogent to orality and literacy as matters of form. Some highlight the reader's participation in language's transgressive play, as in Lothar Hönnighausen's *Faulkner: Masks and Metaphors*, in which he links the author's penchant for the role-playing power of the mask and a new understanding of that power in his texts as "metaphoricity": metaphor not as fixed "rhetorical device," but as "complex shaping power" substituting for the "work" as the novel's "ruling aesthetic" the "illimitable text," through which the reader participates dynamically in the "Bakhtinian 'openness' of Faulkner's novels" (*x*). New Critical, formalist, structural, and psychoanalytical theoretical frameworks have given way to non-representational understandings of language and narrative form, as evidenced, for instance, by Robert Holton's postmodern *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History* (1994), in which he examines Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (along with Conrad's *Nostromo* and Ford's *Parade's End*) as examples of "problems concerning the construction of coherent narrative . . . in relation to the historical and cultural point of view grounding this act of representation" (*x*). Holton's purpose is to hold up the modernist "orthodoxy" of these earlier writers as a backdrop for the "heterodoxy" in the discursive space marked out by African-American women, a "group of jarring witnesses," including writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, who attempt "to overcome the

accumulated weight of the orthodoxy that has enforced their marginality” before moving on to the postmodern “problem” of “heterodoxy and point of view in historical narrative” confronted in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, according to which postmodernism confronts the charge that the “abandonment of traditional concepts of Truth and Objectivity inevitably leads to a relativist paralysis that is injurious to political dissent and resistance” (xi, 163, 169).

In *Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner* (1989), Stephen M. Ross examines a number of Faulkner’s short stories and novels to display the ways in which voice operates to reveal the novelist’s attempt, in the “spiraling play between telling and writing” to assert “the written text [in] its own valid status as art,” by which Faulkner “articulates his commitment to written telling, and . . . his own voiced art” (242). For Faulkner it is only out of the silence of the written text, Ross argues, that the poet’s voice may be heard. Faulkner’s discovery of and use of voice in his fiction reveals his attempt at “overcoming writing for the sake of living voices” (236). This attempt does not diminish the importance of writing in Faulkner’s fiction, Ross concludes, as it reveals that Faulkner’s voice is “always that of a writer” (236).

Ross considers voice according to four registers. Its appearance as description rather than utterance he calls *phenomenal* voice. Transcribed speech is *mimetic*. The *psychic* voice blurs the distinction between speech and thought, between voiced consciousness and unvoiced subconsciousness. The *intertextual* voice constitutes an extra-textual rhetorical tradition, in Faulkner’s case that of Southern oratory, whose devices are at play in the structuring of a narrative, instances of which, however, appear

within the text.⁵ As Ross understands it, the oratorical voice in Faulkner's fiction is perhaps the "most distinctive," one that grows from an external source out of a specific set of "discursive practices . . . by which speech is represented, [and by which it] integrates features of a cultural discourse into the fiction . . . [and] bears a strong (if often ironic or parodic) relationship to expressive functions of Southern oratory" (186-7).

Faulkner's fiction questions not only what language "says" but how it says as speech-act and as written formulation. As the citation to McLuhan indicates, such a concern entails the relationship between the oral and the literate in terms of the novel as form. The issue of the oral and the literate is taken up, quite often, but not in terms of Faulkner's texts. Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* argues that writing "restructures consciousness." According to Ong, writing primarily restructures an oral consciousness by relocating its foundation from hearing to seeing. Ong argues that while written texts from the age of the manuscript may be seen as a bridge from an oral to a literate culture, where there is preserved something of the "give and take" of orality in the "possibility of erasure and emendation" of the word on the page, print itself closes off the possibility for such give and take by situating the "utterance and thought on a surface disengaged from everything else." As a result, print "makes for more tightly closed verbal art forms, especially of narrative" (132-3). According to Ong, "until print the only linearly plotted lengthy story line was that of the drama, which from antiquity had been controlled by

⁵ Ross writes of such instances, "considered merely as a set of stylistic mannerisms, the oratorical voice can be heard with more or less intensity throughout Faulkner's canon, from Shegog's sermon to 'the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful and graceless seraphim' that concludes *The Mansion*" (187).

writing. Euripides' tragedies were texts composed in writing and then memorized verbatim to be presented orally. With print, tight plotting is extended to the lengthy narrative, in the novel from Jane Austen's time on . . . " (133).

Ong makes a quite convincing case for the differences between the ways human experience is organized for oral and for literate cultures, especially as expressed in narrative. Plot is a different matter for Homer than for Flaubert. For the latter, according to Ong, the idea of plot derives from an organizing principle provided by print itself. Such a principle conceives time in spatial terms. Plot is chronological and linear—a feature of narratives whose roots draw from print as much as from the calendar (which pre-dates print but not writing). Ong's argument is that the Homeric epic begins *in medias res* because it owes much to its oral tradition and the story it tells had to begin somewhere. That is, oral culture does not organize experience spatially, as literate (i.e. print) culture does. As a result Ong argues, Milton, for instance, looking back to the oral tradition of the epic as well as to the Old Testament, deliberately disorders his "plot" in an approximation of that oral tradition of non-linear sequence but does so with the chronology of events fully in mind from beginning to end. Ong then argues that *Paradise Lost* is only possible from the mind of a poet fully conversant in oral tradition while at the same time fully acclimated to print culture (142).

For the literate, as Ong points out, plot is best figured in " 'Freytag's pyramid' (i.e. an upward slope, followed by a downward slope): an ascending action builds tension, rising to a climactic point, which consists often of a recognition or other incident bringing about a *peripeteia* or reversal of action, and which is followed by a denouement

or untying . . . [and which] kind of plot Aristotle finds in the drama.” For Homer, by contrast, such an understanding of “plot” is not possible since strictly sequential order would never have occurred to him. Rather, his *in medias res* is the result of his unique selection of an episode—chosen from perhaps hundreds heard sung by other bards—with which to begin. Indeed, all ritualized verbal performance for Ong proceeds along such a principle:

Having heard perhaps scores of singers singing hundreds of songs of variable lengths about the Trojan War, Homer had a huge repertoire of episodes to string together but, without writing, absolutely no way to organize them in strict chronological order. There was no list of episodes nor, in the absence of writing, was there any possibility even of conceiving of such a list. If he were to try to proceed in strict chronological order, the oral poet would on any given occasion be sure to leave out one or another episode at the point where it should fit chronologically and would have to put it in later on. If, on the next occasion, he remembered to put the episode in at the right chronological order, he would be sure to leave out other episodes or get them in the wrong chronological order. (143-4)

This sounds like a plausible explanation of the Greek’s experience and likely tells much about the choices Homer made in arranging the material of his two epic poems. But, as Ong goes on to point out, the epic poet organizes his utterances much as do speakers in any situation: “We know from present-day experience how a performer, unexpectedly pressed by a group to perform, will normally at first demur, thereby

provoking renewed invitations until finally he has established a workable relationship with his audience: ‘All right, if you insist . . .’ [The] oral song (or other narrative) is the result of interaction between the singer, the present audience, and the singer’s memories of songs sung” (146).

But as Stephen Pinker has more recently pointed out in *The Language Instinct*, this is the situation for any speaker at any given moment. What Ong has here described may well apply to the epic bard who organizes materials and human experience according to an oral imagination, but so too does it apply to the modern speaker. With little alteration, Ong’s description nicely fits the interaction between speaker, audience, and the words spoken. Such a principle is described by Pinker in terms of two basic “tricks” of spoken language. These are instinctive and, he argues, embedded at the level of DNA. The first, taken from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, is “ ‘the arbitrariness of the sign,’ the wholly conventional pairing of a sound with a meaning” and is possessed by every speaker of every language by “rote learning in childhood that links the sound to the meaning” (Pinker, 84-5). The second trick of the language instinct “is captured in a phrase from Wilhelm Von Humboldt that presaged Chomsky: language ‘makes infinite use of finite media,’” meaning that command of a mother tongue entails knowing the differences in meaning produced by differences in the order of words: “That is, we use a code to translate between orders of words and combinations of thoughts . . . [a] set of rules . . . called a generative grammar” (85).

So, just as with the epic bard in Ong’s example, any speaker at any given moment may be said to be “original and creative on rather different grounds” (Ong, 146) than

might be expected. Just as Homer's "originality" comes as a matter of selection and ordering of material for this or that particular audience and situation, a speaker's originality comes not from inventing new words to express hitherto unexpressed thoughts, but in inventing new ways to organize previously used language in order to fit them to a new situation. For Homer, the *Iliad* is an arrangement out of his memory of "songs sung." For the speaker, the utterance is an arrangement from memory of words (always already) spoken. And just as Homer's "original" arrangement will be "processed" by the poet in the "traditional way," any new spoken arrangements, according to Pinker, will always follow the "rules" of the code, the generative grammar, for the language of utterance.

Both the oral and the literate imaginations are involved in the production of a literate text. And though literacy "restructures" an oral consciousness, as McLuhan had pointed out earlier, the rise of new technologies, especially radio and television, heralded a new orality that itself was a kind of mimicking of a literate consciousness.⁶ I do not here mean to indicate that Faulkner's texts were influenced by the kind of transformation that McLuhan describes in any kind of direct sense. Rather, Faulkner's novels themselves confront the presence of two separate technologies for the organization of the word in language (as language) and display the marks of a form that is always dually determined

⁶ McLuhan pointed out, for instance, that the rise of fascism in Europe coincided with the increased use of the radio to transmit a single speaker's oral message to hundreds of thousands of listeners instantaneously, effectively erasing the distance between the speaker and the listener. According to the old orality a chain of repetition would have been required to send such a message. But, as one repetition followed another distortions would change the message. The orality of the "hot" media of radio and television, then, acted like the stable language of the literate construction as Ong describes it.

by the interplay between the two. At the same time, I do not wish to imply that orality and literacy are binary opposites that impinge upon each other in some kind of competition for the transmission of meaning so much as I wish to argue that, in the case of Faulkner's novels at least, the oral and the literate as structuring devices are involved in the *form* of his narratives. And though I would not argue that his novels participate in the "new orality" of the "hot" media as McLuhan defines them, William Faulkner's novels were all written during the period to which McLuhan referred, so it should not be surprising that they are reflective of a kind of re-oralization (but not necessarily as a recapturing in a romantic sense of some "lost" old orality) of language that formed part of the project of modernism. But, as the chapter especially on *Light in August* shows, the re-oralization within Faulkner's texts is not simply a return to the "old orality."

Faulkner's early major novels seem structured to violate the literate principle of order illustrated by Freytag's Pyramid, suggesting either the modernist attempt to revitalize the by then tired literate form (much in the same way that critics saw T.S. Eliot's fragmented ordering of his poetry to be an attempt through defamiliarization to refocus attention on poetry in a new way), or an attempt to reveal the fundamental impossibility of expressing a fully oral meaning through the literate form. But the difference between orality as Pinker describes it and literacy, however, is that the language in the literate form is stable. So, the re-combination or arrangement of its linguistic material, its constituent parts, does not necessarily have to follow any "traditional way." In fact, the combinations of the basic units of meaning are nearly endless. Faulkner's early novels, especially *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom,*

Absalom!, appear to participate in the modernist attempt to create the “new” from the breaking of the old. Yet, the relationship between orality and literacy at the narrative level in Faulkner’s fiction produces a stable structure—though one that is hidden beneath the literate surface of the novel.

All narrative texts, as Robert Holton points out in his *Jarring Witnesses*, participate in the transmission of social, cultural, political, historical, and ideological information through time. As many critics have noted, the very idiosyncratic structure of Faulkner’s texts suggests his concern for the ways that fictive narrative itself participates in such a transmission. In a sense, each narrative text constitutes the embodiment of a kind of memory, the expression of which reveals its structuring according not only to the reigning paradigms of the world out of which it is produced (even as that text sometimes parodies and thereby interrogates that paradigm), but also by the informing pressures of the oral and the literate as each participates in the formation of the medium of the message of that text.

The question of the relationship between the oral and the literate has animated a variety of debates since the work of Havelock and Parry, Goody, Ong, and McLuhan, and a host of others, especially in terms of stresses upon the differences between the two “states” of consciousness and its claimed implications for Western civilization, especially as they cross the boundaries of “discipline.” *The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, in 1996, for instance, describes the state of the relationship between orality and literacy for anthropologists in of the questions of what “it is to be ‘literate’” as dependent upon “local symbols and practices: on how [literacy] is distributed,” to whom

and “for what purposes.” Literacy, according to this line of argument, depends upon “ideas about history and the self,” on “educational and economic arrangements; on sexual or social divisions of labour; and on local power relations.” The anthropologist confronts such issues “increasingly” in “culture-specific” ethnographic ways. Outside of anthropology, however, such issues are confronted differently:

. . . Partly covering the same ground, but involving more extreme positions, is the cluster of arguments dubbed '*the orality-literacy debate*'. On the one side were writers like McLuhan and Ong (1982) (partially associated with Jack Goody's early writings) who not only sharply contrasted 'literacy' and 'orality', but also envisaged the development of human civilization as a series of revolutionary leaps from orality, to writing, to print and finally to the electronic age. Each medium had its own consequences, leading to the 'Great Divide' between 'primitive' and civilized marked by literacy. (388)

Opponents of Ong and McLuhan point out that there are “ethnographic and theoretical difficulties of such uni-causal . . . explanations, . . . and their underlying technological determinism (Finnegan 1988, Schousboe and Larson 1989, Street 1993)” (388).

In many ways, the “orality-literacy” debate continues outside of anthropological circles, as the citations to the work of Finnegan, Schousboe and Larsen, and Street attest. Its articulation in terms of narrative as it appears in non- and pseudo-Western cultures has successfully pointed out that the terms of the debate are not necessarily the same for those cultures for which the Western paradigm posited by Ong, Goody, and McLuhan

does not reign. Citing Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa*, who "stresses the flexibility of African narratives and the difficulty of establishing clear typologies," Bernard W. Bell, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*, stresses "for the anthropologist, myths, legends, folktales, and other forms of verbal art have four principal functions. They transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society" (16). With little alteration, the same four-fold functions have been identified with the ways that narrative operates whether orally or literately.

But, at the same time, the novel seems to cross the borders of such nicely described designations for the landscapes of the oral and the literate. Partaking in both, it expresses and transgresses at the same time. At least in Faulkner's texts, the oral and the literate participate in the novel as fundamental to the questions of narrative transmission and expression as part of the way that the "knowledge, values, and attitudes" of culture and society is figured through time and passed from one generation to another. Yet not unlike the traditional oral transmission, the very form of the literate calls into question the ways the medium participates itself in the transmission of its message. The difference between the two, however, has to do with the stability of the literate form when compared to the oral recitation. The oral recitation, the product of Benjamin's "storyteller," under its natural circumstances precludes analysis of its "form" (without extra-ordinary technological aid) and in some ways thereby suppresses examination of any aspect that does not support the structuring paradigm out of which it is produced. The stable form of

the literate text, however, positively displays the inclusion of the very subversive elements that call into question the knowledge, values, and attitudes it seems to espouse.

Literacy in Faulkner, then, is clearly not merely a substitute for orality in the transmission of values. If originally it was understood to be the spatialization (and so, the codification) of the oral, literacy as the arresting of the oral upon page for Faulkner bleeds into the transformation of the message via its submission to the spatial, as opposed to the aural and oral, and brings to light the distorting effect of the transformation of language through literacy. Though Goody's early work has been cited as participating in an understanding of cultural progress from orality toward literacy and beyond, his more recent work comments upon the ways in which literacy itself has impinged upon our understanding of the workings of the purely oral—even suggesting obliquely that such an understanding is only available as a result of literacy. In terms of the transmission through language in time of the knowledge, values, and attitudes of a culture, Goody has recently commented upon the ways that the orality-literacy debate itself has framed the way that we understand the very workings of memory for the oral imagination.

In *The Power of the Written Tradition*, Goody argues that his research suggests that writing itself has influenced our attitudes about memory as we associate it with the oral tradition. According to one aspect of the orality-literacy debate, verbatim memorization has been cited as an especially valued aspect of oral cultures. This opinion is based upon the fact that when verbatim recitation is practiced in literate cultures, it is tied to a written text (the Koran, for instance) and “mistakes” in recitation are corrected by reference to that fixed form. In oral cultures, by contrast, differences between the

recitations of the long verbal art form have been understood not to be “corrected” in the same way. Using the seemingly fixed first ten lines (that he calls the “Invocation”) from the “Bagre” myth of the LoDagaa of northern Ghana as his example, Goody explains:

Even when I had given up the idea that the Bagre was fixed, I still believed this Invocation to be rigid, because people would confidently begin to speak these lines, and then an elder would correct a younger man’s version . . . However, I have now recorded some dozen versions of these lines, and none of them is precisely, word for word, the same as any other. If an elder corrects a recital, it is on the basis of his own memorized version, her personalized model, which differs slightly from that of others. Since there is no fixed text from which to correct, variation is constantly creeping in, partly due to forgetting, partly due perhaps to unconscious attempts at improvement, adjustment, creation. (40)

So, contrary to the idea that oral cultures practice and prize verbatim recall, Goody’s research suggests that only literate cultures practice and prize verbatim recall while oral cultures participate in a cultural transmission that lives and changes with great variety. The kind of variation witnessed in the transmission of urban legend in a literate culture is *not* the result of the literate imagination’s having lost the ability to remember precisely, but an instance of the transmission of information according to oral rather than literal means.

The argument of the present work is that the intersection of the structuring power of the oral and the literate is intimately involved in producing the form of Faulkner’s

texts. Those aspects of the purely oral that determine the *form* of the transmission of information through time combine with the literate ability to parody and interrogate that transmission simultaneously with its production. The texts of William Faulkner are investigated, then, not only because they participate in the questioning of the efficacy of the novelistic form in that endeavor, but also because, increasingly as his career proceeds, they become a matter of subject as well, as his texts call attention to narrative structure as intimately involved in the expression of meaning through the written word even as it contemplates the oral as its own progenitor form.

I do not mean to define orality and literacy in terms of the novel in general but rather to imply this distinction as a tool to investigate the ways that structure is linked to content in Faulkner's novels. To observe the development of this linkage, I have opted to consider Faulkner's novels in the order in which they were produced and published, with the exception of beginning, like Ross (who does so for different reasons), with an analysis of the short story "Barn Burning" as representative of the ways the oral and the literate combine to structure a text.

"Barn Burning" illustrates how the oral and the literate structure a text conventionally. By "conventionally," I mean that "Barn Burning" employs those graphic devices we have come to expect in the literate text for the ways in which the oral will appear as speech-act (in being offset by quotation marks) and as the presentation of verbal narration of direct or indirect thought (through the use of italics). Each of these attributes of the text constitutes the workings of what Ross terms "phenomenal" and "mimetic" voice within the text. At the same time, "psychic" voice—that voice of the

consciousness (usually of the character's consciousness upon whom the story concentrates but often including that of a third-person narrator or even the author) makes its presence felt in this story as well. The narrator (or Faulkner) also provides an "intertextual" voice to provide the reader information that cannot be known at the time of the story by its protagonist—though this information does not appear in text that itself is graphically differentiated in the ways that, for instance, "psychic" voice is differentiated. Rather, the intertextual voice appears only in terms of the content rather than the form of its expression. I do not treat in this or any of the chapters that follow how this intertextual voice represents a tradition for the structuring of "oratory" or narrative fiction in terms of the Southern tradition out of which Faulkner writes, as my aim is not so much to investigate how such a voice might represent a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs that structure the text. My interest, rather, is to illustrate how the oral and the literate, in some sense more simply, combine to produce the balanced structure of a text—that is, my interest is in the medium, not the message.

Chapters three and four, concerning *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*, attempt to reveal how the oral and the literate function as differentiated "logics" in tension with each other in the production of text. In each of these chapters, my interest is in the relationship between the different sections or chapters in the texts as they are ordered according to the oral or the literate. These two Faulkner works show how orality and literacy constitute what appear to be opposed logics for the organization of the material of the novels but whose tension, in the end, functions to create the illusion that

orality and literacy are binary opposites while, in fact, they are inseparably related according to a “logic” that is neither properly oral or literate.

The question of the oral and the literate does not make itself felt at the level of content in *The Sound and the Fury* yet while the tension between the two modes is heightened in terms of structure, its structure is still stable. An investigation of *Light in August* in terms of narrative time-shift as intimately linked to the shifts between the oral and the literate, is shown also to exhibit a stable narrative structure, but the novel also reveals Faulkner’s concern for orality and literacy as a matter of content as well. At the level of content, however, this consideration is not literally in terms of whether or not characters themselves enjoy full participation in literacy. Rather, Faulkner presents us with a story that takes place in a world in which the oral and the literate confront each other as forms of logic that perhaps do not “direct behavior” (as Judith Lockyer understands the power of the “word” to direct the behavior of certain of Faulkner’s male narrators) so much as to participate in the experience of certain of the characters in the novel depending upon their perceived relations to the oral and the literate as structuring devices for reality.

Chapter five, on *Absalom, Absalom!*, further explores the relationship between the oral and the literate as structuring devices. In this novel, Faulkner layers a multi-voiced narration within the consciousness of a single character, through whose imagination the novel is rendered. At the same time, Faulkner brings to bear the issues of the oral and the literate in juxtaposing the authority of the literate (in Charles Bon’s and Mr. Compson’s letters) over and against the oral (in Rosa Coldfield’s, Quentin and Shreve’s attempt to

tell) as each vies for authority over its “text.” The serpentine order of the novel’s form reveals the intimate link between the oral and the literate, perhaps more fully than any of those novels in Faulkner’s corpus before it, as the logic of each structuring mode vies to dominate Quentin’s attempt to get at the meaning of the story of Thomas Sutpen.

Chapter six considers *Go Down, Moses* and notes Faulkner’s shift toward a full consideration of the oral and the literate as aspects of both form and content. The fragmented nature of this novel repeats the fragmentation of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, but with the difference that each of its sections does not take up story lines that are related directly to those of the other chapters or sections or entail characters who are (necessarily) directly related to each other. The central characters of each section are related in some way by blood to the McCaslin family, and each section takes up the workings of the oral or the literate as the means for the transmission and expression of the meaning of human experience through time, linking them in some ways to what McLuhan identified as the “oral manner in prose” within a text that is punctuated by sections that positively ignore such oral bonds (“Fire and the Hearth,” “Pantaloon in Black”), flaunting those “foundations” for authority that Ike seeks in the reading and interpreting (or “explaining”) of the ledgers.

The concluding chapter, on *The Reivers*, examines the text in terms of how Faulkner brings to bear all of the issues that have been suggested by the presence of the oral and the literate within the narrative texts that have come before it. *The Reivers*, however, does not merely summarize the implications of the relationship between the oral and the literate, even if it seems to connect itself to all the Yoknapatawpha novels in

Faulkner's *oeuvre*. Rather, *The Reivers* seems ironically to leave the prejudices of the logics of the oral and the literate in place in what is perhaps a conflicted statement of their relationship within the novelistic text that simultaneously participates in the transmission of knowledge, values, and attitudes of culture and society through time.

Since the difference between the ordering for the literate and the oral imagination has to do with the relationship between events in a narrative in terms of time, my argument regarding the Faulkner texts under investigation here is that the relationship between these two modes of ordering may be often plotted as a function of the shifts in narrative time. The considerations of Faulkner's works that follow will be accompanied by diagrammatic schemes as examples of the relationship between the oral and the literate as modes of ordering form. Such mapping does not yield anything like the same pattern for any two works, but it strongly implies that Faulkner's novels have always been *ordered* according to a relationship between the oral and the literate as structuring devises.

At the same time, however, I do not wish to suggest that such analysis will always reveal such patterns for all Faulkner's works. If Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, a novel obviously engaged in the very nature of language in conflict with itself, engages the relationship between the oral and the literate, it does not do so in the same way as the novels in question here. In Faulkner's early novels included in this study, *discontinuity*, fittingly, applies to content—so the difference between the literate and the oral, as modes of ordering form, once diagrammed, is obvious. *Go Down, Moses* exhibits still some ambiguity in what Martin Kreiswirth calls Faulkner's "ordering of materials," but the gap

between oral and literate begins to narrow and the temporal relations between story and narrative make this clear. After *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner's style begins to look nearly conventional in the sense that story and form no longer seem so at odds with each other. This apparent resolution of the tension between the oral and the literate is achieved in Faulkner's last work, *The Reivers*, a novel that nonetheless leaves in place the conflicted nature of the transmission of meaning through time by the oral and the literate in the form of the novel.

Finally, I make no judgment regarding the "message" of Faulkner's novels as each participates in the ongoing discussion of the ways fictional narrative structures the very relationships in human terms of cultures and institutions as they vie with each other for legitimacy or equality. There is no question that Faulkner's fictions reflect, question, parody, and promote certain values and attitudes that mark the very tension of human experience outside of its expression through art. Nor do I concern myself with the success with which Faulkner himself achieves some goal he intended to reach in his career as a writer. If we are to take him at his word in the *Address Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize* (a highly questionable stance to take, on a variety of grounds), Faulkner's fiction was an effort to aid and support the ongoing dialogue that functions itself to under gird what we call *culture*. And even if we do not agree with the values and attitudes reflected in his texts, we can at least credit him with providing a kind of bulwark for their continued investigation. At the very least, Faulkner's texts interrogate the relationship between the oral and the literate in the *novel* as that medium that expresses a meaning even as it displays its form. As Faulkner attempts to discover the new orality out of literacy, over

the course of his career, he increasingly moves toward an appreciation of the presence of the old orality as always already present within literacy, and so posits a relationship between the two that is not antagonistic, but rather organic, according to which the literate embodies the expression of the oral, even as the oral serves as that message that is always already its medium.

CHAPTER TWO— “BARN BURNING”: ORALITY AND THE LITERATE

FRAME

William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” displays the ways in which the oral and the literate combine to structure a text in Faulkner’s fiction. Written stories are literate when the organization of their material follows a causal chain using what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in a different context call the disjunctive logic of the decision tree, rather than the conjunctive logic of the rhizome, which analogously is oral. Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” follows the disjunctive logic of literacy whose structure is also finally determined by the conjunctive interruption of orality. While the oral is encapsulated and expressed within a text in a variety of ways, “Barn Burning” illustrates how orality is expressed in the literate at the level of story and narrative, content and form. At the level of narrative, the oral appears as an interruption of the literate ordering of the materials. At the level of story, the old oral order appears in opposition to the new literate order. Yet Faulkner’s complex handling of the different logics of the oral and literate worlds reveals that this seeming opposition is in fact the basis for the stable structure of the narrative as

well as the resolution of the conflict central to the story of Sarty Snopes. Following an analysis of the ways in which the apparent opposition between the values of the oral and literate worlds are played out at the level of story in “Barn Burning,” this chapter will turn to an examination of the oral and the literate at the level of narrative structure to show how they combine to produce a balanced and harmoniously structured formal whole.

In *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long Revolution*, Richard Godden argues that “Barn Burning” represents Faulkner’s lamenting the advent of modernization in the “Old South” as he understood it:

‘Barn Burning’ is very much an afterword to *Absalom, Absalom!* Written out of Faulkner’s despair over modernization (confronted through *Pylon* [1935,], which he wrote while writing and rewriting Sutpen’s narrative), the story explores the limited patterns of resistance within the cropping contract. In this it differs from *Absalom, Absalom!*, being a view from below, but story and novel share a single trigger — the breaking of the plantation system of agriculture, and the attendant exposure of ‘dependency’ as a cultural remnant, no longer useful to a dominant class, finally forced to revolutionize itself, and moving from ‘pre,’ or ‘quasi,’ to ‘full’ bourgeois status (129).

Godden argues that though the story’s chief witness is Sarty, its action revolves around those “crimes” committed by Ab, “whereby a tenant seeks to command a degree of ‘freedom’ and mobility within a sharecropping agreement” (123). Godden’s work

investigates how Faulkner's fiction during perhaps the most productive decade of his career (from 1929 to 1939) illustrates that the "trauma" of the South of which Faulkner writes, "is a labor trauma, centered on a primal scene of recognition during which white passes into black and black passes into white along perceptual tracks necessitated by a singular and pervasively coercive system of production" (1). Though Godden's view is focused mainly upon those novels that include Quentin Compson as a character, his view of Faulkner's fiction in general, and in particular of "Barn Burning," resonates in several ways with how this short story has generally been received.

Noel Polk, in *Children of the Dark House*, describes "Barn Burning" in terms of the choice Sarty faces:

Sarty must choose between two value systems that are in conflict over the particular but in complete agreement over the general. He must choose between an abstract principle of social justice that favors property over people and a more immediate, concrete principle that insists upon family loyalty above all else. Each system has its hold over him, and each asks—nay, demands—that he martyr himself in its name. Whichever choice he makes, he suffers, in the abstract or in the particular. And choose he eventually must. (28)

Regardless of whether one agrees with Polk's interpretation of specific terms of Sarty's choice in "Barn Burning" (or a number of various readings of Ab's character, as will be seen), the fact that Ab stands in opposition to a system that he sees as antagonistic to his will and station in life and the fact that Sarty feels torn between his emotional ties to his

father and demands upon in him in terms of what he ought and ought not do (demands, the story makes clear, that arise from within him just as much as they are imposed from without), “Barn Burning” presents the reader with a story that revolves around a dual set of conflicts. The more general one is that conflict between the individual and society and, depending upon one’s critical viewpoint, is represented positively and negatively by Ab Snopes. The more particular conflict in the story revolves around that between the interior and exterior experience of the character Sarty. For though the story is told from third person point of view, it is Sarty’s consciousness that we are made privy to.

These conflicts also resonate in terms of the oral and the literate. While the combination of the oral and the literate in the story reveals itself in conventional ways, that is, with graphic markers that offset certain kinds of narrative to distinguish it as distinct from third person narrative either as uttered speech, or the direct transcription of thought, the oral and the literate, as will be shown, also work in terms of organizing the text along certain lines that produces a balanced structure. The oral in the story is to be understood, however, not merely as attaching itself only to speech or thought (though it is, since especially in terms of thought it is associated with the consciousness of Sarty), but also in terms of the way that it moves through the landscape of the linguistic terrain of “Barn Burning.” In this sense, the oral may be seen to move *in* a landscape, rather than merely upon a landscape. The oral senses immanent impressions from a variety of directions and sense apparatus at once and responds to these. By contrast, the literate “maps” a set of actions and enacts them according to a pre-conceived plan. Sarty’s story, then, is oral in that it is both reactive and responsive to that which goes on around him.

Ab's is literate in that it proceeds according to a plan, the details of which both Sarty and the reader are made aware of only after the fact (Ab dons the black coat, for instance, not for his appearance in court, but for the move that will inevitably take place as a result of its outcome and the narrative indicates that Sarty understands the black coat somehow to symbolize that his father's actions are ever the result of a plan he has worked out, in a sense, three steps ahead of the present moment).

The details of the plot of "Barn Burning" are relatively simple and straightforward. Set in post-Civil War rural Mississippi, its main character, Colonel Sartoris Snopes (Sarty), is the son of the story's antagonist, a sharecropper named Ab Snopes. The story begins in a general store during a trial concerning whether or not Ab burned down another man's barn in retribution for that man's taking legal possession of a hog and charging a "pound fee" for its return because Snopes had failed to control it. Unable to find against Snopes because of insufficient evidence, the Judge nonetheless advises him to leave the country. The family, consisting of Ab, his wife and her sister, two daughters, and an elder son, along with Sarty, leaves to find work in Yoknapatawpha, where Snopes has made arrangements to sharecrop for Major De Spain. It is not long before Ab runs afoul of De Spain over the ruining of a rug. Ab sues his employer and, failing in this second court case, resolves to seek his revenge by burning De Spain's barn. His attempt to enlist Sarty's aid in this effort constitutes the boy's central conflict: whether he should remain loyal to his blood-kin or defend what he knows is right.

At the level of plot, since the main character of "Barn Burning" is illiterate, something of the opposition between the literate and the oral as competing paradigms, or

ideologies, is at play. The “old fierce pull of blood” that Sarty Snopes feels at the beginning of the story represents the entire world encapsulated by the oral as Ong and McLuhan describe it. In its immanence and immediacy, the oral world is one of familial ties in which word and action are not so separated as they are in the literate world. In the opening scene, Faulkner sets Sarty’s world in opposition to the world represented by the courtroom. In this world, the written word, the Law, can stand in for an action, can sanction or authorize, can validate a course of action as “set by statute” in ways that to Sarty’s father seem to circumvent individual freedom.

If we understand orality to ally itself with a set of values distinct from those of literacy, and the story comprises a confrontation between competing values, then Ab Snopes’ position might be taken to be in defense of a set of values he intends to protect against a competing set that stands to either marginalize or assimilate that set. Critics have described Ab’s antagonism to the world in a variety of ways along such lines. In introducing the character Flem Snopes (Ab’s unnamed elder son in “Barn Burning”) in his discussion of *The Hamlet*, Daniel J. Singal describes Ab as “a dirt farmer so enraged by the indignities of sharecropping that he specializes in the burning down the barns of his landlords. Venting his fierce resentment at his social superiors has, in fact, become an virtual obsession for him” (*William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* 247). In “Faulkner’s History: Sources and Interpretation,” Don H. Doyle describes Ab as a “bushwhacker,” but indicts Faulkner (in terms of Ab’s character along with others in *The Unvanquished*), for failing to seize in such characters the opportunity to “have explored some of the historical complexities and ironies of Reconstruction” (*Faulkner in Cultural*

Context 26). Later in the same essay, however, Doyle characterizes Ab's act of barn burning as participating in what in the South in the 1870's was a "prepolitical form of individual retribution," according to which Faulkner captured "perfectly" the "mingled resentment of class and race" (27-28). Along similar lines, in the same volume, John T. Matthews, in "Faulkner and Proletarian Literature," argues that Ab's career (which he treats across a number of the texts in which the character appears), reveals in Faulkner's fiction "a keen sense of the injustices suffered by individuals under plantocratic and later mercantile capitalism" (169). Paraphrasing Sylvia Jenkins Cook, Matthews points out that Ab's gestures of "violent guerilla warfare against the injustice of tenancy . . . parts ways with Marxist representations of class, . . . in [Faulkner's] refusal to identify class exploitation as responsible for the plight of Yoknapatawpha's poor" (170; 169). Matthews tempers Cook's assessment, however, by pointing out that "the simple plot of class consciousness and conflicts [in "Barn Burning"] fails to cover the multiplicity of exploitative forms in the South," concluding that given Sarty's resistance to his father's actions in "Barn Burning," we might be surprised that it is Ab that returns in *The Hamlet*, rather than Sarty. Matthews argues, "Sarty disappears because he represents a futile longing for some inexpressible revision of oppressive ways. His confusion argues the need for new languages of both ambition and resistance" (172, 74). In this view, Ab represents one language for ambition and resistance, while De Spain and the law courts represent another—with Sarty caught in-between.

Indeed, that need for a new language seems keen to Sarty at the beginning of the story, as he stands nearly *official* witness to the court proceedings involving Ab and Mr.

Harris. The Judge insists that he cannot find against Snopes without “proof”— an indication of a literate structure of knowledge. In terms of the acceptability of eyewitness testimony (on Sarty’s part), orality here is disciplined and subjugated to literate requirements. At the same time, the law cannot assist Mr. Harris without the corroboration of the oral testimony, so he is defeated by the very system to which he looks for vindication. Eyewitness testimony brings the oral present into the literate proceedings about past events, verifying and establishing their “truth.” The speech act that verifies what the eye has seen is subsumed by the literate in its becoming a formal (and written) part of the legal proceeding. Absent the oral utterance to corroborate Mr. Harris’ accusation, to lend to it a language that combines the oral/aural world with the literate/visual, the law must allow Ab to go free.

In the world of “Barn Burning” orality still fundamentally matters. The literate is shown to rely upon the oral for its authority, but will not accept it without its submitting to the literate formula. What Mr. Harris testifies to is hearsay and “not proof.” What Sarty would testify to presumably would constitute proof, since his language *authorizes* (in that it speaks it) what the eyes have seen. Here, the visual world of the literate is privileged over Mr. Harris’ oral/aural world, but, significantly, still relies on the progenitor form, oral testimony, to be made official. If Sarty had been forced to testify it would have been, presumably, by swearing an oath upon a book. But Sarty is not made to testify, perhaps signaling an acceptance of the fundamental importance by the Law of those values that the old oral world still represents.

When they arrive at their next destination, the De Spain plantation, Ab takes Sarty with him to finalize arrangements with his new employer. As they walk toward the De Spain mansion, Ab tells his son: “Pretty and white, aint it. That’s sweat. That’s nigger sweat” (*Collected Stories* 12). Ab’s utterance is not motivated by his sense of outrage against slavery. Rather, he is here a smaller version of Thomas Sutpen whose whole design was motivated by a slight at the front door of a plantation in Virginia when he was a boy. Both characters are motivated by their lack of inclusion in a world they covet. Ab is distinguished both by his lack of desire to work for such inclusion and his sense of entitlement. His remark here indicates a racist sense of superiority and is confirmed by his pushing his way past the servant at the front door and his staining the De Spain’s rug. The scene mirrors that scene from the childhood of Thomas Sutpen, when a slave at the door of a mansion turned him away. Sutpen’s response is to spend the better part of his life accruing the necessary means to insure that he is never treated in such a way again. Ab’s response is more immediate and visceral. He simply pushes his way through the door. While the two characters take different routes to exerting their personal integrity, it seems rooted not only in a sense of isolation from society as a result of material want, but also in a nascent racism that refuses to be seen as lower than the lowest members of society. In terms of Ab, this motivation is coupled with a desire for material gain.⁷

Faulkner is explicit on this point in a telling detail regarding Ab toward the end of the

⁷Ab’s character in *The Unvanquished* seems more motivated by greed than anything else. In *The Hamlet*, however, Ratliff describes Ab’s motivation as coming from a sense of honor that goes beyond the bounds of his own individual integrity. Of course, Ratliff’s reading of Ab’s motivation may have as much to do with Ratliff’s values as to do with Ab’s.

story: Ab was a “soldier” in the “fine, old, European sense,” going to war not for honor, but for booty. Ab’s limp, a result of an injury suffered in the war, is an ignominious reminder that his participation was neither to defend the South against an interloping North (perhaps the image writ large, from a certain point of view of the imposition from the outside of one type of order upon another), nor even an attempt to undermine the defense of a society based upon a cruel injustice, slavery.⁸ Ab received the injury while fleeing an encampment of Confederate soldiers in an attempt to steal their horses. The reference in “Barn Burning” seems calculated to lead to the conclusion that Ab’s actions in the war were motivated by nothing other than his desire to profit.

Though I treat only Ab as he appears in “Barn Burning,” like many of Faulkner’s characters, he appears in other stories as well. If anything, his character seems more corrupt in *The Unvanquished*, appearing there as an accomplice to Major Grumby an episode that winds up leading to the death of Rosa Millard. In their gloss of the text of *The Unvanquished*, the overall impression of Ab’s character given by the writers of *Reading Faulkner: The Unvanquished: Glossary and Commentary* is that Ab is little more than an opportunistic scoundrel, according to which he is variously described as the progenitor of a “shady clan of rural con-artists,” “undeserving” of respect by Ringo, and of “no-account” (119, 123, 136). Yet Ab appears also in *The Snopes Trilogy* and the

⁸ There is evidence in Faulkner’s fiction of characters motivated to acts of violence out of an equal resistance to the arbiters of order on both sides of a conflict that, on its surface, seems “black and white” in terms of right and wrong. In *Genius of Place*, Max Putzel sites one example from the short story “Turnabout.” The American pilot dumps his “last bomb on the enemy’s staff headquarters . . . wishing they were all down there ‘all the generals, the admirals, the presidents and the kings—theirs, ours—all of them’” (qtd in Putzel, 289).

narrator Ratliff, in *The Hamlet*, tells a comic story of Ab that depicts a sense of honor belied by his actions in “Barn Burning” and *The Unvanquished* and even suggests tenderness toward his wife in the failed cow-horse-milk-separator episode. Other more complex and sympathetic readings of Ab, whether confined to “Barn Burning” or not, are valid. In terms of the structure of the story, however, the interpretation of Ab’s motivations does not affect the oral/literate nature of the organization of the narrative, or the pattern of the story.

Many of the values Ab espouses— of kith and kin, of the “old fierce” blood ties, without which an individual might be said to lack identity (“you got to stick to blood or you won’t have any blood to stick to you”)— could be identified with a tribal mentality that fails in the face of a civilized life organized around bonds that go beyond blood ties. Ab seems rather simply not up to the new economy, which perhaps fits better with Faulkner’s mentality about the New South following the war. Yet such a reading would ignore the fact that, except for in the technical terms of his case against De Spain in court, Ab succeeds at every act of retribution he sets out to accomplish. That is, despite what would appear to be the subjugation of the “old” ways that Ab’s code of integrity may be identified with, that subjugation is not total. In addition, if we understand the logic of Ab’s actions as literate, we may see in them the very logic of the law—whose literate hands are tied unless it is enlivened through the agency of an oral interpretation of its statutes that makes more of it than a dead code. Hence, Ab punishes Sarty because he knows that the boy would not have lied for him in court. Ab understands that the law requires the union of the oral and the literate to function properly. Without Sarty’s verbal

corroboration of Ab's denial of involvement in the burning of Harris' barn, Ab risks being prosecuted. By the same token, the contest in the first courtroom scene brilliantly illustrates the two forces Sarty finds himself between. Though we might be tempted to understand the conflict to arise as a result of the antagonism between the "truth" that resides in Sarty's heart and the "truth" that his father would have him sanction, in terms of the oral and the literate, we can read the scene another way as well.

The initial courtroom scene asks, in essence, "What is the truth?" But the answer to this question in terms of the way that the scene plays out depends upon point of view. For Mr. Harris, the truth is initially what he (thinks) he knows from the evidence. In his mind, a literate logic implies there is a causal chain of events that leads to the indisputable conclusion that Ab must have burned his barn. The Justice of the Peace rightly disputes his reasoning by pointing out that his testimony is hearsay—that is, based only upon what he heard and surmised, but not also upon what he saw. As a result, Mr. Harris' oral argument (made according to the disjunctive logic of "and so") lacks the corroboration of the visual. Sarty's eyewitness testimony (a combination of the oral/aural and the literate/visual) is pressed into service, if Mr. Harris is to win the case.

From Ab's point of view, oral corroboration by the only present eyewitness is also necessary to win his case. If Sarty testifies, however, Ab requires that the foundation for his testimony be based not on the particulars of what he might have seen, but in the more general rule of Ab's code—articulated in the following scene when he strikes Sarty after they leave to take up their contract with De Spain. For Ab, the code outweighs the particularity of reality, representing a law as a basis for "truth" more fundamental than

the details of “what happened.” Mr. Harris’ case depends, then, on fact; Ab’s case depends not on fact, but on what he takes as more fundamental, the law of blood-kinship, according to which loyalty to family is more important than loyalty to fact.

Because Sarty is not made to testify by the Justice of the Peace, the case in effect ends in a draw—each party losing. Mr. Harris loses his barn and what it contained, and Ab loses the dollar pound fee he paid to retrieve his errant hog. But the scene illustrates also the mutual dependence of the literate and the oral. The literate is represented by the written law (statute); the oral by the testimony that must be sworn to to corroborate what the eyes have seen. In court, then, in “Barn Burning,” seeing may be believing, but saying makes it so only if that saying corroborates the seeing. Neither logic by itself is sufficient within the world of “Barn Burning” to establish the truth. The oral is dependent on the literate and the literate is dependent upon the oral.

At a level beyond the confines of the story itself, such a relationship between the oral and the literate reflects the situation in terms of their relation for the narrative. Orality is intimately involved in the production of a text, since it is through orality, as Ong pointed out, that we are introduced into the basic linguistic configuration that informs our relationship in language to experience and the form of its organization and expression. As has been noted, “it is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society” (*Orality and Literacy* 179). Once the expression and organization of experience is spatialized by literacy, however, the fundamental relationships between its constituent parts become portable.

They may move from their associative and immanent positions side by side in orality and be shifted to other places within the textual landscape without a loss of the original connection they enjoyed according to the conjunctive logic of the oral realm. Thus, when the oral/aural and the literate/visual work in tandem, the map of the latter literally references the landscape of the former. But if that relationship is disrupted, the connections cannot be made.

Sarty's experience demonstrates that below or beyond the question of orality or literacy at the level of story, there exists some level of experience that either of these two modes seeks to organize. In the beginning scene, if the general store cum courtroom is to represent all that the literate world has to offer but which is denied to Sarty, then his ambivalence toward his father, his struggle to find some middle way between protecting him and honoring his own responsibility not to bear false witness, indicates that while orality and literacy constitute two distinct ways of defining the world, they are not necessarily at odds within the story as story. We may see Sarty's own illiteracy then as an indication that despite it he may still participate in a larger world.

Each oral intrusion in the literate narrative flow of the story comes at a moment of crisis for Sarty and serves to underpin the entire structure of "Barn Burning." The resolution of the crisis that Sarty faces will come as a result of his negotiating between two worlds—that represented by his father and that represented by De Spain. Furthermore, as each crisis is marked by an oral interruption of the literate narrative, it may be seen how the resolution of Sarty's conflict at the level of story is related to the resolution of the "conflict" between oral and literate at the level of narrative.

The oral makes its appearance within the literate text most obviously through the devices available to print that simultaneously display and bracket orality. Such devices include offset speech, italics to indicate direct access to thought, parenthetical asides, and narrative directives, including “he said,” or “she said.” In the case of offset speech, print signals the presence of orality as utterance. The use of italicized and parenthetical “utterances” (when they belong to the main character especially) reveals orality at another level, as the raw and present-time material of a character’s psychic experience. Here, present-tense orality is bracketed within the past-tense flow of the literate narrative as told by a third-person omniscient narrator. Such instances of the oral, according to convention, bubble to the surface, in some sense, ekphrastically as interruptions to or flights from the literate, revealing that, by convention, a literate paradigm directs narrative, while an oral paradigm directs story. Instances of oral interruption of literate narrative in general reveal how the literate form offers access to an oral reality in a way not possible through the oral form alone. But, in addition to showing the most basic ways that the oral appears within the literate, “Barn Burning” also hints at how the oral and the literate combine to create a stable structure for a story.

In broad terms, “Barn Burning” is conventionally literate. Accordingly, it subordinates the oral, and orders itself along an arc that follows Freytag’s pyramid: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This pyramid, however, is illustrated in a series of events and scenes that constitute repetitions of past events and scenes and odd reversals of those same. The resolution of “Barn Burning” is ironic in its attempt both to resolve the conflict central to the story and preserve what seems an

inevitably tragic end. In short, Sarty Snopes faces what so many of Faulkner's characters face: he must accomplish the impossible and produce a resolution that embodies both his doom and his liberation.

The main events that comprise the parabola of "Barn Burning" are these: (1) the initial courtroom scene (which includes within it the memory the burning of Harris' barn); (2) the conversation between Sarty and Ab in which Ab strikes him because Sarty "was fixin' to tell them," the import of which is the announcement of the theme of manhood and familial obligation; (3) the introduction of de Spain's Mansion (with new reference to courthouses, the law, and extra-familial obligations); (4) the soiling of the rug (a repetition of the errant pig episode); (5) the cleaning of the rug (and its deliberate destruction); (6) the offer of a means of restitution by De Spain (a repetition of Mr. Harris' generosity in giving Ab a means to build a pen for his pig); (7) the lawsuit by Snopes against de Spain, protesting the terms of restitution (a reversal of Harris' suit against Snopes); (8) Sarty's protesting Ab's means of establishing "justice," (which articulation reverses Sarty's earlier inability to articulate his desire); (9) Ab's enlisting Sarty's participation in the barn burning and the latter's verbal resistance; (10) Sarty's attempt to warn de Spain (a repetition and reversal of his first visit to the mansion *and* his simultaneous attempt to save/stop his father); and finally, (11) Sarty's rejection of and escape, apparently forever, from his father's cycle of blood-feud-revenge.

"Barn Burning" offers a series of actions that are repetitions of earlier actions. Yet for Ab, each repetition is the variation on a theme. Sarty's repetitions, on the other hand, transform the repeated act and make of it something different than it was before. As the

story moves, Sarty grows in his ability to articulate his thoughts regarding the conflict he feels inside. As his articulation increases, so too does he move toward that moment when he will put thought into action. While this movement is in tandem necessarily with the actions of his father, it also inevitably brings Sarty to the moment he must chart his own course or be consumed by his father's code.

Charting the events of the story's chronological macrostructure reveals this pattern. Though this pattern implies a balanced relationship between Sarty and Ab's actions, I do not intend to imply a mere balance. It should be noted that important moments in Sarty's psychic development are linked to the pressures created as a result of his father's behavior. The structure of the story, then, acts in a kind of strophe and antistrophe between Ab's actions and Sarty's responses:

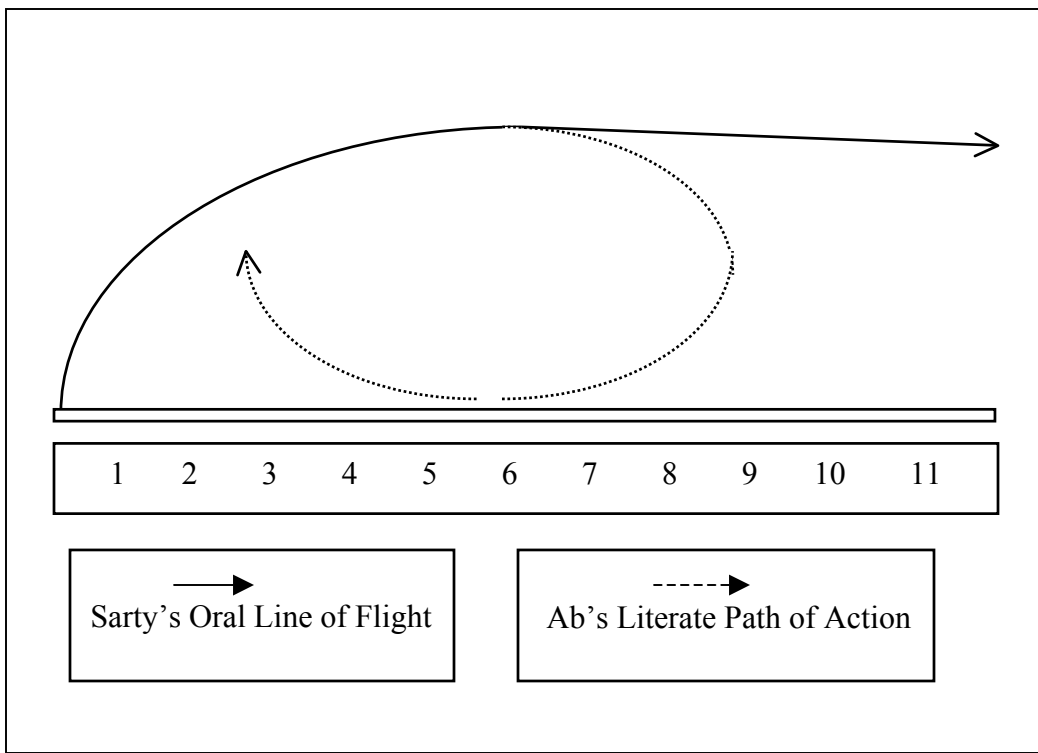


Figure1: Oral "Line of Flight vs. Literate "Path of Action."

The solid line beginning at number 1 and ending at 11 represents the main arc of Sarty's story. The dotted semi-circle represents Ab Snopes' circular pattern of blood-feud revenge. As Sarty grows in his ability to think, speak, and act with his will in accordance with what he thinks is right, the two lines of action separate, with Sarty's finally going forward, toward the future, and Ab's circling back on itself, in endless repetition. Though I refer to Ab's as a "literate path of action," I do not intend to suggest that Ab is literate, though nothing in the story suggests directly that he is illiterate. What I mean to suggest is simply that Ab's imposition of will upon the landscape in which he moves follows the pattern suggested by the imposition of a literate understanding of a map or grid whose logic is causal, but in this case, circular. Each episode is balanced by its mirror in the second half of the story; hence, episode 1 is balanced by episode 11; 2 by 10, etc. Ab's literate path of action ends where it began, with another act of revenge. Sarty's oral line of flight, however, escapes this circular pattern of "justice," ending in episode 11 with a new dawn, the signal of new hope and a future

The oral event in storytelling, then, articulates itself according to a logic that in another context (without reference to the oral or the literate) Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizomatic way, the contours of its form being determined using "continuous change of direction and the conjunctive logic of AND . . . AND . . . rather than the disjunctive logic" of literacy (Cowan, "The *Nomos* of Deleuze and Guattari" 282). According to such an analogy, the oral story operates in a "smooth" rather than a "striated" space. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "smooth" space "is a space of affects, more than one of properties Whereas in the striated, forms organize a matter, in the smooth

materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them The smooth is *nomos*, whereas the striated always has a *logos*” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 478). According to the analogy I’m drawing then, the striated space of literacy constitutes a “rational mode of organization that intellectual history has customarily labeled Cartesian: the superimposition of a grid and of clear divisions in a field of continuous phenomena in order to know and control them better.” The smooth space of orality, by contrast, according to the same analogy, constitutes a continuous development that “develops its form in constant contact with itself rather than by reference to a template discontinuous with its space” (Cowan 283-4). As Deleuze and Guattari put it, striated space “is defined by the requirements of long-distance vision” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 494). The same might be said for the differing logics of orality and literacy—Sarty’s orality is rhizomatic, Ab’s “literacy” (bracketed here since we have no indication in the story that he can read) acts according to the “long-distance vision” of a field that is ordered the “superimposition of a grid and of clear divisions in a field of continuous phenomena in order to know and control them better.”

For Deleuze and Guattari, the difference between the logic of the *nomos* and the *logos*, between the smooth space of the rhizome and the striated space of the grid, is fundamental. But the analogous difference between the *nomos* of the oral and the *logos* of the literate is perhaps not so negative. There seems to be a third dimension to this apparent binary opposition that implies that the relationship between the oral and the literate is not always one according to which the literate order overwhelms the oral, or conversely, that the oral order “disrupts” the literate. This third dimension reveals itself in

the relationship of orality and literacy and time. The oral exists only in non-reversible time⁹. While as Deleuze and Guattari theorize, the smooth space of the *nomos* is conjunctive and rhizomatic, it still only moves in one direction and is non-reversible. Orality behaves in the same way. By contrast, striated space exists in reversible time, meaning that it can go back or jump forward because one of the consequences of its “long-distance vision” is an ability to take in and refer to events from the past, present, and future. The literate, in stabilizing the word upon the page, has access to the same kind of ability. The vantage point of the literate is large enough to “see” everything that is laid out on the grid to which it refers. Hence, one of the results of the combination of the oral with the literate in Faulkner’s text is to make the oral malleable (in terms of its relation to time) in a way that it cannot be according to its own paradigmatic “logic.”¹⁰ While Sarty’s oral experience can only happen as it happens, in the now, that same experience is “available” for insertion anywhere on the literate grid of the narrative. As a result, the oral within the literate text is liberated from its own unidirectional nature and can appear, literally, anywhere in the text. In “Barn Burning,” this aspect of the effect of the literate in combination with the oral is revealed at crucial moments to lend a deeper significance

⁹ Ong and others make reference to this feature of the oral, but the seed for this idea came as a result of a chance encounter with an overview of the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss, in a paper entitled “Claude Levi-Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth,” posted as a web document by Associate Professor Mary Klages.

¹⁰In “Barn Burning” this relationship is especially seen in the way Sarty’s time-bound unidirectional oral experience is juxtaposed to narrative intrusions that speak of what he might know in the future but does not know in the present—such as Ab’s real role in the Civil War. Such interpolations of future knowledge, or the linking of past experiences that Sarty, in the moment, can only know in the present, are indications of the way that the literate makes the oral malleable.

to events as they unfold for the main character by including information that cannot be known or experienced by Sarty in the moment.

While the macrostructure of “Barn Burning” illustrates the ways that the oral and the literate combine to produce a harmoniously balanced formal whole, the microstructure of the story reveals a similar balancing as well. The first few sentences of “Barn Burning” show how the story immediately bears the marks of the differences between telling, speaking, thinking, and narrative description as communicated in the tension between the oral and the literate:

The store in which the Justice of the Peace’s court was sitting smelled of cheese. The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves closed-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish— this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood. He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father’s enemy (*our enemy* he thought in that despair; *ourn! mine and hisn both! He’s my father!*) stood, but he could hear them, the two of them that is, because his father had said no word yet:

“But what proof have you Mr. Harris?” (*Collected*, 3)

The initial passage of the story is quite obviously the product of a literate imagination, taking every advantage of the ways that orality can be bracketed in a literate text. A variety of narrative techniques are here used to display the differences between the organizing principles of the literate and the oral. Over the course of the entire passage, the very relationship between the two is implied as a matter of the story’s content and linked to the very core of the principles that reside, for Faulkner, at the center of what it means to be human and to belong (or not to belong) to the larger human family. Furthermore, the subject of the passage articulates not only the immediate situation but also the identity of the main figure, an illiterate innocent who is tied to the oral over and against the literate establishment.

The first sentence articulates what is at the heart of the entire story: the relationship between the individual and the world of the society within which he finds himself and the principles to which the individual must submit if he or she is to enjoy full membership. The first sentence is remarkable as well for revealing how the literate mode both brackets and liberates the oral, resulting in access to the main character’s experience, impossible in the oral mode alone. The narrator describes the immediate situation: “The store in which the Justice of the Peace’s court was sitting smelled of cheese.” The odd syntax, with the appearance of the “was sitting” at the end of a subordinate descriptive clause and immediately before the main verb (“smelled”) gives the reader pause. Something of Faulkner’s entire problematizing of the relationship between the events in his stories and their telling is displayed here. Here, we see the

tension between the oral and the literate—in which the oral expresses the experience of the action from within a narrative unfolding directed in literate terms. Yet, before the literate narrative can express fully, it must be interrupted by oral intrusion. Articulation here is complete but fragmentary at the same time. Narrative sentence describes by being about (literally, “around”). As a result, the literate brackets the oral and the oral appears as an interruption or interpolation from someplace else.

But this reveals one of the ways that the literate does not subjugate the oral so much as it liberates it from one of the strictures of its own logic. As has been mentioned, the oral is unidirectional in time. Hence, if a story is written, but according to oral experience, then some insights about the meaning of that experience may remain unavailable until the telling is complete. When the oral is embedded within the literate, however, interpretation of the meaning of events is perhaps more possible as a result both of the immediacy of the interruption of the narrative flow by oral experience *and* the “long range vision” available to the literate imagination by way of its ability to select information across the entire spectrum of its striated space. As a result, the first sentence brims with information.¹¹ That a Justice of the Peace’s court is in a store tells much about the setting and time of the story. It must take place in an environment in which there is no permanent site for a court case to take place. The story must take place in a community that either does not have too regular a need for a Justice of the Peace (because it is small)

¹¹ While this is an idea borrowed from physics and will be brought to bear more specifically in the analysis of the textual structure of *The Sound and the Fury*, suffice it to say at the moment that the “disorder” that results from the relationship between orality and literacy increases the amount of information that may be included or communicated by that text.

or the affluence or time to have constructed a proper courthouse. That the narrator calls it “the store” and does not specifically name it or its proprietor indicates that the narrator is either not a regular member of the community his story is telling about, there is only one store, so everyone would “know” the proprietor’s name, or that the detail is not important. Similarly, the narrator names the Justice by a title rather than by a name and thereby indicates either a lack of familiarity or the unimportance of the detail. It is also possible that the lack of specificity is Faulkner’s signal that these features in the passage are emblematic or symbolic— standing in things important to people in communities everywhere. Whatever the case, this odd opening sentence links the terms “store,” “Justice,” “Peace,” “court,” and “cheese,” obliquely announcing the core issues of the story about to be related. In a rural community, especially one in a past remote enough from the present to find a Justice of the Peace’s court session taking place there, a store is often a gathering place where members of the community do more than merely buy items of necessity for their material existence. They also exchange news and gossip, make and renew acquaintances, pass the time, and, as in the present situation, settle their differences. Hence, the store represents both the material and immaterial necessities of communal life and this first sentence links them in such a way as to imply that such needs are important for the health and maintenance of life for both individual and community. “Justice” and “Peace” are also intimately associated with what is central to the health of communal life, and the fact that a court case is taking place at all indicates a social concern for the orderly protection of these for the good of individual and collective well being.

This first sentence, then, is rather equally oral and literate. The order of that relationship is in terms of a literate situating of oral experience. In the lack of quotation marks, we know that it is not transcribed speech. Yet its direct pronouncement of the setting is more like speech than mere literate narrative description. But we know, even if there is very little distance between the narrator and the events being described and told, there is some time between action and telling. The use of the past tense sets the story in the narrator's past, though it does not indicate with precision how far in the past. The details of the first sentence set the story in the reader's past but more precisely locate them a greater distance from the reader's present (one would be hard pressed in the United States to find a great many communities in which a Justice of the Peace would hold court in a store). Both the oral and the literate afford the speaker/narrator the ability to relate past events. But orality only knows these as present moments while literacy affords the stable grid through which they may intrude. And this is important because it means that the present can appear under these circumstances *as present* even though it is past.

The second sentence is merely a repetition of the first with more detail (though not more information). This sentence reveals the difference between oral direct utterance and literate description. It is, in this sense, the way that the literate "describes" an oral reality rather than allowing that reality to bubble to the surface ekphrastically to reveal directly the experience that is the subject of its expression. As a result, the second sentence (some one hundred and eleven words long) is more problematic. We have come to be accustomed in Faulkner's fiction to such tangled syntax as this sentence exhibits.

But it should be noted that the style of the second sentence repeats the syntactical style of the first. Without the interruption of the first subordinate clause or the addition of the many that follow, the second sentence reads, merely, “The boy knew he smelled cheese and more.” Though we still do not know if the story will include the narrator as a character, the introduction of “the boy” indicates that the narrator is at least semi-omniscient and “speaks” of what “the boy” smelled not apparently from being told about it (which would more appropriately be rendered, “The boy who crouched on the nail keg told me that he knew he smelled cheese and more”) but from a knowledge of some other sort. In this sense, the narrator is identified with the author as a kind of co-creator of the story being told. If he or she were merely retelling events told, for instance, by the boy, then the narrative description would offer clues to the relationship. Later in the story, there are indications, though slight, that the story being told is second hand and removed from the events of narration by many years, but the information conveyed about Sarty Snopes in this first paragraph offers some reason to believe that the present telling is beyond Sarty’s own linguistic ability (ever) to express. We conclude, then, that the narrator is an intimate of the story’s main character but also somewhat akin to the primary architect of the telling of that character’s story. In this sense, the narration is literate.

As the second sentence proceeds, our understanding that the narrator is not a character is confirmed not only by the meaning of the sentence, but also by the lack of any first person intrusion. The second sentence offers an ever-deepening literate description of both the exterior and interior experience of the as yet unnamed boy. And it

follows the pattern of the first sentence almost in reverse. After a short description of the immediate location of the boy, the passage moves to his physical and psychological experience of the situation. The subject of the first sentence is the store. The subject of the second sentence is the boy. The first sentence is marked by the interposition of the Justice of the Peace's court while the second sentence is interrupted by a description of the boy's literal situation in the store (crouched on "his" nail keg at the back of the room). Yet this is accomplished in literate terms—as description. The second sentence is then linked to the subject matter of the first with the repetition of the smelling of cheese, but with a difference. The second sentence is not so much interested in expressing something about the smell of cheese as about what the boy "knew." So, to the central issues at the core of communal life expressed in the first sentence are added the central issues at the core of a particular individual's life. The relative shortness of the first sentence implies that the issues at the center of communal life are simple, few, and easy to articulate. The relative length and complexity of the second sentence implies the corresponding complexity of this particular individual's interior experience of that world and the difficulty of its expression. Hence, the second sentence introduces an element of importance: the relationship between an individual's outer and inner lives— seen here as antagonistic to each other.

At the same time, the second sentence reveals the difficulty; even at the level of syntax that the literate has in fully expressing what is, at bottom, an oral experience. But, because an increase in disorder equals an increase in information, such a difficulty is not without its rewards. From this sentence we learn that Sarty is illiterate. This furthers the

reader's knowledge that the setting of the story is in an area where education is perhaps not as readily available as it will come to be in the U.S. in some future time. It also indicates perhaps that the boy is poor— since the cheese, the sardines, and the deviled ham all seem to represent items of which he is generally deprived. He has perhaps tasted them before, but certainly not very often. More importantly, the sentence indicates that he is presently hungry. And his physical hunger is tied to a deeper psychological hunger. For the physical smell of cheese— which his nose can smell— is linked with his memory of items he cannot presently smell (since they are closed in tins or cans) and this with another ever-present smell that isn't really even a smell but an emotional or even spiritual sense— of fear, grief, despair and “the old fierce pull of blood”— that pervades his experience of everything else.

The advantages, then, of the enveloping of the oral by the literate, despite the difficulty that literacy has in expressing an oral reality, includes the fact that literacy makes orality analyzable. Without literacy, we have no direct access to the mind of the main character. At the same time, because literacy exists only in the form of words permanently frozen before us on the page, they may be analyzed. The second sentence quite subtly continues the essential link between material and psychic necessities as vital to the sustaining of both communal and individual life. At the same time, it clearly indicates that the as yet unnamed boy is alienated from the community that has assembled. The sentence begins with what the boy “knows” he smells and then moves to what he can see but cannot possess. His hunger is physical but intimately linked with another hunger, a different sort of “smell.” This other “constant” smell, not easily

articulated literately, exists either at a sub- or a meta-physical level and so escapes his, and the narrator's, ability to name. "Old fierce pull of blood" indicates an essential connection to familial bonds, but the use of the term "pull" does not fit metaphorically with the use of smell. This is no error. Rather, it is an indication that at the heart of the main character's story is an experience originating below or beyond the literate level. At the same time, as the narrative interpolations from the future indicate, while such an experience originates below or beyond the literate level, the literate level is required not only for its expression, but its interpretation as well.

Not only does this sentence imply something about the reliance of the oral upon the literate for its expression as well as the reliance of the literate upon the oral for the "stuff" of its narrative, the third sentence of the opening passage reveals the ways in which the combination of the two makes possible the expression of the unutterable. It also develops the themes introduced in the first two sentences and shifts the intimate links between physical sensation and psychic experience. The third sentence also establishes, at the level of plot, Sarty's central conflict.

Sarty cannot "see" but can hear the voices of the Justice and his father's adversary in the court case. Here, Faulkner introduces another sense to the scene—the auditory—to compliment the olfactory, visual, and gustatory imagery already introduced. In addition, the narration confirms the omniscient nature of the narrator by a parenthetical entry into the boy's oral reality. The use of italics offsets the boy's thoughts from the narration proper and another level of the oral/literate expression of meaning is revealed. The use by Faulkner of italics in this story (as in others) is reserved exclusively for the articulation of

the main character's thoughts— thoughts that, later in the story it is indicated, he is not yet ready or capable of speaking out loud.¹²

This third sentence also securely establishes the antagonistic relationship between the boy's father and the society from which he is isolated. In addition, it relates the boy's ambivalence regarding his loyalties. In the rendering of his frantic thoughts of his father's "enemy" we see a boy who desires goods that are out of reach as a result of his familial obligations to his father and everything those entail as well as his attraction to the very things to which his father seems to stand in opposition. This boy, whoever he turns out to be, sits in a store-cum-courtroom packed with people and foodstuffs from which he is generally excluded. Such exclusion is clearly physical as well as psychological. Furthermore, the matter before the court entails his father who is similarly and more literally pitted against what the store and court exist to sustain.

The boy's privation is directly linked to his ambivalent devotion to a relationship with a father over whom he has no direct control. What this boy experiences is the gap between two competing drives that are manifested in the figures of his father and the existence of the cheese he desires but cannot taste. The parenthetical intrusion, along with its "direct" expression of his thoughts, resembles a frantic kind of self reminder in the

¹² In the few narrative intrusions in the story, the indication that Sarty is at the time of the story too young or frightened to say out loud what he is thinking coincides with indications of the narrator's relationship to the text and its main character. These are indicated with varying degrees of subtlety— "Later, twenty years later he would tell himself . . ." and ". . . with a surge of peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words, being too young for that . . ." and "not knowing that his father had gone to that war a private in the fine old European sense . . ." (7, 9, 25). Such intrusions establish the narrator's relation to the story being told and to its main character and underscore the difference between the oral and the literate: such knowledge of Sarty's psychic life is purely literate.

face of his privation since it is a correction of the use of the term “his” to “*our enemy . . . ourn! mine and hisn both! He’s my Father!*” The use of eye dialect, the phonetic spelling is a further indication both of the dually determinative roles of the oral and the literate in the story. At the same time that Sarty’s sense of privation shows the gulf between his oral experiences within a literate establishment, it also expresses his desire (linked ironically to his father’s) for the closure of that gap.

Only the literate can have direct access to the character’s thought, but the expression here is a rendering that approximates the sound of the boy’s articulation, despite its being a thought and not a spoken utterance. Such a rendering underscores the intimate relation between speech and writing, though in such a way as not to call attention to that relation. The oral and the literate work in harmony in “Barn Burning” not only to express but also to order the material. But the oral is subsumed within the literate—as the use of direct quotation and italics indicate—and appears as a kind of intrusion into, or an exception from, a literate world.

As the quotation from “Barn Burning” indicates, any transcribed utterance in a text must be *present*. In this sense, the literate liberates the oral from its unidirectional nature, allowing the present to emerge within the narrative flow of a necessarily past event for direct access. Even if, for instance, a character speaks of the past, the speaking is a present act within the time frame of the fictive universe established within the text. In this sense, the oral must always be offset since the production of meaning in the written text is necessarily always an act produced in the past. Yet Faulkner’s texts bear ample witness to his continuing effort to liberate the oral from the literate, to transcribe in a text

the immediacy of present experience without formal indication in typographical terms. That is, his narrative illustrates an attempt to incorporate the oral within the literate without subjugating the one order according to the other.

The paradox of this effort is perhaps summed up in Faulkner's comment to Cowley for the 1945 edition of *The Portable Faulkner* regarding his attempt to link everything, past and present, in a single utterance since the "past isn't dead, it isn't really even past."¹³ In "Barn Burning," the relationship between the oral and the literate is signaled in the ways we expect—with the use of quotation mark and italics. Still, the ways in which the two stand to indicate the relationship between the narrator and the narrative and story, are interesting and telling.

Yet, what appears to be literate in "Barn Burning" is sometimes oral. While in the passage quoted the literate seems interrupted by the oral, each sentence contains within it an orally determined set of information that is interrupted by the literate. If we parse the sentences for that which is determined orally, we find three rather straightforward utterances: "The store smelled of cheese." "The boy knew he smelled cheese, and more" and "He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father's enemy stood, but he could hear them." Without narrative or authorial intrusion, these sentences stand out as oral in their immediacy and in their descriptiveness. They are simple, straightforward, and exterior. Oral texts, in general, do not allow for the kind of internalization that literate texts make possible. The oral statement offers a description of

¹³ See Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*.

the scene that is immediate (even if in the past tense) and straightforward. The literate, on the other hand, serves to offer material that is not accessible in or to the oral mode qua mode, and appears in this context as an interpolation into the oral material.

So, while it might be expected that the oral will be, as McLuhan describes, immanent, holistic, and simultaneous, things are not as they seem in the relation between orality and literacy. As he describes, pre-literate orality, having as its primary sensory organ the ear, occupies what he terms “acoustic space,” which is “space that has no center and no margin, unlike strictly visual space, which is an extension and intensification of the eye:”

Another basic characteristic distinguishing tribal man from his literate successors is that he lived in a world of *acoustic* space, which gave him a radically different concept of time-space relationships . . .

Acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses, whereas ‘rational’ or pictorial space is uniform, sequential and continuous and creates a closed world with none of the rich resonance of the tribal echoland. Our own Western time-space concepts derive from the environment created by the discovery of phonetic writing, as does our entire concept of Western civilization. The man of the tribal world led a complex, kaleidoscopic life precisely because the ear, unlike the eye, cannot be focused and is synaesthetic rather than analytical and linear. Speech is an utterance, or more precisely, an *outring*, of all our senses at once; the auditory field is simultaneous,

the visual successive. The modes of life of nonliterate people were implicit, simultaneous and discontinuous, and also far richer than those of literate man. (*Essential McLuhan*, 240)

The oral follows a linear projection from a beginning to an end that is limited by its unidirectional nature in terms of time. But just because it goes forward does not mean that it always goes straight. As a result, within the literate, the oral appears as an interruption of, interpolation into, or flight from the literate. Just as Deleuze and Guattari describe the differences between smooth (McLuhan's "acoustic") and striated, the oral appears to break up the predetermined grid of literate space. Sarty's break from Ab's hold participates in just such a disruption of an order that would organize itself according to a predetermined grid of action. Yet as has been demonstrated, the literate also liberates the oral from the strictures of its present-time bound existence and the union of the two yields a structure that is, in the end, quite uniform and stable.

"Barn Burning" represents, then, one of the conventional ways that the oral and the literate work in tandem to produce the written text. That which is oral runs a horizontal line from beginning to end through a character's experience of the here and now, yet this line must emerge and re-emerge within the literate map of the text. It makes itself known conventionally as an interruption of the narrative flow. Literate narrative employs a regularized orientation toward its material that sets up expectations for how and when certain information can be expressed. Faulkner's "Barn Burning," exhibits how the oral can disrupt such expectation by interpolating the immediacy of the present into a discourse that itself is the production of past experience. Such a production (the writing

of the present into the text) must have happened in the past. Though the logic of this interruption by the oral is “horizontal,” it is still “smooth,” being the accumulation of a patchwork of intensely unique “affects” of properties perceived. But, since it is unidirectional in time, its exposition according to its own paradigm renders its exposition as events strung together as if they were discrete “beads on a string” (as Cowley described). In order for those “beads” to connect to form a meaning, they must be interpreted. The striated space of the literate makes interpretation possible. And, as “Barn Burning” begins to illustrate, interpretation does not merely involve the rendering of the oral according to a literate paradigm. It entails the rendering of a set of events alongside its own interpretation. As Faulkner’s novels reveal, it is not simply that the oral is always already present in the text, as if the oral is the soul of the literate. Rather, it is the oral as the body of a literate soul, the combination of the two that makes possible an utterance that is itself also a meaning.

CHAPTER THREE—THE SOUND AND THE FURY: THE ORAL PROBLEM OF LITERATE MEANING

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan writes: the literate/ “visual makes for the explicit, the uniform, the sequential in painting, in poetry, in logic, history. The non-literate modes are implicit, simultaneous, and discontinuous, whether in the primitive past or the electronic present” (*Gutenberg* 57). Such a description of the differences between cultures molded by the literate/visual as opposed to the oral/aural fits nicely with the description by Deleuze and Guattari regarding the differences between striated and smooth space. In the former, organization is according to a “grid” that predetermines how features of the striated landscape may relate to each other. For the latter, organization, while “discontinuous,” is ever developing from within, articulating itself as it moves. Smooth space is self-organizing. One may make a similar argument about the differences between the ways that linguistic material is ordered in a text depending upon whether the oral or the literate dominates. Oral spaces in the text

will be smooth— “implicit, simultaneous, and discontinuous”—while literate spaces will be uniform, sequential, and logical.

Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel in four sections each of which represents a different relationship between the oral and the literate as ordering principals of the text. At the same time, these four sections themselves are arranged according to an order that suggest that orality and literacy enjoy what Tony M. Lentz argues in *Orality and Literacy in Hellenic Greece* has been the case since the advent of writing: a symbiotic relationship (175).¹⁴ The attempt in each section is to “capture” an image of the novel’s central figure, Caddy Compson. And each section bears the formal marks of the organizing principles of orality and literacy in differing relations to each other.

Faulkner said *The Sound and the Fury* “began with the picture of the little girl’s muddy drawers, climbing the tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn’t have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw”:

And I tried first to tell it with one brother, and that wasn’t enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn’t enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her

¹⁴ Lentz’s work is not on orality and literacy as structuring devices for texts. He does, however, employ the terms alternatively as media and as modes of thought and communication whose strengths combined to play a crucial role in the formation of Western culture.

to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes, I thought. And that failed, and I tried myself—the fourth section—to tell what happened, and I still failed. (*Faulkner in the University* 1)

If this is so, then the novel represents what many critics have argued—the failure of the narrative form to capture fully either the image or the experience of whatever central meaning it attempts to tell. For Faulkner, it seems, everything this novel exists to express may be encapsulated in the above-cited remarks.

Five years after the novel was published, Faulkner wrote, “When I began the book, I had no plan at all. I wasn't even writing a book.” He goes on to describe that the image of Caddy and her muddy drawers, with her brothers looking up at her, he came to understand to be a “symbolology of the soiled drawers” according to which Caddy's “was the courage which was to face later with honor the shame which she was to engender (“An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* 414). Faulkner goes on to write that he saw Caddy this way because he “had already gone on to night and the bedroom and Dilsey with the mudstained drawers scrubbing that naked backside of that doomed little girl—trying to cleanse with the sorry byblow of its soiling that body, flesh, whose shame they symbolized and prophesied . . .” (414). This shame is the same that Caddy faces “with honor” that her brothers Quentin and Jason, according to Faulkner, cannot—the one committing suicide and the other taking refuge in “vindictive rage.” For Faulkner, Dilsey represents the future, “to stand above the fallen ruins

of the family . . . patient and indomitable,” while Benjy represents the past—the former representing the future because she accepts it, the latter representing the past because he remains, “a pallid and helpless mass of all mindless agony under the sun,” oblivious. Faulkner goes on to say that in Benjy’s section the “story is all there . . . as Benjy told it,” adding “I did not try deliberately to make it obscure; when I realized that the story might be printed, I took three more sections . . . to try to clarify it . . .” (415).

That attempt to clarify leads to the realization that in Quentin and Jason’s sections, Faulkner was “temporizing,” so he needed to “get completely out of the book” in Dilsey’s section to complete it, resulting in the four sections as we have them in the published work.¹⁵ The central action of the plot, “what happened,” is

¹⁵ Some fifteen years after the original publication of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner wrote an expansive “Appendix” for *The Sound and the Fury*, to be used ostensibly as an introduction to the portion of Jason’s section to be included in Cowley’s *Portable Faulkner*. For a recent overview of the critical and editorial impact of this material, see Philip Cohen’s *Text and Textuality: Textual Instability, Theory, Interpretation*. According to Cohen, Faulkner hoped the “Appendix” would clear up much of the confusion that the published form of *The Sound and the Fury* had generated and urged later that it be included as the first section of a subsequent printing of the novel (though still called “Appendix.” Cohen argues persuasively for the inclusion of the “Appendix,” along with pertinent notes and historical textual variants, with editions of *The Sound and the Fury* on the grounds that in lieu of suppressing an important aspect of the textual history of the novel, it is better for readers to be presented with as many textual variants as possible to provide opportunities for interpretation according to the inclinations of readers rather than (merely) authors (who, Cohen argues, like Faulkner in this case, re-contextualizes and thereby essentially re-writes one of his own works) or by editors who act with as co-executors of the text. Cohen argues that editorial (and authorial) operations upon an historical text are themselves acts of interpretation. Cohen’s points up differences between the 1929 *The Sound and the Fury* and the Appendix that result in some cases from oversights, but in others can only be explained as Faulkner’s own interpretation of the characters in the novel (which interpretations are not always justifiable according to the 1929 text).

Caddy's climbing the tree. The theme is the possession of a courage requisite to an action, the lack of which each of the brother's sections is devoted to revealing. Because Faulkner does not give voice to the central character, the disintegration of the Compson world is the result of a void in its center. She must then be "seen through somebody else's eyes," and her image and action are their own meaning—a meaning that remains unexpressed and unapprehended by especially Quentin and Jason. To come to terms with her meaning, then, is the central concern of each of the sections of the novel, though Dilsey's "vision" as a result of Reverend Shegog's sermon incorporates a world larger than the narrow vision of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason can or will admit.

If the entire story is "all there" in Benjy's section, it is only there as an unprocessed vision unaffected by the mind's ability to interpret. Caddy is both a presence and a spectral absence in Benjy's experience and the narrative threads in his section vacillate between the two. Yet perhaps Benjy's "innocence" consists in this lack of filtering ability and so constitutes a vision of Caddy "as she is" in such a way as to present the entire "symbology" of the Fall (for Faulkner's language seems to circle around Caddy's symbolic representation of the fall from grace into shame and death with which the Christian paradigm presented in Shegog's

Cohen sites numerous remarks, including one in Joseph Blotner's *Selected Letters*, in which Faulkner is quoted as saying that the Appendix makes the novel fit together "like a jigsaw puzzle" but does not hazard an opinion about what Faulkner might have meant by such a statement. Because the nature of Faulkner's expansive Appendix seems to me to be, as Cohen argues, an interpretive attempt by the author to contextualize a novel that nonetheless stands on its own as a formal whole, the present study treats only of the novel in terms of its four original sections.

sermon at the end is crucially concerned) without the distorting lens of its simultaneous interpretation, suspended with Benjy in a world “in time but not of it” (“An Introduction,” 415).

Faulkner’s pairing of Quentin and Jason’s sections is especially apt in their “temporizing” effect upon the narratives to which they belong. Each section temporizes through the imposition one mode of organization upon another. If everything in Benjy’s section is “present,” in a sense, then everything in Quentin’s is “past.” Yet in Quentin’s section, it is not that the past presents itself to Quentin’s imagination as present, rather, it is that his past is so overwhelmingly present to his consciousness that it obliterates his sense of the present *as present*. As the first lines indicate, the clock strikes and Quentin is “in time” again. So, where Benjy and Dilsey’s sections partake of worlds that are “in time but not of it,” Quentin’s is both in time *and* of it. And where in Benjy’s section the past-as-present breaks up the normally sequential order of the literate grid (that which regulates the relationship in temporal terms between the past and the present in the literate), in Quentin’s section, the normally fluid and simultaneous nature of experience in the present is completely disoriented by the constant imposition of the past upon the present without rhyme or reason. That is, the relationship between the oral and the literate has been completely undone by the end of Quentin’s section, so that the normal mechanism for the imaginative relationship between present sense impression and experience and past memory, association, is completely lacking. Even Benjy’s imagination preserves a rudimentary quality

of association, so that the episodes in his section are linked, but Quentin's section, in the end, does not even exhibit this relationship between past and present.

Jason's section temporizes in an altogether different way. Jason's narrative is characterized by the imposition of his order upon that landscape in which he exerts his will. The world in which he lives is not self-organizing; it is self-imposing. In this sense, his is an impotently literate logic operating in an oral landscape. If the literate represents a mode of organization according to the exigency of the map, or grid, then it represents a kind of ordering that is both an imposition of a foreign order upon a native landscape even as it is a symbolic representation of the landscape upon which it is imposed. The literate map abstracts and re-spatializes in a new dimension the features of the landscape that it seeks to organize. In representing that landscape symbolically, it is necessarily reductive. Yet the reductive nature of the symbolic also has the virtue of making knowledge transportable and thereby available outside of the landscape to which it refers. Such mapping, however, can only work if it is drawn as much as imposed. It must both reflect the landscape as well as refer to it. If the literate order reduces the reality it refers to or reflects too much, then its symbolic distortion of that landscape will render the mapped order incapable of fulfilling its purpose—making it impotent.

Hence, Jason is impotent because he would impose the map of his narrative upon a landscape that he refuses to reflect. Or, in terms of his section more specifically, if the image of his absent sister Caddy is at the center of

Jason's section, then his attempt to map the landscape is doubly thwarted—first by a lack of a center to act as reference point for where to begin, and, second, by the very imposition of his “rule” that Caddy's name never be uttered in the Compson household. If Caddy's absence signals for Benjy a loss of “order,” it is linked to his lack of language, his inability literally to *recall* her. In Quentin's section, though his language skills allow him to recall his sister, his idealized image of her is so distorted that the “Caddy” he recalls is a figment of his imagination. For Jason, the imposition of the rule that Caddy's name never be uttered, even as her presence continues to inform the household order causes a similar gap between symbol and referent. Jason's order will ever circle upon himself not only because he is selfish, but also because the symbolic order he wishes to impose refuses to refer to the landscape he wishes to map.

To varying degrees, the first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* feature a technique of narrative that effectively erases any trace of a controlling narrative frame. These three sections most closely what Gérard Genette calls, in *Narrative Discourse*, “inner monologue.” Genette cites Eduard Dujardin to characterize such monologue “as discourse without an auditor and unspoken, by which a character expresses his most intimate thoughts, those closest to the unconscious, prior to all logical organization, or, simply, thought in its dawning state—expresses it by means of direct phrases reduced to their syntactical minimum, in such a way as to give the impression of *hodgepodge* (*Le Monologue interieur* (Paris 1931) 59 qtd in Genette, 174n). Benjy's section, to be sure,

resembles such a description of what Genette prefers to call “immediate monologue” but which nevertheless reveals itself in “hodgepodge.” Yet the hodgepodge nature of Benjy’s section relates it most closely with narrative given over to smooth space and orality—even though the narrative in question is unspoken. This is because the section registers as disordered to the reader but not to the narrator. Benjy’s imagination simply experiences reality as a series of equal impressions that flow before the mind’s eye in an unbroken stream. Faulkner sometimes signals shifts in time with the use of italics, but sometimes does not. If the entire section, however, were given over simply to Benjy’s experience without regard for the reader’s impression of that experience, no italics would be necessary.

Nearly every thread of Benjy’s narrative is included as his section comes to its end. There are seven different time frames represented in Benjy’s section, from Damuddy’s death in 1898, to the present on April 7th, 1928. Though no rhyme or reason seems to account for the ways that shifts from one year to the next are managed throughout the section, it begins in the present in 1928 and ends with the earliest memory, on the night of Damuddy’s death in 1898, suggesting an overall reverse chronology. At the end of the section, shifts between different years increase in frequency, bringing the entire section to a surprisingly poetic end.

Benjy’s stream-of-consciousness is impressionistically oral in failing to register the differences between the past and the present that the literate text

(sometimes) signals through graphic marker. A first reading of the section is confusing because beyond the use of italics to mark off differences in what gradually reveals itself as shifts in time, the reader is provided none of the expected mapping devices for those differences. That is, the events contained within the section exist as if unmoored from the timeline to which they belong. Hence, the literate appears in Benjy's section as the oral.

The last third of the section shifts more and more quickly between episodes and includes the seven major threads of the section in addition to covering all of the other time frames of the novel, between 1898 and 1928. Yet, though there are many shifts, each episode itself plays out chronologically, suggesting that Benjy's experience of time in the present is orderly. What is disorderly in Benjy's consciousness is the difference between experience as present and experience as memory, giving to the entire section the logic and quality of a dream from which the narrator does not awake. The logic of such a dream is smooth—discontinuous, immanent, and rhizomatic—surfacing and resurfacing in an uninterrupted flow that transforms the literate striation of time as chronological sequence into immediate sense impression seamlessly experienced from beginning to ending. And in the end, Benjy's section reads with a curious kind of order all its own.

The last three pages or so of Benjy's section shift from a typically violent confrontation between Caddy's daughter Quentin and Jason as a grown man in 1928, to his earliest memories, when Caddy "smelled like trees" of sitting with

her and Jason in his Father's lap in the library, being quiet "while [the brother] Quentin's studying" (*Sound* 82). The shift between this first episode is not only signaled by a shift to italics, but in the mention of going into the library (in 1928, after the female Quentin storms out of the kitchen), at which point Benjy's mind immediately experiences Caddy's giving him the gold and green cushion to quiet him down. This episode segues to the next through the repetition of the line "she smelled like trees" (82); shifting the scene from 1900 (roughly the year of the scene in the library sitting with Mr. Compson) back to 1928 and the day Luster lost the quarter. In this episode, Benjy sits in a corner of the darkened library clutching the slipper (rather than the cushion) where Luster finds him before getting him ready for bed. This ends with a mention of getting ready for bed and is interrupted by Benjy's experience of going to bed the night Damuddy died in 1898 ("We didn't go to our room" (83)).

The episodes then quickly shift between 1928 and 1898 until the section ends:

Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again. Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell. And then I could see the windows, where the trees were buzzing. Then the dark began to go in smooth, bright shapes, like it always does, even when Caddy says that I have been asleep. (85)

Benjy's description in this last passage from his section is thoroughly oral. Connections between impressions are linked by "and," "then," or "and then," resembling the conjunctive logic of the rhizome described by Deleuze and Guattari. And as the linkages between the shifts that precede this passage indicate, shifts between episodes throughout the section are seamlessly accomplished according to the same sort of connection. The repetition of a word or the impression of a place acts as an "and then," connecting disparate impressions of experience to Benjy's mind's eye according to the seamless logic of a dream.

Though Quentin's section fits Genette's definition for immediate monologue in some ways more closely than Benjy's, by comparison, his section becomes more disordered as it goes along. While speech in Benjy's section appears as "heard" speech rather than "reported" speech (in the sense that Benjy can discern no intentionality in those who speak around him), bracketed utterances in Quentin's section belong to a framing provided by Quentin as narrator. Yet those markers that distinguish dialogue from other modes become more rare and then disappear altogether from his section. Initially, they include indicators that Quentin discerns the intentionality of others' speech, but at the end of the section, all sense even of division between speech, thought, and intentionality are lost. In this way, Quentin's section includes a kind of immediate/oral dialogue absent from Benjy's section. Faulkner employs italics to indicate a certain type of thought for Quentin, but he also employs the transcription of language within the section that is neither italicized nor bracketed

with quotation marks. These latter sections do not seem to represent direct speech or direct thought. Rather, they seem to constitute imagined episodes that are complete fabrications of Quentin's increasingly disturbed imagination: bits and pieces of his experience that rise to the surface and arrange themselves around a powerful but momentary emotional state as possibilities that never come to pass. In contrast to Benjy's sensory impressions of experience, according to which there is no impressionistic distance between present and remembered experiences, Quentin's section increasingly lacks a distinction between present or past experience and imagined experience.

There are four different levels of immediate monologue in Quentin's section alone: 1) a level devoted to the context of the day in which events in his reality are transcribed; 2) his simple memory of experiences from his past that exert pressure upon his immediate present; 3) his tortured and furious thoughts and impressions as he falls into the river (indicated by the use of italics); and, 4) passages in which punctuation and graphic signal disappear in the formulation of experiences, impressions, images, and dialogues that arise out of his desperate attempt to re-articulate his past experiences in some semblance of order and meaning.

The first type of immediate monologue is devoted to that strand given over to Quentin's activities on June 2nd, 1910, which include his experiences with his roommates and others at Harvard, his visit to the watch shop, his meeting the little "dirty girl," his fight with Gerald Bland, and so on, right up to the arranging of his

room before committing suicide (though this final scene “occurs” in the text after Quentin has committed suicide, in terms of sequence). The second type entails those parts of his section that have to do with direct memories attached to conversations with his father, a few of the episodes with other family members, his fight with Herbert Head, and the like. The latter two continuously interrupt the first two types of immediate dialogue. The italicized portion of Quentin’s section constitutes what he thinks as he falls from the bridge into the river. These begin with “*She ran right out of the mirror, out of the banked scent. Roses. Roses. Mr and Mrs Jason Richmond Compson announce the marriage of*” (87) and run continuously through Quentin’s section, melding together Quentin’s own impressions of past experience, bits of overheard dialogue (though not offset with quotation marks within the italics), and imagined dialogue.

The other type of monologue is difficult to place, as it constitutes a kind of psychotic unreality. It emerges from below the surface throughout the section and is keenly directed toward Quentin’s sense of impotence in those past moments when he seems to think he had a real opportunity to actually *do* something that would change the course of his and Caddy’s lives. These last passages represent an endlessly looping failure in Quentin’s mind to live up to his projected ideals. In manufacturing (or witnessing?) them in his present state, he merely confirms the underlying failure of his life.

Like Benjy’s section, the immediacy of the inner monologue in Quentin’s section is powerfully oral. It appears as printed text upon the page, but does not

seem to conform to the literate grid of striated space, except in the most minimal way, as interruption to an order that can never quite establish itself. In both of these sections, orality overwhelms the literate impulse to organize material in some formally sequential, logical, or continuous way, offering rather the immediacy of raw experience in the here and now even as that experience admits the past. In both sections, however, the past appears itself to be controlled orally—as it simply rises as if out of nowhere and alongside what is properly “present,” making of both sections the hodgepodge that Dujardin describes and which Deleuze and Guattari call smooth. Indeed, as in all of the sections of *The Sound and the Fury*, those events that belong to the day to which the section heading refers are rendered chronologically. The hodgepodge nature of the smooth space of these first two sections, then, is not the result of a violation of chronology. Rather, it is the result of the seemingly random way that the past interpolates itself into the present.

In Quentin’s section, however, this interpolation is complicated by Quentin’s increasing inability to register a difference between reality and his imagination. Faulkner signals his confusion (which is very unlike Benjy’s who, by comparison, does not seem confused at all) in the dropping of both italics and the graphic markers that offset speech as speech, and normal punctuation in the blending of all narrative modes in the near complete disorientation of Quentin’s consciousness. In this way, Quentin’s section leads to near total disintegration. In the final passages of the novel, all strands of the narrative seem to be collapsed

together between the tone for the three quarter and the hour on the clock at Harvard. A brief quotation from the second to last paragraph of Quentin's section will suffice to illustrate. The passage appears as the clock strikes the three-quarter hour and runs until "the last note sounded," leading hence into a strangely well-ordered final paragraph. This second to last paragraph is an admixture of nearly everything that has come before it in terms of its including a disjointed "conversation" between Quentin and his Father that is so embedded within the narrative from lack of graphic markers as to be nearly indiscernible as conversation:

The first note sounded, measured and tranquil, serenely
peremptory, emptying the unhurried silence for the next one . . .
Just by imagining . . . it seemed to me that I could hear whispers
secret surges smell the beating of hot blood under wild unsecret
flesh watching against red eyelids the swine untethered in pairs
rushing coupled into the sea and *he* we must just stay awake and
see evil done for a little while its not always and *i* it doesn't have
to be even that long for a man of courage and *he* do you consider
that courage and *i* yes sir don't you and *he* every mans is the
arbiter of his own virtues whether or not you consider it
courageous is of more importance than the act itself than any act
otherwise you could not be in earnest and *i* you don't believe I am
serious and *he* I think you are too serious to give me any cause for

alarm you wouldn't have felt driven to the expedient of telling me
you had committed incest otherwise and *i* i wasn't lying and *he*
you wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a
horror and then exorcise it with truth . . . (202-3, emphasis added)

The passage continues the "conversation" between Quentin and his father in this way, with Mr. Compson taking up more and more of the talk, punctuated infrequently with Quentin's interjection of "and i temporary" until the passage ends with Mr. Compson's advising Quentin that he should go to Cambridge and spend some time in the country and realize that it has been his mother's fondest dream for him to go to Harvard followed by Mr. Compson's repeated "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues

but let no man prescribe for another mans wellbeing and *i*
temporary and *he* was the saddest word of all there is nothing else
in the world its not despair until time not even time til it was

The last note sounded. (204-5 emphasis added)

There is no way to tell what in the passage belongs to Quentin's actual memory (though Mr. Compson's language resembles what we've come to expect from him both in Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury* and his narrative speech in *Absalom, Absalom!*) and what belongs as part of Quentin's deteriorating imagination. It is difficult to believe that if the conversation had ever taken place, Quentin would have answered any of his father's speech with the single word "temporary." Perhaps this interjection is Quentin's present time attempt to stem

his father's speech as it flows out of the past into his present consciousness. Either way, the literate markers of order are completely absent from the conversation, and this passage appears among a jumble of final passages that describe Quentin's coming back to clean the blood off of his sullied suit, change into a new one, and leave the note for Shreve before going to commit suicide.

But the combination of the second to last paragraph with the ones that come before it, taken together with the nearly conventionally ordered last paragraph of the section (which is the only straightforwardly descriptive narrative in the entire section), one is puzzled by what this final order could indicate. Yet, though the final few paragraphs severely distort any semblance of order at the end of the section, there is a moment before this denouement that offers a clue to the relationship between the threads as they appear in the end. After Quentin arrives back in his room at Harvard and cleans his clothing with gasoline from Shreve's apartment, he washes and dresses in a fresh shirt and suit and stands, brushing his hair, when he hears the chimes for the half-hour. He thinks, "But there was until the three quarters anyway. Except suppose" (197). The last word in this phrase is followed by a blank in the text, and then the print shifts to italics:

*seeing on the rushing darkness only his own face no broken feather
unless two of them but not two like that going to Boston the same
night then my face his face for an instant across the crashing when
out of darkness two lighted windows in rigid fleeing crash gone his
face and mine just I see saw did I see not goodbye the empty*

*marquee empty of eating the road empty in darkness in silence the
bridge arching into silence darkness sleep the water peaceful and
swift not goodbye (197-8).*

This is followed by a new paragraph that is not a continuation of the narrative interrupted by the matter in italics. This new paragraph, rather, continues to recount Quentin's activities as he prepares himself in his rooms before committing suicide, but in beginning "I turned out the light and went into my bedroom, . . ." it does not finish the unfinished "except suppose" that preceded the above italicized passage. In fact, nothing in the rest of the novel suggests a continuation of that broken off thought. It is here Faulkner has rendered the moment of Quentin's plunge into the river. In fact, we may read his "Except suppose" to be a momentary lucidity in his realization that while he perceives himself to be preparing to kill himself, he has actually already jumped into the river and is remembering preparing. That is, when he hears the chimes for the half hour and thinks "But there was until the three quarters anyway, except suppose" his thought breaks off at just the moment he realizes that he has already jumped.

If Benjy's orality simply impressionistically transforms the literate past into the present, then Quentin's literate past succeeds in overwhelming his oral attempt to transform it. In the psychic confrontation in Quentin's mind between the past as the endlessly repeatable and fixed and the present, the very rigidity of the literate order defeats his oral attempt to interrogate and change what cannot be changed. Quentin's desire, in a sense, is to impose the power of the oral upon the

fixed symbolic order of the literate. In the several references to his imagined crime of incest with Caddy—as that act horrific enough to secure for them the status of a Francesca and Paolo, in their own private eternal embrace—Quentin seems to believe that if he can merely say it, then it will be: “*and Ill tell you how it was Ill tell father then till have to be because you love Father then well have to go away amid the pointing and the horror the clean flame Ill make you say we did Im stronger than you Ill make you know we did it . . .* (Sound 170). Yet this imagined oral conversation is one that resides in Quentin’s imagination and, like everything in his section, it is (for him) tragically too late.

The disjointedness of the end of Quentin’s passage ironically underscores his search for order and his war with time—since the order of time itself, seemingly punctuated by the chiming of the clock, has been overthrown. The half-hour has passed and so too has the three-quarters. The last note has sounded and has been followed, ironically, by the sound of Quentin’s puny voice, “still talking.” Benjy’s section is one that, like Dilsey’s at the end of the book, is “in time but not of time,” Quentin’s, by contrast, is literally and figuratively, at the end of his section, *out* of time.

Jason’s section is more difficult to describe in these same terms. We could with Genette identify it with immediate monologue in the sense that it begins by erasing a narrative distance from the consciousness of its direct speaker (Jason), but the conventional way in which Jason’s section is rendered (in comparison to the first two sections of the novel) makes arguing that it continues along the same

lines problematic. Even if Jason's section can be described as immediate monologue, it cannot be described either as hodgepodge or smooth. Perhaps this is so because Jason's sense of the present suppresses the past as an informing principle for meaning in the here and now.

Jason's section begins in what seems to be his own narrative voice: "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say" (*The Sound and the Fury* 206). The utterance appears in the text without quotation marks indicating direct access to Jason's mind that resembles the access Faulkner has provided for Benjy and Quentin's sections. This utterance is followed, however, by narration that registers on a slightly different level than the opening statement. "I says you're lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you" (referring to Caddy's daughter, Quentin). Here, the reader moves from being inside Jason's mind to the position of an auditor listening to a tale told by a narrator (Jason). This is not reported speech, but direct utterance; hence the lack of quotation marks. The rest of the section, until the last paragraph returns to Jason's unspoken immediate monologue, proceeds in this second register.

The orality of Jason's section, then, is managed according to a literate striation of the space within which it takes place. His section, unlike the two that precede it, moves along swiftly in a sequential way. The present is easy to discern in Jason's section, while it must be forcefully extracted from Benjy's and Quentin's. Of all of the sections, Jason's is least troubled by intrusions from the past—though Jason angrily thinks about moments from time to time that motivate

him in the present to act as he does. These moments, however, are completely controlled by Jason's inner monologue. As he stands at his father's grave, for instance, with Caddy, he thinks (at some unspecified time separated from the reported moment):

We stood there, looking at the grave, and then I got to thinking about when we were little and one thing and another and I got to feeling funny again, kind of mad or something, thinking about now we'd have Uncle Maury around the house all the time, running things like the way he left me to come home in the rain by myself.

I says,

'A fine lot you care, sneaking in here soon as he's dead . . .'

(*The Sound and the Fury* 233).

Every instance of the past in Jason's section is managed through the narrative filter of his present consciousness. As we see in this instance, as in others, as soon as the past begins to rise up in his consciousness, it is suppressed as his attention turns to matters at hand. What we might surmise by the style of this section is the ways that Jason suppresses the immanence, the simultaneity, and the discontinuity of oral experience. In every bit the sense that Quentin attempts to impose some sense of order upon a reality over which he does not have full control, Jason attempts to manipulate his reality to conform to his sense of what is right. Benjy can neither think nor act. Quentin, the closest thing in Faulkner's corpus to Shakespeare's Hamlet, can think but fails to embody his thought in meaningful

action. Jason, by contrast, is all action and no thought, it seems. “I got to thinking about when we were little and one thing and another . . .” he says, suppressing any specifics in his past that make him get to “feeling funny.” His failure is perhaps the most just of the novel, since it gives the lie to any attempt by one order to impose its alien grammar upon another order that operates according to quite different “rules.” If Jason’s attempt to control Miss Quentin and manipulate everyone else is in some sense analogous to a literate attempt to impose order upon orality, or analogous to the imposition of striated or gridded space upon smooth space, then his section stands to illustrate the fruitlessness of such an undertaking.

Jason’s section ends where it began: “Like I say once a bitch always a bitch” (*The Sound and the Fury* 305). Note the lack of an “s” on the word “say.” This lack signals a return to the immediate monologue of Jason’s consciousness, shed now of his role as narrator of the story he tells. We are no longer auditors. We are in his mind. But this return also signals Jason’s kinship with other of Faulkner’s evil male characters—notably, Thomas Sutpen, and Flem Snopes. Like them, Jason’s striated logic is also circular—ending where it begins. The imposition of his sense of order upon a reality that articulates itself in smooth space fails ultimately because it cannot account for the self-organizing dynamism that such a space entails. In short, it cannot account for the unexpected. In Faulkner’s terms, this is the moment that progress is mistaken for motion, progress representing the development along paths dictated in the literate sense,

logically and sequentially, according to the laws of cause and effect. Motion, by contrast, operates in smooth space, is given to discontinuity and immediacy. In Jason's section, the younger Quentin and the absent Caddy escape the bounds of striation simply by responding to the efficacy of the here and now—Quentin, by seizing an opportunity to beat Jason at his own game and Caddy by introducing a variable into his scheme that was unexpected, the money order. Jason Compson, like Thomas Sutpen and, ultimately, Flem Snopes, is undone by a miscalculation. Such an undoing is only possible within the symbolic grid of the literate, since that grid depends for its efficacy upon a reference between its symbolic order and the landscape to which it refers. Yet Jason forbids Caddy's name to spoken in the house, though he presence is strongly felt, and his manipulations in the money scheme and his attempts to control the younger Quentin come to naught.

Each of the first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* is dominated by orality—but the relationship that each has to literacy, as revealed in the relationship between past and present events, is expressed differently. The smooth space of Benjy's section simply does not admit the past *as past*. It is as if the striated space of linear time can find no purchase in the here and now of Benjy's experience. Without any symbols, the literate can create no grid upon which to order its reality. In Benjy's imagination, sensation registers mental images that present themselves to the mind's eye as simply present but can have, in a sense, no name. His experience is of a kind of unbounded *now* that is "closest to the unconscious, prior to all logical organization, or, simply, thought in its dawning

state,” as Dujardin described. In contrast to the self-organizing of reality in Benjy’s section, one that proceeds according to the conjunctive reasoning of “and and and,” the past in Quentin’s section itself is self-organizing. For Quentin, the past operates in smooth space that interpolates itself within the gridded space of his present experience—but with no associative markers *in language* (that is, associations between a present scene and his psychic reality may be made, but the text rarely includes associative markers, as in the Benjy section). In the end, Quentin’s attempt to connect the present with the past in a meaningful way is expressed in his suicide, which brings all senses of his experience together in the meeting of body with shadow in the river, obliterating the differences between a past that he cannot change and the present within which he cannot meaningfully act. In Jason’s section, the narrative act continually suppresses the past and its intrusion into the present. The oral, in Jason’s section, also operates in striated space, as in Quentin’s section. Yet here the imposition of the grid upon the smooth space of experience successfully blocks the possibility of its self-organization as “motion” or “life.” Rather, Jason’s section, like his life, races along a sequential path of actions which end where they began. And while at moments Jason’s thoughts turn to the past, he suppresses whatever meaning such a past might have in the present except insofar as his interpretation of it can be manipulated according to his plans. Jason actively applies a literate organization of reality upon oral experience and succumbs finally to the circularity of its own logic: “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say.”

Genette regards the Dilsey section of *the Sound and the Fury* as the one that gives the narrative frame to the other sections. Since this section includes the presence of a third person omniscient narrator, it is the one that offers the full context, the “background,” against which full sense of the other sections may be made. Dilsey’s section regularizes the relationship between the oral and the literate, between the smooth and the striated, in a way the other sections, owing to the particular pathologies of their narrators, do not. The last section of the novel offers a view that intimates that smooth and striated space do not always need to be at odds. The fourth section of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* is instance in which the smooth and the striated come into harmony; in which the oral and the literate work out a kind of accommodation that gives meaning and context to the novel as a whole.

Dilsey’s section is suspended in a world “in time but not of it” according to the Christian paradigm of Shegog’s sermon, which speaks of that salvation offered to the suffering through a sacrifice that at once informs that suffering with meaning even as it ameliorates it. But Faulkner does not employ either the sermon or Dilsey’s section to articulate the meaning so much as to offer an instance of the unspoken understanding of that meaning. Indeed, Shegog’s sermon is not “spoken” in Dilsey’s section so much as “heard.”¹⁶ While the words of the

¹⁶ Stephen Ross explains Shegog’s sermon as an example of phenomenal voice, par excellence, according to which the description of voice in the text, rather than its transcription as (mere) mimetic voice whose function is to communicate. Through the use of heavy dialect, including “eye dialect” voice is turned “loose and separated from the author in order to enter the visual discourse of our

sermon are represented in the text, their import for her can only be surmised by her tears and her answers to Luster's questions—which express a knowledge that Dilsey has come to possess and accept, but does not explain it. In this sense, Dilsey's section is the “fulfillment” of Benjy's in encountering a vision the import of which is central to her being, just as Benjy's section revolves around the image of Caddy. Each section presents the image, the vision, but neither is reduced to explaining it. As Benjamin described in “The Storyteller,” this each section oral in presenting without explaining.

Significantly, Jason's undoing by the younger Quentin happens while Dilsey and Benjy are at the church service. So, as his plans come to nothing according to his own logical miscalculations, Dilsey's suffering is imbued with a meaning according to a vision of reality that is both larger and outside the narrow world the first three sections have posited in their narratives. The Dilsey section is the only section to employ third person selective omniscient point of view and in it we see Faulkner's effort to “get completely out of the book” in an effort to offer a view that itself can account for (“clarify”) the first three sections. Yet as Stephen Ross has pointed out, Faulkner resists the urge simply to communicate meaning, to, in Benjamin's term, “explain.” As a result, though the final section resembles the short story “Barn Burning” in most conventionally representing the presence within the text of the oral and the literate as organizing principles, their

reading” and, so, leads to “engender a communion not only beyond the need for words but beyond the site of fiction's written language” (Ross, 44-5).

union in this section is not in terms of the expense of one or the other. The end of the section describes not a return to order so much as the acceptance of an order that has been present the entire time. They leave the church, with Luster at the reins, and pass through the square under the shadow of the statue of the Confederate soldier. Luster decides that he is going to show off in front of a group of Negroes that he sees in the square and “hit Queenie again and swung her to the left of the monument:

For an instant Ben sat in an utter hiatus. Then he bellowed. Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarce interval of breath. There was more than astonishment in it, it was horror; shock; agony eyeless, tongueless; just sound, . . . (*Sound* 370).

Benjy’s reaction is the tale told by the idiot of the title—pure agonized response to the suffering of disorder without rhyme or reason, a suffering disconnected to everything else and so oblivious. Ironically, it is Jason who reestablishes the order of Benjy’s world in seizing the reins and violently bringing the carriage back around to the right.

Out of the violence of this scene, in which Jason strikes not only Queenie, but Luster and Benjy as well (breaking the flower he is holding), order is restored within Benjy’s hearing by the “clop-clop” of Queenie’s feet as they head for home, “and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place” (371). Though we cannot give any

insight to Benjy, the scene combines the markers of the literate and the oral—as the symbols of an order that builds exists in symbiosis within a landscape rather than upon it: “cornice and façade,” “window and doorway and signboard,” side by side with the natural elements of the landscape, represented here by the tree, and perhaps by Benjy’s broken flower, but also in tandem with movement through that landscape—as the oral moves past the markers of the literate, “each in its ordered place.”

The inclusion of movement in the scene is important not only to underscore the limited ability of Benjy to cope with a disruption of order as he experiences it, but also to point up the dynamic relationship between the oral and the literate in combining within a text to form an order between them. The grid is static and lifeless as map alone. The smooth terrain of the oral is soundless or meaningless unless it connects in some way to a symbolic order that makes what it utters available to something larger than its own “bellowing.” The movement at the end of Dilsey’s section is a momentary view of “motion” or “life” as Faulkner conceives of it—as not mere progress through a landscape filled with signpost and tree, but a motion that in motion invests those markers with meaning.

The meaning of *The Sound and the Fury*, however, cannot simply be surmised from a few passages that suggest a living connection between the oral and the literate. The form of the novel in four discrete sections speaks to a sense that Faulkner meant to do no more than imply that such meaning could be understood, even if it cannot be expressed finally as an utterance. As the inclusion

of Reverend Shegog's sermon in Dilsey's section suggests, it is not merely what the words themselves can communicate, but the act of their communication that is vitally involved in the meaning of language in Faulkner's novel. Like Quentin's "saying will make it so," the fact of Shegog's sermon does not in and of itself inform the message with its meaning. As McLuhan pointed out, the *medium*, here the oral and the literate, *is the message*. And rather than attempt to render such a meaning in mere words alone, Faulkner implies this fundamental relationship in the expression of meaning in the overall structure of the novel itself.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, then, Faulkner seems to signal with an initial dichotomy between the oral and the literate an opposition that cannot be resolved. Though the reader can experience the disjointed sense of reality as Benjy sees or experiences it in the first section of the novel, one can only puzzle at what, if any, meaning there is behind it. Indeed, in Benjy's section Faulkner establishes the title's link with the famous lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. So disorienting is the first section of the novel that even Malcolm Cowley admits, "[I]n *The Sound and the Fury*, which is superb as a whole, we can't be sure that the four sections of the novel are presented in the most effective order; at any rate, we can't fully understand the first section until we have read the three that follow" (*The Portable Faulkner* xxv).

The ordering of the sections, however, is precisely what the novel seems to draw attention to in designating them by dates and narrating them through different character's points of view—even if the matter of each section does not

always seem to reveal events from the same story. Upon examination, however, it may be seen that the first two sections of the novel offer every detail of the “back-story” for the final two sections. Cowley’s request that Faulkner provide an introduction for the inclusion of Jason’s section in *The Portable Faulkner* seems indicative enough that the placement of these two sections was necessary, that Jason’s section just doesn’t make sense without Benjy and Quentin’s sections.

The disorientation at the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury* underscores the intimate relation between narrative events and time. The first section, Benjy’s, is designated “April Seventh, 1928.” Quentin’s section, the second, is “June Second, 1910.” The third section, Jason’s, takes place on “April Sixth, 1928.” Finally, Dilsey’s section falls on Easter Sunday, “April Eighth, 1928.” The order as published may be seen thus:

April 7, 1928	June 2, 1910	April 6, 1928	April 8, 1928
Benjy	Quentin	Jason	Dilsey
3	1	2	4

Figure 2: Order & Narrative Focus of Sections of *The Sound and the Fury*.

The first line represents the headings of sections as they appear in the novel. The second line shows to whom each section belongs. The third represents the achronological order of the sections in relation to each other. As can be seen in the third line, the order of the sections overall is “inside out.” The beginning

movements in chronological time (in terms of the dates heading each section) are bounded by those that follow in the other two sections. In terms of the chronological relationship between sections, the middle of the novel (Quentin's and Jason's sections) is chronologically in sequence. So too are the outer boundaries of the novel, with Benjy's preceding Dilsey's. Significantly, then, the order of the narration in terms of the familial relations is in sequence with their chronological ages: Quentin, the eldest, then Jason, then Benjy. The matter of Quentin's section is most remote from what follows it in Jason's. Benjy's section is most comprehensive regarding events in the familial experience through all of the years that the novel encompasses through flashback, while Dilsey's section makes the most comprehensive sense of those events. In Benjy's section the present swallows up the past. In Quentin's section, the past swallows up the present. In Jason's section, the past is entirely denied. In Dilsey's section, the meaning of the past is understood, finally, within a present that signals for her its fulfillment.

Two fundamental anomalies confront the reader with such a grouping. There is the interposition of Quentin's date, June 1910, within a weekend grouping for the other sections that take place eighteen years after Quentin's section. The other anomaly is that the novel begins "out of order," with Benjy's section, the seventh of April, first. If the date of Quentin's section is set aside and the fact that the April dates all comprise a single weekend over Easter in 1928 is taken into account, it can be noted that the Easter weekend sections are presented

in the most “out of order” sequence that a series including only three items can admit,¹⁷ if linear time retains any meaning in giving “direction” to the narrative flow of events.

Yet the novel is not as disordered as at first seems to be the case. Its serpentine nature links beginning, middle, and end together in a way that suggests a powerfully intimate relation between each section of the novel, despite Cowley’s objection that the novel is not, perhaps, “presented in the most effective order.” In chronological terms, the Easter weekend—Good Friday (Jason), Holy Saturday (Benjy), and Easter Sunday (Dilsey)—are offered neither in proper nor reverse order. Instead, the novel begins in the middle, with Benjy’s section, and is immediately interrupted with a date apparently outside the dominant time-line with Quentin’s section (June Second, 1910). It then resumes with Jason’s section,

¹⁷ Any sequence with three units admits a limited number of ways it may be disordered. Numbers represent units. Arrows represent time:

→1	2	3
3	→1	2
2	3	→1
1←	3	2
2	1←	3
3	2	1←

As can be seen, every combination of numbers represents an “ordered” pattern, depending upon how one counts time. The first three arrangements preserve the chronology of events, while the second three arrangements reverse that chronology. If one were to choose, however, the most disordered of arrangements (taking “→1 2 3” to represent “most ordered,”) then the sequence “2 1← 3” seems the most disordered, since the first position is in the middle and time is counted in reverse chronology. This, of course, is the pattern of dates for the Easter weekend in *The Sound and the Fury*. When Quentin’s section is added to this pattern, in the second position, before Jason’s section, which is chronologically first, then the pattern is even more severely disordered, since the events of Quentin’s section happen entirely outside of the Easter weekend of the other three sections.

chronologically the first in terms of Easter weekend and the second in terms of linear time after Quentin's section. The novel ends with the only section that is in its chronologically proper position, Dilsey's section, Easter Sunday. And she, unlike any of the characters of the novel, is the one who can say, "I seed de first and de last . . . I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (*The Sound and the Fury* 344). This last section, like the first, touches upon every narrative thread in the novel, but in a way that makes sense of the chaos of those threads as presented through the filter of the consciousness of the other characters.

Such an odd order of sections suggests something of the (lack of a) relationship between several different senses in which we count time. There is obviously a disparity in experience between the sections when they are considered in terms of the consciousness to which each belongs. Each section, except Dilsey's, takes little or nothing into account regarding the way others experience time and events in time. Benjy is innocently incapable of sympathizing with others. Quentin has so capitulated to his tortured sense of failure that he has ceased to take others properly into account. Jason is so selfish that the notion of taking others into account does not even occur. (In this sense, he resembles his mother while his brother Quentin resembles his father). Only in Dilsey's section does Faulkner offer a consciousness capable of including within its ken a sympathy for the experience of others. But as the broken clock in the kitchen suggests (Dilsey "knows" what time it is even though the clock does not display it) Dilsey does not look for meaning in experience in the here and now but in

terms of how present relates as a moment of some larger reality. For her Christian consciousness, the suffering of this world is vindicated and made meaningful by the fruits of the matter principal to the observance of the day to which her section is devoted—of Christ’s resurrection and its guarantee that all shall be redeemed in the paschal sacrifice. It is this that she experiences at the Easter Sunday service, the efficacious presence of the past in the here and now that yields to a future to which she already belongs—that sacrifice that redeems all is present, though it marks an event in linear time that happened in the past, the church service brings those in attendance into its (timeless) presence in such a way as to inform everything that Dilsey has seen, and heard in Reverend Shegog’s sermon, with meaning,¹⁸ leading to an understanding, unexpressed though it is, that belies the fragmentation of the novel, that despite such apparent disorder each is “in its ordered place” (*Sound* 371).

This dichotomy between secular and sacred time constitutes another anomaly important in terms of the time sequence in *The Sound and the Fury*. The novel itself is bounded by the sacred mystery central to a Christian paradigm. Such a reality is only fully real for the character Dilsey. For the others, it impinges upon their lives but is not determinative in an explicit way of what their stories mean. For Benjy and his brother Quentin, the distinction between sacred

¹⁸ Stephen Ross argues that this meaning registers itself in the change in Reverend Shegog’s voice from the rhetoric of the white to the language of the black race, creating though *phenomenal voice* a cathartic discourse “according to which communion is efficacious” (see 40-5).

and profane time is essentially lost. Benjy either exists in sacred time only, or the full depth of meaning available through an understanding of the sacred upon the profane is not available. For Quentin, any sense of the sacred has been so wholly subsumed by an individual sense of time and experience that the difference is absent as an informing force.

Jason's antagonism to anything but what he can control is so total that Dilsey's belief system is regarded as worse than childish. Over breakfast before Dilsey takes Luster and Benjy to Church, Jason asks his mother "Did you ever have [any servants] . . . worth killing?" and follows this crass comment, upon hearing that Mrs. Compson has given Dilsey permission to go to church, "Hasn't that damn show left town yet?" To his mother's weak protestations that Jason's discomfiting is her own fault, he says, "For what? . . . You never resurrected Christ, did you?" (*Sound* 322). The differences between Jason's and Dilsey's worlds could not be greater—and the remainder of the day for each illustrates this fact in Jason's spending it trying to track down his niece Quentin and the missing money while Dilsey sits in the church and listens to the sermon on the "ricklickhun and de blood of de Lamb" (341). As Dilsey hears the promise of that sacrifice that guarantees each "in its ordered place," all of Jason's calculations are undone in Quentin's running away from home with the money her mother Caddy had provided for her well-being.

In terms of the entire novel, the relationship of each of the characters to the suggested sacred time-line reveals the impotency suffered by each of the

brothers belied, in the end, by Dilsey's simple faith. Benjy cannot be touched personally by the purported saving sacrifice celebrated in the ritual observance of Easter, both because of his idiocy and his "innocence," but, as the end of the novel shows, he can be included within it. Quentin has allowed his own pathology to eclipse the possibility that salvation can come from anywhere outside himself—so much so, that his section is divorced completely from the Easter observance. The collapsing of the present and the past in the second section of the novel suggests an inversion for the fulfillment in time of the paschal sacrifice outlined in the sermon in Dilsey's section. Jason, quite simply, has rejected that there is any distinction between salvation and damnation—only a distinction between profit and loss.¹⁹ Dilsey's response to Reverend Shegog's sermon, her unashamed tears as they leave the church, confirms her acceptance of its message even though the promise is one the fulfillment of which for her lies in the future.

A final note concerning the time that each section encompasses will reinforce that a pattern determines the order of the sections in the published novel. Benjy and Dilsey's section share aspects that make them different from Quentin and Jason's sections. Benjy's section, though labeled "April Seventh, 1928" is constituted by experiences that range from 1898 to 1928. Dilsey's section, though confined to the experience of Easter Sunday, "April 8th, 1928," is the only section told from the point of view of a third person omniscient narrator. In this sense,

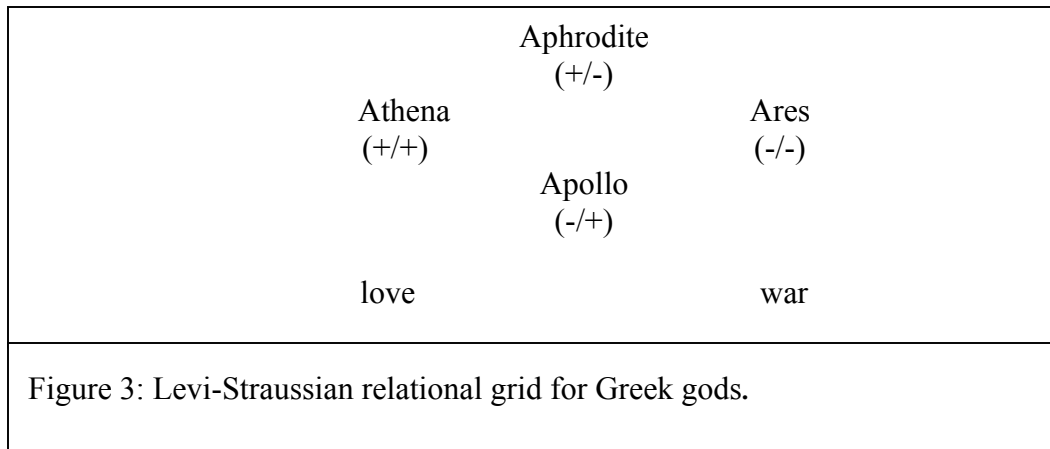
¹⁹ Faulkner has been quoted as citing Jason Compson as his most evil character—even eclipsing Flem Snopes for the "honor" of the character most likely to hurt others in his pursuit of success in his terms.

these two sections offer an overarching perspective not available in the other two sections. The reader of the Benjy section must supply that perspective, but it is supplied in the form of the third person narration for Dilsey's section. Both sections, however, offer a kind of objective view when compared to the other two sections that, in being wholly devoted to a single day and the view of a single character, supply narrowly subjective views of their realities. In terms of perspective, the novel's structure suggests a kind of development from Benjy's section to Dilsey's section: Benjy's section is so wholly subjective that it yields to a kind of narratorless objectivity; Quentin's section is subjective but intensely concerned (though impotently so) with how that subjectivity can or cannot connect to a larger reality; Jason's section, by contrast, is also wholly subjective but lacks any concern for the views of others; and, finally, Dilsey's section combines the objective view of third person narration with Dilsey's special subjectivity and its sensitivity for the reality of others' views and experiences, seen not only in her care for the Compson household, but her response to Reverend Shegog's sermon. In *The Sound and the Fury*, it is only for Dilsey that language, in the end, is efficacious.

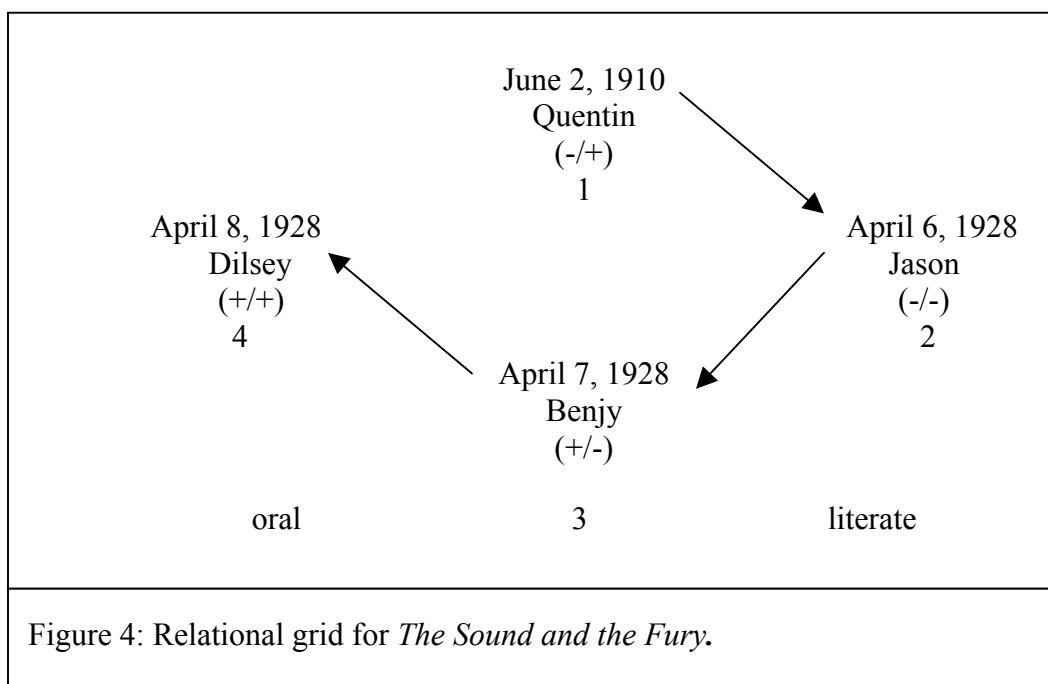
Indeed, the relationship between each central character with time is mirrored by his or her relationship with language. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in "The Structural Study of Myth," created a kind of diagram for the relationships between the gods of the Greek pantheon according to the ways in which each participates in the dynamic *nomos* or *logos* of a given order. These structural

relationships bear telling affinities to those in his development of cultural classifications that serve to regulate desired communication according to marriage-exchange, incest taboo, and the like. According to one such schematic, for instance, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, participates in that order but enjoys a kind of perpetual virginity, putting her at one extreme on an axis over against Ares, the god of war, who also participates in the order of love, but is sullied by it. Athena, who participates in the order of war but, as a goddess of justice (and also one who is perpetually virginal), occupies another position in the scheme, while Apollo, whose activities overlap love and war, stands across from her at another point. Each god or goddess takes up a position on a grid according to active participation in love or war and whether that participation leads to order or disorder.

Aphrodite is “+” for love, “-” for war; Ares is “-” for love and “-” for war. Athena is “+” for love and “+” for war, while Apollo is “-” for love, and “+” for war. A “+” in a category indicates participation without violation. A “-” indicates participation that also crosses a boundary, or taints the participant in some way. Hence, Athena, a goddess of war and virginal, participates both in the order of war and of love, but without taint, according to Levi-Strauss’ scheme. In grid format, Lévi-Strauss renders these four gods and goddesses thus:



If we apply a similar relational schema between the four sections of *The Sound and the Fury* in terms of each central character's relationship to orality and literacy, where each represents a kind of relationship with time and language, then a similar pattern of relationships may be seen. Diagrammatically, the relationship that each central character has to time and language—relationally positioned according to whether that relationship leads to order or disorder—ends up revealing that the novel's overall structure is stable and ordered. Adding arrows indicating the flow of linear time reinforces the novel's pattern. Each section of the novel, then, takes its position according to its central character's relationship to orality/literacy as well as in terms of the flow of linear time:



The order of the sections in the published novel are 3, 1, 2, 4, beginning with Benjy’s, followed by Quentin’s, Jason’s and Dilsey’s. Yet if we follow the scheme in terms of chronology, beginning with Quentin’s section, and move with the arrows from left to right, then the order becomes apparent. Quentin is the oldest son and his section is chronologically first. Quentin is a “—“ in terms of his relationship to the oral, since the unchanging, literate past overwhelms the present in his section. Moving to Jason’s section, the next chronologically and narrated by the second son, we find a “-/-,” indicating the nullification of the past through the striated order of the presence. That is, the present and the past in Jason’s section have no meaningful relationship, the oral is dictated as *if* it is the literate, and both modes are disrupted thereby. From Jason’s section we move to

Benjy's, again, the next in terms of chronology, and note that his is marked "+/-," because the past merely presents itself to his mind's eye *as present*. Hence, the literate order of things does not obtain for him at all. Finally, Dilsey's section, both chronologically and sequentially the last, rates a "+/+", where both the oral and the literate mode, indicated by the presence of an objective third person semi-omniscient narrative voice, reveals the oral and the literate modes in harmony and yields a frame large enough to render meaning for the prior three sections.

In terms of time-shift, the sections in which the oral and the literate are most at odds ("-/+ or "+/-", Quentin's and Benjy's sections, respectively), are the most conflicted in terms of the relationship between sequence and chronology (that is, the sequence of the present day's events must be "extracted" from the many interpolations of past events within these sections, but for opposite reasons). Those sections in which the oral and the literate are either harmonious (Dilsey's section, "+/+") or opposed (Jason's "-/-"), sequence and chronology are most straightforward, but again, for opposite reasons.

The order of the sections, then, begins to clarify itself. Taking their respective positions in the pattern above, it will be seen that Dilsey's belongs in its position because she has seen "de first and de last," (not only in terms of events in the Compson history, but in terms of the other narrators in the novel—Quentin is "de first," Benjy is "de last"—and they occupy the positions closest to Dilsey's. Likewise, her section opposes Jason's in more ways than just in terms of the oral/literate dynamic. Quentin's section takes up a position opposite his

brother Benjy's because theirs are mirror images of each other. Each is innocent, but for opposite reasons—one because he is a failure, the other because he cannot act. In Quentin's section, the past takes up the position of the immanent, self-organizing present, so that the literate overwhelms the oral. In Benjy's section, quite the opposite is the case, the immanence of the present/oral is so pronounced that the literate past can only make itself available in the same mode—hence, everything is experienced for Benjy as if it is the present, while everything for Quentin is experienced as if it is the past. Even Quentin's death is experienced as “the past,” since it appears prior (in narrative sequence) to his arranging his few positions before he commits suicide.

Such non-sequentiality indicates a further way in which each section demonstrates the nature of the relationship between the present and the past, the oral and the literate. Quentin's section ends quite out of order—as if the smallest details, in the end, can never be connected to the matter which began his section, his finding himself “in time” again, and remembering his father's gift of a watch—“the mausoleum of all hope and desire . . . the reducto absurdum of all human experience” (*The Sound and the Fury* 86). At the end of his section, Quentin deposits the watch in his roommate's drawer before setting out to kill himself. So, in a sense, his section ends where it began yet out of order, since his suicide within the narrative sequence has already been revealed. Likewise, Jason's section ends where it began. His begins with the statement of an insight that seems to underlie all of the subsequent action in his section. And so it does. But

his platitude itself is revealed as mistaken as a guiding philosophy for his success. That is, Jason's opening statement is simply a cruder expression of his father's philosophy regarding women, but Miss Quentin's defeat of his plans for her and her money reveals that such a philosophy does not serve. Both Quentin and Jason are trapped by the circularity of their own logic. Benjy's section, by contrast, ends, in a sense, where it began—with Caddy. At the beginning of his section, Benjy is looking for his sister. At the end, he has found her.

Dilsey's section begins with the narrator's description of her care over every aspect of the Compson household. In the first few pages of her section, every impression about this dysfunctional family is confirmed. After a few pages of dealing with Luster's lateness, the firewood, Mrs. Compson's fretting, and setting about for breakfast before Jason awakens, the narrator describes the natural way in which Dilsey keeps order in the house: "On the wall above a cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamp and even then evincing an enigmatic profundity because it had but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound, as if it had cleared its throat, struck five times. 'Eight o'clock,' Dilsey said" (316-7). Dilsey's efforts are not to impose an order on the Compson household so much as to inform it with one and are counterpoised by an example of the futility of the Compsons' efforts to impose an order upon their own realities. The one-handed clock in the kitchen recalls Quentin's tearing the hands off of his own watch. But it also serves as an indicator that there are more ways to count time than mechanically. Dilsey's sense of the order of things brings

together both the fluidity of the here and now and its relationship to the larger continuum of time that stretches from “de beginnin” to “de endin.” It is in this time that Dilsey exists and it is for this reason that the past and the present coexist in a meaningful way for her alone among the major characters in the novel. For Benjy, time doesn’t even really exist. Everything is passing event. For Quentin, time consumes all events so that the only present he can experience is the past—and to the past, all of his experience is doomed. For Jason, time is the enemy in the present that his frenzied scheming and activity must fight against—as his speculating in the market might serve nicely to illustrate. Finally, Dilsey’s activity is responsive to the exigencies of the here and now but, as her innate understanding of the relationship between event and time is illustrated in the striking of the clock, and her knowledge of what that means in mechanical terms as it relates to the proper order of things *in time*, her section altogether indicates a marriage of the present with the past in a way that looks forward, because it has seen the beginning and so recognizes the ends of things, that is summed up in Faulkner’s epitaph for her in the Appendix for *The Portable Faulkner*, “she endured.”

CHAPTER FOUR—LIGHT IN AUGUST: THE LITERATE, THE ORAL, AND THE TRIANGULAR FRAME

Just as he maintained that *The Sound and the Fury* began with a single image, Faulkner said that the idea for *Light in August* began with a vision of Lena Grove walking, pregnant, along a country road. In *Faulkner and the University*, Faulkner remarks: “That story began with Lena Grove, the idea of the young girl with nothing, pregnant, determined to find her sweetheart As I told that story, I had to get more and more into it. But that was mainly the story of Lena Grove” (74). As he got “more and more into it,” of course, he found that comic story was somehow connected to the tragic story of Joe Christmas. The resulting novel, as Michael Millgate describes, “seemed on the surface a less ‘difficult’ work than some of its predecessors [even though] it remained loose in organization and often violent in content” (31-2). But if the issue of organization has been of concern to critics, it seems it to have been a matter for Faulkner as well, as Faulkner apparently found *Light in August* more difficult to write than earlier works. He seemed satisfied with the final result, as he has been quoted as saying, “This one is a

novel, not an anecdote” (Blotner 66). But elsewhere he complained that *Light in August* showed that he had “learned too much about his trade” (703).

Long after its publication, in answer to a student’s question regarding the arrangement of narrative episodes in *Light in August*,²⁰ Faulkner replied,

It may be this. Unless a book follows a simple direct line such as a story of adventure, it becomes a series of pieces. It’s a good deal like dressing a showcase window. It takes a certain amount of judgment and taste to arrange the different pieces in the most effective place in juxtaposition to one another. (*Faulkner in the University* 45)

Faulkner’s answer is decidedly visual, spatial and, in these terms, literate. It would seem that he did not think of some his novels especially in terms of the line of the story, but in terms of narrative threads or blocks that must be arranged. Certainly *The Sound and the Fury* shows the features of such a conception, even if Faulkner wrote its sections in the order in which they appear in the final novel. At the very least, his writing the Appendix for Malcolm Cowley reveals a lingering dissatisfaction if not with the arrangement of sections, at the least with the overall cohesiveness that such an arrangement provided. He even encouraged subsequent publishers to attach the Appendix to the *beginning* of the novel. As Cohen relates in *Texts and Textuality: Textual Instability, Theory, Interpretation*, Faulkner enthusiastically wrote to one:

²⁰ The question was specifically about the placement of Hightower’s early life at the end of the novel rather than at the beginning, when the character is first introduced. Faulkner’s answer indicates that the positioning of the narrative thread in question was decided because there its juxtaposition to Joe Christmas’s tragic story would be most effective.

When you reprint *The Sound and the Fury*, I have a new section to go with it When you read it, you will see how it is the key to the whole book, and after reading it, the 4 (sic) sections as they stand now fall into clarity and place When you issue the book . . . print the Appendix first, and title it APPENDIX Then continue with the sections as they now are Be sure and print the Appendix *first*. (Blotner, *Selected Letters* 205)

Cohen argues for the inclusion of the Appendix in subsequent editions of *The Sound and the Fury*, though not because he thinks it is the “key to the whole book.” Its importance is as part of the historical life of the text of *The Sound and the Fury* and Faulkner’s re-contextualization of the 1929 version with the 1945 Appendix written for Cowley, in Cohen’s view, is crucial to understanding novel’s textual instability over time. Of interest to us here is Faulkner’s seeing the appearance of the Appendix “*first*” as causing the other sections to “fall into clarity and place.”

Clearly, the arrangement of narrative blocks in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August* was important in Faulkner’s mind for the overall coherence of the novels. In terms of *Light in August* the arrangement of the narrative “pieces” of which the novel is made reveals itself in a pattern that is dependent especially upon time-shift. These time-shifts, however, are associated with certain characters in terms of the relationship that they themselves have not only to time, but also to orality or literacy as modes of organization for the landscapes within which or upon which they move. Two recurring images or tropes in the novel suggest that Lena Grove and Joe Christmas represent alternative relationships to orality and literacy. Lena’s travels from Alabama to

Mississippi are described in the narrative as along a road. Joe's frantic attempt to "escape the circle" is repeatedly referenced in terms of the street that he has traveled his entire life. The differences between these two different ways of traveling could not be starker. Lena's road has no definite destination. She follows Lucas Burch like a rumor across the landscape—going from place to place, depending upon the help of those along the way—asking after her fleeing lover's whereabouts and, amazingly, arriving in Jefferson, Mississippi just at just that moment that Joe Christmas' story is about to run its course.

In contrast to Lena's road, Joe's street seems to represent for him the fated course of his doomed life. He conceives of its running and running—and in a sense, taking him along with it—toward an inevitable conclusion, a destination that he cannot avoid. As will be shown, the features of the landscape upon which and past which Joe's street runs appear in the literate terms of the striated grid. According to this conception, all time is past since it is connected to the same street upon which he has run for as long as he can remember. As will be shown, Joe's sense of time participates in a literate logic that separates the dimensions of his reality into separate components that are not bridged into a living breathing reality until his death. His life seems mapped and his efforts to escape its bounds seem, as a result, futile. Lena's road, on the other hand, does not constitute a boundary outside of which she cannot go. Rather, like the oral nature with which she conceives her relation to both time and distance, the road itself occupies a liminal space between times—that is, the present. In terms of the description given it in passages devoted to Lena's consciousness, the present is the momentary bridging between the past and the future; a bridging that collapses the striated distinctions of dimensions

themselves. And though such a contrasting of the differing ways that these two characters conceive of and live in their respective reality suggests a binary opposition between orality and literacy, the overall structure of *Light in August* militates against seeing them as opposed in such a way, as Faulkner's arrangement of narrative pieces suggests that the union of the oral and the literate undergirds the organizational stability of a novel within which no such stability exists for its characters.

In terms of the placement of the narrative threads that make up *Light in August*, Faulkner seems to have needed to do quite a bit of rearranging before he was satisfied. In "Plots and Counterplots: The Structure of *Light in August*," Martin Kreiswirth points out that study of prepublication documents reveals that the novel went through several rearrangements before Faulkner settled upon its final arrangement. Though the published novel begins with the Lena Grove story, Kreiswirth writes, "at different times, . . . the novel seems to have begun with each of the other narrative strands—with Hightower's biography (now chapter 3) and with Christmas's capture (chapter 15 in the published book)" (Kreiswirth 59).

Whether or not Faulkner was as satisfied with the arrangement of the narrative threads in *Light in August* as he seems to have been prepared to be satisfied with those of *The Sound and the Fury* with the addition of the Appendix, the structure of *Light in August* has been, as Kreiswirth explains, an issue for some time:

From the first reviews to some of the most recent articles, critics of *Light in August* have been anxious about the novel's structure. Praise of its characterization, themes, language, mythic strength, and so on, has been

characteristically given despite an acknowledged formal instability.

Disturbing the numerous accolades the novel has received is an audible undercurrent of crucial doubt: Where is its structural coherence? What of its unity? Is there wholeness? Comprehensive design? The question of the novel's narrative structure has invaded, tacitly or openly, almost every discussion of the text, avowedly formalist or not. (Kreiswirth 55)

Kreiswirth argues that the "lopsided organization" of the novel is "not an accident or miscalculation," for the "novel does not, indeed, project wholeness, but precisely its opposite, positively flaunting its disunity, structural lapses, digressions, asymmetries, and imbalances" (55). Kreiswirth further argues that in *Light in August*, along with Bakhtinian polyphony and "recurrence, analogy, and simultaneity," structural ambiguity creates a "centrifugal movement toward fragmentation and instability [that is] countered and held in check by a cumulative, centripetal pull toward interrelation" (57-8). Thus, the unifying principle is conscious narrative disunity. Kreiswirth concludes by accounting for narrative instability with the "reader's experience of the wholly dialogical and thus indeterminate nature of the text's ordering of materials" (77).

In *The Fragile Thread*, Kartiganer argues that Faulkner's works, including *Light in August*, are "process novels" in which we see the instability of organization in terms of "the broken form, the incompatibility of twin commitments to flux and design, process and product" (38). He goes on to write that Faulkner, in *Light in August*, moves toward the resolution of problems posed by *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, and produces a novel in which "design emerges as the voice of a chaos that is signified by

and subverts that design” (39). For Kartiganer *Light in August* is an example of the modernist novel as an experiment that confirms its own premise in a striving for an impossible wholeness the failure of which is a kind of modernist self-fulfilling prophecy: the very fractured wholeness it desired to achieve in the first place.

In an essay that does not attempt to account for the novel as a whole, Stephen Meats quite effectively rearranges the narrative blocks of *Light in August* to reveal the novel’s present-time chronology. Meats’ rearrangement allows one to get a grasp of the novel’s main story lines—of Lena Grove, of Joe Christmas, of Gail Hightower—and reveals how Faulkner’s arrangement juxtaposes those threads especially in terms of time-shift. He supplements this timeline with the historical material, especially that which is tied to Joanna Burden, and this only adds to the conception that the final arrangement of *Light in August* is more balanced than at first seems to be the case.

Meats’ disarrangement of the novel’s narrative blocks reveals that the final arrangement of *Light in August* is calculated to violate precisely that chronological order of events expected by the reader’s imagination. Yet, this juxtaposition of narrative blocks is also precisely possible according to a literate imagination, since the literate allows for movement through time in all directions. That is, since the narrative has been spatialized in being written, it can be broken up and rearranged—much as Faulkner described in 1957, “like dressing a showcase window.” Part of understanding *Light in August* as a formal whole, then, is in terms of the method of selection—the “judgment and taste”—that accounts for the placement of the narrative blocks in their final order.

Faulkner's comment regarding the genesis of *Light in August* indicates amazingly that it is Lena Grove's story, belying the fact that "the more and more" he got into it; the more it became the story of Joe Christmas. Indeed, beyond the question of the novel's organization, critics have struggled to understand the relationship between the two stories, especially considering that Lena Grove and Joe Christmas never come into contact with each other. Though the novel's narrative threads are not as separate as those of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, their seeming lack of relation in light of their deliberate intertwining has led many critics to attempt to account for the novel in terms of the interrelations between them. Such considerations generally take into account the importance of time in the novel, especially to Joe Christmas, but also wrestle with what seem to be the symbolic qualities of both Lena and Joe and how those qualities in juxtaposition inform an overall interpretation of *Light in August*.

According to the narrative in *Light in August*, for Joe, "[m]emory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders" (*Light* 111). As Jean Pouillon explains, the past is so present to Joe's consciousness that the future does not really exist for him: "memory is so much a part of what actually exists that it does not know itself as memory, does not know itself as anything but the sense of reality. Since, however, memory cannot possibly be anything but the sense of the past, we must conclude . . . that [for Joe Christmas] it is the past which is real" (Warren 80). Pouillon's explanation of the connection between memory and a sense of reality for Joe underscores the importance of time for his character. A similar argument, as will be seen, may be made regarding the relative unimportance of time to Lena Grove, suggesting a

juxtaposition of the two character's stories to underscore their different relations to time and the affect such relations have on the outcome of their stories.

David Minter sees Lena's comic story as framing the tragic and complicated stories of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower:

Her comic story, . . . frames the very different stories that dominate *Light in August*. But it does not balance the bleakness of the stories juxtaposed to it. For the final meaning of *Light in August* we must look beyond the simple story of Lena . . . to the complex stories of Gail Hightower and Joe Christmas . . . [W]e must look to the relations that the novel establishes among its three principal characters . . . In brief, we must look for meaning to the novel as a formal whole. In the life the novel renders, Lena Grove touches and alters but never comprehends Gail Hightower, and she remains almost totally oblivious to Joe Christmas. Only through the novel's structure does the inadequate hope of Lena's comic story enclose and embrace the terrible hope of the tragic stories of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower. (13-4)

Minter's assessment argues that Lena's story fails to balance those of Christmas and Hightower because while she "touches and alters" she "never comprehends Gail Hightower" and because she is "oblivious" of Joe Christmas. In accounting for the unbalanced organization in this way, Minter echoes a view of Lena Grove established very early in the criticism of *Light in August*.

Though most readings do not go quite so far in this direction, most have changed little since Irving Howe's early description of Lena Grove:

Beyond a doubt Lena is the most harmoniously conceived and drawn figure in the book, . . . Yet, Lena is less interesting than Hightower or Christmas . . . [T]he good unruffled vegetable Lena survives [them, but] to think of Lena as an agent of traditional morality is to graze the notion that goodness is contingent upon a noble paucity of intelligence. (Warren 204-6)

Part of the reason that Lena Grove's story does not seem adequately to frame those of Christmas or Hightower is that she is very much the passive, unthinking, pastoral figure Howe describes: serene, untouchable, and untouched by the suffering in her own small life or in the lives of others.

More recent views of Lena Grove account for this quality in her character as attaching itself to the way that she is conceived by those (especially) male characters into whose contact she comes, or according to whose narrative construct she is described.

Writing of Lena Grove in her relation to Byron Bunch, Judith Lockyear contends,

Lena asserts an idea contradictory to the role she plays within the novel. She embodies the [male] narrator's and even Byron's impulse to turn her into the articulation of an idea, and she is the positive but equally closed definition of woman. Under no circumstances would I argue that Faulkner was a feminist, but he was at least partially aware that Lena Grove was the projection of a masculine consciousness. (Lockyear 92)

Likewise, Judith Bryant Wittenberg notes in “some respects, Faulkner’s recognition of the general plight of women in the fictional world of *Light in August*—at once timeless and time-bound—makes it tempting to read the novel as proto-feminist” (Wittenberg 104).²¹ According to Wittenberg, the novel’s unity and cohesion is built around the contemplation of the feminine:

the novel as a whole reveals in intriguing ways the problematic presence of the ‘feminine’ as an informing principle, the term ‘feminine’ denoting that which is dependent, emotional, marginal—just as ‘masculine’ is that which is independent, rational, and culture-centered. (Wittenberg 104)

Wittenberg’s argument does not precisely define the nature of the relationship between that principle and the novel as a whole, but she implies that the presence of the feminine accounts for the instability of structure.²²

²¹As will be shown later in this chapter, Wittenberg’s terms, “timeless” and “time-bound,” are crucial to understanding the relationship between orality and literacy, the main characters of the novel, and time in *Light in August*.

²²One of the compelling aspects of Wittenberg’s argument is the fact that the terms of the novel stand against Wittenberg’s definitions for “masculine” and “feminine.” In the characters of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, masculinity is revealed to be anything but “independent, rational, and culture-centered.” In these two men, independence is isolation; rationality is morbid obsession; culture is de-centered. Likewise, while Joanna Burden and Lena Grove are literally female, neither exhibits in any simple way the attributes cited by Wittenberg. As Wittenberg hints, the novel encourages a rethinking of the traditional view of the feminine and, in some important ways, redefines its terms of dependence, emotionality, and marginality. In their own distinct ways, both Lena Grove and Joanna Burden are not only independent, but radically so. In this sense, Wittenberg’s reading suggests that Faulkner’s portrayal of the female characters runs counter to those cultural norms (represented by the male view in the novel) that would see them as dependent, emotional, and marginal.

While many have understood that the arrangement of narrative threads in *Light in August* implies that Lena Grove's story is meant to be juxtaposed to that of Joe Christmas, I think that the perception that her story simply lacks the gravitas to balance that of Joe's may be accounted for by a shifting of our view of the narrative emphasis upon these two characters to include those characters with whom they are involved.

While criticism has for a long time understood the importance of Gail Hightower's story to the novel (often making it more important than that of Lena herself), I would contend that the web of relationships between Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Gail Hightower, Joe Christmas, and Joanna Burden constitute the glue that holds the structure of the entire novel together. This may be seen in a variety of ways, not least of which is in terms of how the constellation of relationships is connected through association (Lena/Byron through Hightower to Joe/Joanna, for instance). At the same time, each set of relationships reveals specific narrative relations to time both in terms of the way that it functions as a dimension of the reality in which the characters move, and in terms of the way that the overall narrative of *Light in August* is punctuated by shifts between the present, the immediate past, and the remote past. These shifts themselves are associated with an oral or literate organization of the linguistic material of the narrative and these in turn are associated with particular characters. In the end, the overall organization of *Light in August* is revealed to be a combining of the oral and the literate at multiple levels to produce a stable structure.

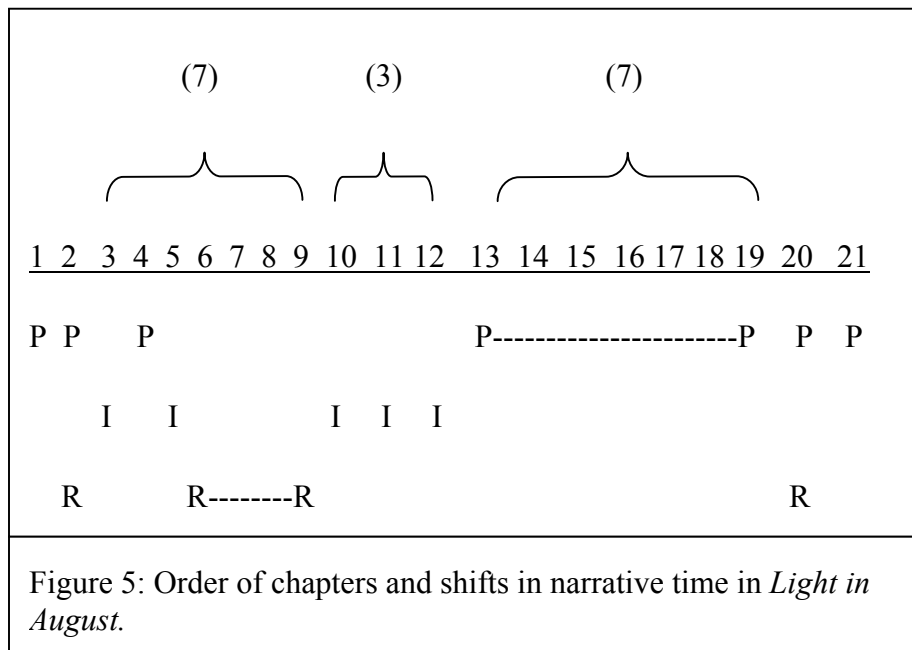
In order to begin to see that structure, it is necessary first to break it into its component parts. Just as the number of major characters (five) does not seem immediately conducive to a neat and ready order, the number of chapters (twenty-one) seems troublesome as well. Yet there is real balance in *Light in August* when the chapters are considered along with attention to narrative time. There are, as Meats points out, three distinct (though broad) stages of time in *Light in August*: the present (associated with Lena Grove and Byron Bunch); the immediate past (associated with Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden); and the remote past (associated with Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, and Gail Hightower).²³ The first half of the novel is mostly taken up with the remote past, while the second half of the novel is set primarily in the present. Events of the immediate past (the least represented of the three stages) cluster in the middle of the book. Though there are exceptions, an organizing principle seems to lurk just below the ambiguous surface of the work.

The stable order of *Light in August* is complicated enough that shifts in time must first be unpacked before considering how orality and literacy come into play to confirm the order suggested by those shifts. Looking at the order of the chapters as published and comparing broad shifts in narrative time reveals an underlying pattern. Not only are time shifts crucial, but the grouping of chapters in terms of their relation to the frame also illustrates how *Light in August* is structured. Both the outer edges of the novelistic

²³ These broad shifts in time are associated with the two narrative threads in *Light in August*: one associated with Lena Grove, the other with Joe Christmas. There are other shifts than those indicated above. In Chapter 15, for instance, there is a brief narrative description of Doc Hines' arrival in Mottstown years before Joe Christmas arrives and is arrested there. The diagram is meant to illustrate a pattern as associated with the major characters in the two narrative threads.

universe in *Light in August*, as well as its “middle” contain balanced and uniform numbers of chapters, which form a balanced structure.

Mapping the relations in terms of the shifts in narrative time may be illustrated in the following diagram:



In the above diagrammatic map, the numerals refer to chapter number, “R” stands for remote past; “I” stands for immediate past; “P” stands for present. The parenthetical numbers (7, 3, 7) that appear above the chapter designations serve as an indication of a grouping. Lena Grove’s presence defines the outer edges of the novel, its beginning and end, and is intimately involved with the novel’s third boundary, Joanna Burden’s death,

at the center.²⁴ The novel's second narrative/temporal boundary is taken up with the immediate past and is associated with Joe Christmas' story.

In terms of the order of the chapters in *Light in August* as published, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 13 through 19, 20 and 21 all contain significant elements in the present action of the novel and are associated especially with Lena Grove and Byron Bunch, (though they are also necessarily connected to Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower through Lena's relationship with Byron Bunch). Chapters 3, 6 through 9, 11, and 20 all contain significant elements from the remote past as related especially to Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, and Gail Hightower. These, in turn, associatively, connect to Lena Grove's narrative thread through Byron Bunches association with her. Chapters 2, 5, 10, 11, and 12, are dominated by action of the immediate past and so are associated with Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden. These episodes, which cluster in the first half of the novel, are not tied to the novel's other major thread—Lena Grove's story—until after the revelation of the meaning of the smoke rising on the horizon that Lena sees at the beginning of the novel as she arrives, finally, in Jefferson, Mississippi. As can be seen, a little over half of the novel (twelve chapters) is given over to the Lena Grove/Byron Bunch narrative, while the other half is split evenly between immediate past and remote past (which appear in five chapters apiece). But because some temporal modes overlap

²⁴The novel suggests a connection between the two characters' narrative threads in the scene in which Lena arrives in Jefferson at the beginning of the novel, and sees the smoke rising in the distance. Faulkner seems here to link symbolically the beginning of the end of Lena's journey toward the resolution of her problem with the ending of Joanna Burden's attempt at the resolution of hers.

within chapters, these shifts do not correspond uniformly with the number of chapters in the book.

There are three chapters in the novel that contain events from two of the major phases of time—2, 11, and 20. Chapter 2 contains elements of the immediate past and the present; chapter 11 includes the immediate and remote past; and chapter 20 includes episodes from the remote past and the present. As will be illustrated, these chapters form the basis of the overall structure of the novel, especially in terms of the associations they have with specific characters as well as with the associations those characters have with orality and literacy.

A description of the movement of the novel's narrative exposition as unfolded in terms of the horizontal arrangement of narrative blocks of material reveals how the pattern articulates itself within a literate text. The novel begins in Lena's present, and then moves to a chapter containing elements of the present and the immediate past. The text then devotes an entire chapter to the remote past, leaps back to the present, then to the immediate past. In the following (chapters 6 through 9) narrative is concerned with the remote past. Chapter 10 brings us back to the action immediately preceding Joanna Burden's death. The middle chapter, which contains but does not literally reveal that murder, also contains information from the remote past and is followed by a chapter that details Joe's actions immediately following Burden's murder. Then the novel comes back to the present and remains with Lena and Byron from chapter 13 through 19. Chapter 20 combines the present with Gail Hightower's remote past, and Chapter 21 ends where the novel began, in the present.

At first blush, the diagram seems to confirm that the order of events in the published work is highly unstable. Yet a pattern may be discerned. Chapters 1 and 21 frame the entire novel in the present of Lena Grove. It is her present, then, that is the reference point for the temporality of the entire novel (i.e. immediate past is “immediate” in terms of its relation to Lena’s present; remote past is remote from Lena’s presence). Chapters 2 and 20 represent two of the three chapters that contain narrative strands from two different time frames, the present and the immediate past in Chapter 2, and the present and the remote past in Chapter 20. The only other chapter that includes narrative from two major temporal threads is Chapter 11, the middle chapter of *Light in August*. It contains narrative information from the immediate past and the remote past.

The temporal boundaries in *Light in August* must be understood to be triangular, rather than binary. And this may be seen on another level by noting that the three chapters (10, 11, and 12) that entirely contain the Joe Christmas/Joanna Burden affair (as the groupings in the diagram illustrate) are preceded and followed by an equal number of chapters, seven, that themselves are divisors of the total number of chapters in the novel. Furthermore, these chapters compliment each other through the associations they have with the specific characters whose stories form their narration.

The initial symbolic connection between the pregnant Lena Grove and the dead Joanna Burden is suggestive of the way that the dual stories in *Light in August* are interwoven. As the diagram illustrates, the narrative structure of the novel is most problematized in the first half, with its many shifts between all three temporal modes. After chapter 12, however, the narrative structure becomes largely straightened out. And

this makes sense. The smoke rising from Burden's burning house, seen from a distance by Lena, symbolically represents that all matters concerning Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas to that point are forever in the past and is also suggestive of the overall relationship, temporally, between the present and the past in *Light in August*. But since Lena Grove's present has not been introduced into the orbit of those events, the significance of that rising column of smoke must remain hidden until her association with Byron Bunch can bring her into close enough proximity with those events for their revelation to be meaningful. So, the complicated order of the entropic first half of the novel is a symbolic expression of the confluence of the two story lines as they come together in Lena's advancing ever closer to the discovery of the whereabouts of the father of her unborn child and its ultimate irrelevance.

All of these associations are accomplished through connections that link the major characters together. Something of the principle of "six degrees of separation" is at work here, but the links are telling. Lena is looking for Lucas Burch. She finds Byron Bunch, who worked briefly with both Lucas and Joe Christmas at the mill. Lucas and Joe share quarters on Joanna Burden's property. Byron Bunch is a familiar of Gail Hightower who is something of a mentor to him. Hightower attempts but fails to protect Joe Christmas from being lynched by a mob. So, while the story of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove never intersect directly, they are linked, at one remove in opposite directions through Byron's association with Lena, his connection to Joe through Lucas Burch and *his* connection to Joe Christmas. These associations are further reinforced in Hightower's association with Byron Bunch (and Joe's direct contact with Hightower as he flees Percy Grimm).

When the associations between these characters and the shifts in narrative time are examined, the pattern is reinforced. Chapters 1 and 21, which deal mainly with the present, serve as the outer edges for the narrative structure. These are followed and preceded by chapters 2 and 20, respectively, with their overlapping considerations of events from the present and the immediate past (2), and the remote past and the present (20), and reveal that striving toward but never reaching the outer boundaries. Chapters 10, 11, and 12 introduce and enclose the entirety of the relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden. These chapters function as that central absence, as they take up Joanna Burden's murder (immediate past) and her familial history (remote past) as approached but never "comprehended" by Joe Christmas.

In terms of time-shift, the order works thus: present (1); present/immediate past (2); immediate past (10); immediate past/remote past (11); immediate past (12); remote past/present (20); present (21). Character associations in these chapters form this pattern: Grove (1); Bunch/Grove/Christmas/Hightower (2); Christmas (10); Burden (11); Christmas (12); Hightower/Christmas (20); Grove/Bunch (21).

As has been observed, the first half of the novel is the most disordered because the two story lines have been symbolically linked, but the present action of Lena's story has not brought her to a point where a connection with Joe Christmas' story can serve to reveal its dark climax meaningfully. But Lena's proximity to Burch works to move the novel closer and closer to the resolution of Christmas' doomed relationship with Burden. It is not until then that *Light in August* (in chapters 10, 11, and 12) brings Joe's narrative to its climax. Following that climax, however, the order of the novel's materials

stabilizes, Joe Christmas' flight dominates and Byron Bunch goes from helping Lena find Burch to shielding her from his presence in Jefferson.

The lopsided order of the novel stabilizes after the middle chapter precisely because Joe Christmas' action is accomplished, though, significantly, not uttered. That is, the central act of his story, in terms of Freytag's Pyramid, the killing of Joanna Burden, is not literately present in the text. The scene is rendered thus:

And her eyes did not waver at all But he was not watching them. He was watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away.

Standing in the middle of the road, with his right hand lifted full in the glare of the approaching car, he had not actually expected it to stop.

(Light 267)

Joanna Burden's death happens in the white space in-between the two paragraphs, illustrating her ultimate absence from the text,²⁵ graphically illustrating Joe's estrangement from her and from the world in an absence of a link between orality and literacy.

Joanna's absence from the narrative at the level of story, and the typographic absence of her death in the middle of the novel underscore the conflicted relationship between the oral and the literate in Joe and Joanna's story. Though the conflict is played

²⁵ Another aspect that displays her absence from the text is that among the major characters in the novel, hers is the only consciousness that the narration does not enter into. Everything we know about her is given in dialogue that is framed by the third person narrator. Hence, she alone remains totally encapsulated within the overall narrative of *Light in August*.

out mutually over the course of their affair, it is Joanna Burden's desire to blend these relationship between what has been established as oral and what has been established as literate and Joe's desire to keep them entirely separate that lead to the violent confrontation that results in her death and conclude finally with his lynching and castration at the hands of Percy Grimm.

When they first meet (in chapter 10), it is Joanna Burden who speaks first—to indicate that he does not have to steal food from her. After Joe has established himself in the cabin on her property, their oral communication is minimal. When their relationship turns sexual, however, the nature of their communication changes and Joe begins to sense that he is dealing with two distinct Joanna Burdens—the daytime version, that spends its time handling (literate) correspondence the nature of which for a long time he does not know, and the nighttime version, a hyper and animalistic sexual version whose language is literally unprintable.²⁶ Ironically, such language is reserved for print in the daytime in the form of notes that Joanna leaves for Joe with instructions for the next sexual tryst. Early on, Joanna seems to attempt to manage her nighttime oral life by subjugating it to a

²⁶ That is, Faulkner describes this language but does not allow it to be uttered in the text. He does not literally call Joe and Lena's filthy language during sex "unprintable." Rather, he describes it but does not display it. When he describes the note that Joe leaves behind in the church for the sheriff, on the other hand, he does refer to it as "unprintable." Perhaps this indicates Faulkner's growing sense that oral experience in its rawest and rankest manifestation must be suppressed (when it is suppressed) in the literate form of narrative description, while the vile expression in print within the narrative—Joe's handwritten note—is suppressed in print terms. In Stephen Ross's terms, Faulkner's description of their orality during sexual encounters is an instance of phenomenal voice in the text, while the suppression of the "unprintable" language in Joe's note at the church is a kind of reverse mimetic voice.

daytime literate one that directs Joe to the next sexual tryst.²⁷ This attempt on Joanna's part, however, plays heavily into Joe's the confrontation between them, since it represents an action that he cannot tolerate.

Joe Christmas sees his life as having been played out on a literate and fatalistic grid, the symbolic form of which is the "street." This street (described in detail in chapter 10) seems to run straight—like his flight from the mob after Burden's death, described by a deputy as "running straight as a railroad" (*Light* 310)—but takes him all over the country. But for all his running, Joe realizes that he has failed to get "outside the circle." After seven days on the run, Joe realizes that his flight has brought him back to that "street" and he finds that although in these few days "he has traveled further than in all the thirty years before," it has brought him right back "inside the circle" (*Light* 321). Joe goes on to lament that the circle to which he refers is his past—the "ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (321). Ironically, one might describe Joanna's frenetic descent into madness in opposite terms: her effort to bridge the gap between her past and her present is plagued not by what she has done, but what she has *not* done. Joe's interpretation of her behavior in the "second phase" of their relationship, described in chapter 12 as in terms of having fallen "into a sewer," is formally regimented, following a pattern and "the days were the same as they had ever been" (242).

In the end, Faulkner reveals in a very idiosyncratic way that the relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden is dictated by pattern until the very end. That

²⁷ Such a division is telling for the title of the novel, *Light in August*, since according to Faulkner it referred to a certain slant of light that blended the ceding over of the day to night and also figures prominently in Hightower's vision at the end of the novel.

that pattern is encapsulated means that his attempt to break free of it is doomed from the start. Regulation of the relationship between oral reality and literate expression in the terms brokered by Joe and Joanna is impossible. She would have it that oral experience would give way to literate management—in the form of Joe’s being subjected to “Negro college” and a dubious career in the “Law” in Memphis. Joe refuses to succumb, and their confrontation is a kind of emblematic expression (not expressed in the text) of the seeming impossibility of the management of the oral by the literate or vice versa.

In *Light in August*, the structural underpinnings of the relationship between the oral and the literate are played out in two different ways in the stories of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove. In Joe’s case, the disjunction between the immanent and holistic experience of orality—in the “now”—is set over and against that “now” as it appears as the grid of the (literate) record of the past, as that which is forever unchangeable and inescapable. It is for this reason that Joe’s release from the grid comes as the result of Percy Grimm’s action.

Percy Grimm’s action is dictated by the literate rules of a game and described by Faulkner in those terms: he is moved as if he is a pawn on a chessboard.²⁸ He is the symbolic embodiment of Joe’s fear regarding fate and is linked to Joe’s description of what the dark (as opposed to the light) represents: “The dark was filled with the voices, myriad, out of all time that he had known, as though all the past was a flat pattern” (*Light* 266). That is, Percy Grimm has given himself over to a fatalistic logic too. His actions are

²⁸ Percy Grimm’s pursuit of Joe Christmas is described by the narrator as a piece being moved on a chess board—see *Light in August*, for instance, the narrator’s reference to Percy’s movements being directed by a “Player” upon a “board” in chapter 19.

directed according to a plan emblematic of the way the literate imposes its order upon the oral. His pursuit, murder, and mutilation of Joe Christmas are the result of his making of himself a pawn within the larger grid of a law. If Joe Christmas is doomed because his flight from the past is an impossible attempt to “get out of the circle,” then Percy Grimm is “doomed” by his freely giving himself over to the “rules of the game.”

The relationship between Joe’s identity, time, orality and literacy is not the same as Lena Grove’s. She is entirely free for the reasons that Joe is enslaved. This is because Lena accepts her relationship to reality. Lena is not conflicted about her circumstances. Unlike Joe, she says “ought,” not “must.” Lena’s actions and attitude are guided by her sense of how things should—but do not necessarily turn out to—be. Joe, by contrast, is haunted by the idea that his life *must* turn out as it unfolds before him because it is determined by circumstances over which he has no direct control. His life has followed but never escaped the grid like, literate, street. Lena’s goes down the smooth space of a road.

Lena’s relationship to the happenings in her life collapses the distinction between time and distance—both are motion for Lena, a motion within which she exists. As a result of her becoming pregnant, Lena decides to follow the natural father of her child. It is with comic bemusement, reminiscent of Dilsey’s faithful certainty in *The Sound and the Fury*, that Lena comments upon her current status at critical moments in the novel. For instance, when asked as to where she has come from and where she is going, the narrator describes, in chapter 1, her response: “She expels a breath. It is not a sigh so much as a peaceful expiration, as though of peaceful astonishment” (*Light* 9). Her

response is, significantly, interrupted by a look to the future in Lena's immediate mention of Lucas Burch as the focus of her search. At the end of the chapter, she seems to finish the thought begun here: "'My my,' she says, 'here I aint been on the road but four weeks, and now I am in Jefferson already. My my. A body does get around'" (26). After all has been accomplished in the novel, both Joe's fate and Lena's situation, she further articulates this comic relation between time and being: "'My, my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee'" (480).

Lena's oral fusion of time and space is precisely opposed to Joe's literate confusion of time and space. For Joe "Knowing not grieving remembers a thousand savage and lonely streets" (207). The past renders experience suspended, rarified, laid out in some ways like a corpse. For Lena, whose experience of time is oral, life is not laid out as if on a grid. Rather, life happens and incorporates all time in each moment. In contrast to Joe's "savage and lonely streets," Lena reflects upon the four weeks she has been looking for Lucas Burch (in the first chapter) as "*far*": "She had been doing that now for almost four weeks. Behind her four weeks, the evocation of *far*, is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices" (4).

Faulkner contrasts this oral experience of time and being in the collapsing of fundamental categories in the descriptions that cluster around Lena's experience. As she waits for a wagon, and perhaps a ride, the narrator describes its approach:

Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so that in watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at last, as though out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost traveling a half mile ahead of its own shape. 'That far within my hearing before my seeing,' Lena thinks.

(5-6)

The passage merges the motion of the wagon with the road and the senses blend as its progress brings it toward Lena. She waits quietly for it, so certain of its arrival and the offer of a ride that

She thinks of herself as already moving, riding again, thinking then it will be as if I were riding for a half mile before I even got into the wagon, before the wagon even got to where I was waiting, and that when the wagon is empty of me again it will go on for a half a mile with me still in it. (6)

Contrasting this sense of reality with Joe Christmas' sense of fate illustrates the difference between Lena's orality and Joe's literacy. Lena's sense of time is one of all

time—past, present, and future—as fluidly belonging to the same stream, the road she travels. Furthermore, time is not a dimension for her that is separate from distance. On Joe’s literate grid, time and distance function as separate variables, while in the smooth space of Lena’s oral world, such distinctions are meaningless. The wagon goes like a “ghost traveling half a mile ahead of its own shape” because this apparition of the wagon is in Lena’s imagination and is rendered in the text *before* she passes Armstid (it is Armstid who will give her the ride) and Winterbottom as they haggle over the sale of a cultivator on the side of the road. When Lena is asked how far she is going, she does not name a destination, only that she is trying to “get up the road a pieceways before dark” (9). Her utterance is more than countrified—it is a melding of time and distance.

This oral sense is further illustrated in Lena’s conception of the connection between herself and Lucas Burch. It mirrors the relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden. In that relationship, the lack of the married state is an abridgement of an oral connection that, by custom, is ratified by the literate (in the form of a marriage license). It is accounted by Joanna Burden, for a time, as something that needs to be regularized and explains her claims to pregnancy. Once she gives up the idea of literal marriage, she opts for the plan whereby Joe Christmas will go to school and then study law—so that he can learn through literate means to steal in support of Burden’s plan for him to take over her business affairs.²⁹ Burden’s plan, then, absent the literate formalizing

²⁹ In the scene in which Joanna’s plan is revealed to Joe, he sees her, significantly, for the first time in a pair of reading glasses. The alienation between the oral and the literate is further illustrated in that part of their conversation is filtered through his mouth alone as he repeats words uttered by Joanna that do not appear in the text. Finally, his situation is based upon his *not* having read the final note that Joanna left on his bed—so, he has misinterpreted the meaning of the literate message by treating it as an object that does not

of their relationship, and lacking the natural fruit of it as well (since she is not pregnant) is to create the appearance of that relationship through its literate trappings.

Lena's relationship to Lucas Burch is entirely natural—as evidenced by her swollen belly. When pressed by Mrs. Armstid about why she is looking for Lucas, Lena at first lies about her married state. But she is aware that the older woman suspects the truth and owns up. “I told you false,” she says. “My name is not Burch yet. It's Lena Grove.

They look at one another. Mrs. Armstid's voice is neither cold nor warm. It is not anything at all. ‘And so you want to catch up with him so your name will be Burch in time. Is that it?’

Lena is looking down now, as though watching her hands upon her lap. Her voice is quiet, dogged. Yet it is serene. ‘I don't reckon I need any promise from Lucas . . . I reckon me and him didn't need to make word promises.’ (15)

Lena's lack of a word to verify or sanctify her relationship with Lucas is contrasted by Joe Christmas' statement about Joanna Burden when she comes down to his cabin after the first sexual encounter between the two. He thinks, “She's trying to be a woman and she don't know how.” But after she begins to talk and to tell Joe her life story, he thinks, “She is like all the rest of them. Whether they are seventeen or fortyseven, when they finally come to surrender completely, it's going to be in words” (227). But Joe is wrong

also contain a subject, and “It seemed to him that he could actually hear the words inside him: *You should have read that note, You should have read that note* Thinking, ‘I am going to do something. Going to do something’”(Light 261).

both about Joanna's surrender and the relationship between the oral and the literate. Throughout his story, that relationship is conflicted and contradictory, while throughout Lena's story, it is fluidly holistic.

After Armstid drops Lena off at Varner's store, she decides to buy sardines with some of the money that Mrs. Armstid has given to her. " 'I'm a-going to do it,' she thinks, even while ordering the cheese and crackers; 'I'm a-going to do it,' saying aloud: 'And a box of sardines.' She calls them *sour-deens*. 'A nickel box'" (24). The narrative text reveals that the relationship between orality and literacy for Lena is the reverse of that for Joe Christmas. Just as his encounter with the tin of sardines in "Barn Burning" reveals that Sarty Snopes is illiterate, Lena's contact with the literate labeling on the sardine-tin reveals how this scene participates in literacy too but here, in re-naming them "sour deens" she takes the literate and reorients it, giving the sardines a meaning that they lack in their literate state.³⁰ Sarty Snopes' inability to read functions to alienate him from the object of his desire and the community within which that desire is experienced. Lena's reorientation, by contrast, bridges the gap between the oral and the literate by breathing new life into the literate form. She does not simply purchase sardines; she makes them her own *sour deens*.

When Lena has her child, Byron Bunch has an epiphany regarding his relationship with her that touches perhaps upon the relationship in *Light in August*

³⁰ In "Metaphor by Mistake," in *Message in a Bottle*, Walker Percy argues that such misnaming is indicative of how words are filled with the meanings that speakers give to them and that the 'metaphor by mistake' plays a vital role in creative meaning-making. Faulkner seems to underscore such a role here in that the text does not spell Lena's reorientation phonetically in her offset speech, but explains her pronunciation in a narrative aside.

between orality and literacy. When Byron is called from his tent to the cabin by Mrs. Hines and sees Lena, propped on her elbows, in labor, the scene causes something to “lurk clawed and waiting” within him as he gallops to town to rouse Hightower and then get a doctor. He is plagued by this unformed thought or feeling for the entire trip and is not delivered of it until he arrives back at the cabin with the doctor to find that he is too late and Hightower has already delivered the baby. Standing just outside the door of the cabin, Byron hears the baby’s cry.

. . . and something terrible happened to him.

He knew now what it was that seemed to lurk clawed and waiting while he crossed the empty square, seeking the doctor whom he had neglected to engage. He knew now why he neglected to engage the doctor beforehand. It is because he did not believe . . . that he (she) would need one, would have a need . . . He knew now that when he ran to the cabin and looked in, he expected to see her sitting up; perhaps to be met by her at the door, placid, unchanged, timeless. But even as he touched the door with his hand he heard something which he had never heard before. It was a moaning wail, loud, with a quality at once passionate and abject, that seemed to be speaking clearly to something in a tongue which he knew was not his nor that of any man. (377-8)

What Byron has discovered is that the Lena he has been helping for the past week is real—she is not, as he had constructed her, a projection of his consciousness. She does not represent those qualities that he has projected upon her—of placidity, immutability,

and timelessness. She is not his ideal. In a sense, this moment illustrates how Byron has attempted to literalize Lena, to make her fit an ideal, and that is why the discovery of his error is terrible to him.

Lena Grove oralizes the literate without violating it, symbolizing the relationship between the oral and literate worlds when they exist together harmoniously. Byron has, until this moment, romanticized Lena in the web of lies he has told to protect her from contact with Lucas Burch. He realizes, speaking first of his discovery that this same web of lies meant that he has not until this moment treated Lucas Burch or any of the others as if they really existed:

Why, I didn't even believe until now that he was so. It was like me, and her, and all the other folks that I had to get mixed upon in it, were just a lot of words that never even stood for anything, were not even us, while all the time what was us was going on and going on without even missing the lack of words. Yes. It aint until now that I ever believed that he is Lucas Birch. That there ever was a Lucas Burch. (380)

The sound that he hears, then, when Lena is in labor, might best be described as a kind of primal orality—unmitigated by the striating effect of literacy. It is the utterance of sound that is also its own meaning while the language he has used to this point has been at one remove from such a meaning/being. Lena Grove is not merely Faulkner's mimetic representation of orality as a social phenomenon; she is the presence of orality within the literate text expressionistically.

In *Light in August*, while literacy contains and displays orality it does not express its meaning. Orality, by contrast, when it reorients literacy breathes new life into it. The attempt to contain the one mode by the other leads to a disruption of the gridded space of literacy as it tries to get outside of its own circle. Or, the complete alienation of the two modes from each other leads to the perversion of both—as the relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden reveals. Gail Hightower’s attempt to blend the oral and the literate, in the end, fails fully to disclose meaning to him as a result of his own abstraction and alienation from life—but the image includes the gridded literate space as well as the holism of orality. But they do not quite combine to reveal meaning:

Out of this instant the sandclutched wheel of thinking turns on with the slow implacability of a medieval torture instrument, beneath the wrenched and broken sockets of his spirit, his life . . .

The wheel, released, seems to rush on with a long sighing sound. He sits motionless . . . The wheel whirls on . . . In the lambent suspension of August into which night is about to fully come, it seems to engender and surround itself with a faint glow like a halo. The halo is full of faces. The faces are not shaped with suffering, not shaped with anything: not horror, pain, not even reproach. They are peaceful, as though they have escaped into an apotheosis; his own among them . . . his wife’s; townspeople, members of that congregation that denied him, . . . Byron Bunches; the woman with the child; and that of the man called Christmas.

(465)

In this moment, Hightower's vision seems to map all of the relationships of those in the novel whose lives have intersected with and played a role in his. In these terms, the vision is a literately spatialized map, or grid, but one that itself cannot express the meaning of the relationships it reveals. The wheel of Hightower's thought has become "unhinged" and engenders a holistic vision of all of the narrative threads that have intersected Hightower's life. The most significant part of the vision is the image of the face of Joe Christmas. Hightower sees that it seems to be two faces at once, struggling "to free themselves from one another" but which fade and then blend together again. Hightower recognizes the other face as that of Percy Grimm: "'Why, it's . . .,' he thinks. 'I have seen it, recently . . . Why, it's that . . . boy. With that black pistol, automatic they call them. The one who . . . into the kitchen where . . . killed, who fired the . . .' (466). The blending of the oral and the literate in Hightower's final vision brings him to the brink of an insight as to the nature of the relationship between Percy Grimm and Joe Hightower. But he is unable to express that insight. Joe Christmas seems instinctively to know that to bridge the gap between literate and oral knowing, he "is going to have to do something." Gail Hightower has ceased at the end of the novel to be capable of action, and so ends with a vision of the bridging of that gap that remains unuttered.

The elements of literacy appear in this novel in the guise of the spatialization of form, the map like relationship of one horizontal block of narrative with another; the grid like tracings of Joe Christmas from Cabin to mill to Joanna Burden's house, wearing his own unique paths as they mark his isolation and alienation. We see literacy in the thematic loading of the use of notes in communications between Christmas and Burden

and the crucial role his failure to read the last note plays in the outcome of their disastrous relationship. The oral elements are seen in Lena's "road" (as opposed to Joe's "street"), in her appropriation of the literate by renaming the sardines, thereby making them her "own," not just purchasing them. Negatively, the power of orality is represented in the sermons of McEachern and Doc Hines, which resemble those of fascism as described by McLuhan, part of an oral "hot" medium that delivers the word readymade, welded to its meaning. We also see the oral in the use of lies—Byron's, out of love for Lena, or in the trickster figure Lucas Burch, illustrating how he can operate fully in orality, but only indirectly or symbolically in literacy.³¹ Hence, orality and literacy play a role in *Light in August* that is not merely structural, but thematic as well. It seems that Faulkner contemplates the differences between orality and literacy in the world and attempts, especially in the figures of Lena Grove and Joanna Burden, to illustrate the alienating effects of their total separation or their harmonious union.

The novel repeats several times scenes between couples in bed, at night, talking. Early in the novel, there is the scene with the Armstids. Several times in the story of Joe Christmas, there are scenes of conversation after a sexual tryst and, in his encounter with Joanna Burden, he even imagines one such scene, though it is suppressed in the text, as if to signal its impossibility for those two. The novel ends with a recitation of Lena and Byron's relationship after all of the other threads of the novel have been tied up. The

³¹ When Lucas Burch flees Lena and her child, he attempts to claim a thousand dollar reward by sending a note to the sheriff that reads: "*Mr Wat Kenedy Dear sir pleas give barer My reward Money for captain Murder Xmas rapp it up in Paper 4 given it to barer yrs truly*" to which he adds after some thought, "*not Sined but All rigt You no who*" (*Light* 412-3).

furniture dealer talks with his wife in bed about his encounter with Lena and Byron, and his tale includes the story of Byron's humiliation on their first night together, alone. The furniture dealer overhears a conversation in which it is revealed that Lena seems still to hold out some hope of finding Lucas Burch. The furniture dealer comes to understand that Byron loves Lena and wishes to marry her and protests that they have no way of knowing where Lucas set out to, that they "might travel on like this from one truck to another and one state to another for the rest of their lives and not find any trace of him" (474). In his frustration, Byron leaves, only to return after he thinks the furniture dealer is asleep, and climbs into the truck with Lena. After a few moments, she puts him out of the truck, saying, "Why Mr. Bunch. Aint you ashamed. You might have woke the baby too." Lena then tells him, "You go on and lay down now, and get some sleep. We got another fur piece to go tomorrow" (477).

The furniture dealer surmises, in the end, that Lena Grove has no intention of finding Lucas Burch, but that she just wants to travel a little more before settling down with Byron Bunch. But perhaps the explanation is not so simple as that. The furniture dealer says that Lena listens to Byron's protestations as if she "had heard it before and knew that she never even had to bother to say either yes or no to him" (475). If we recall that in the scene in which Lucas Burch escapes out of the cabin window that it was as if Lena held him there, "without rods or cords but with something against which his lying blew trivial as leaves or trash" (409). It is against Lena's oral word that Lucas attempts to lie, and he finds he cannot escape through words and must resort to jumping out the window, forsaking, in the end, any chance at collecting his reward. Lena had said to Mrs.

Armstid that she reckoned that there did need to be a “word promise” between herself and Lucas—but the scene of his escape brings Lena to an understanding of his character that militates against our believing that she would continue to naively follow him.

The furniture dealer suggests that she’s just traveling before settling down. Yet perhaps it is more than that. When Byron gets back in the truck after leaving Lena the second time, he says “I done come too far now . . . I be dog if I’m gonna quit now,” to which Lena says, “Aint nobody never said for you to quit” (479). Following this remark, the text begins a motion that suggests the form of life that Lena Grove represents. The furniture dealer describes her, sitting in the back looking at the passing landscape

with him by her now and the baby that hadn’t never stopped eating, had been eating breakfast now for about ten miles, like one of these dining cars on the train, and her looking out and watching the telephone poles and the fences passing like it was a circus parade. Because after awhile I says,

‘Here comes Saulsbury,’ and she says,

‘What?’ and I says,

‘Saulsbury, Tennessee,’ and I looked back and saw her face. And it was like it was already fixed and waiting to be surprised, and that she knew that when the surprise come, she was going to enjoy it. And it did come and it did suit her. Because she said,

‘My my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it’s already Tennessee.’ (480)

As with other passages associated with Lena, and especially the opening one in which her imagining the approach of the wagon is described, time and distance references are collapsed. But the furniture dealer's interpretation of Lena's enjoyment, I think, does not give it full justice. Lena Grove lives in that now that includes the past as a living part of the present and this harmony yields to a future that, while certain, is not closed. Her language does not describe her reality; it expresses and breathes life into it. Like her reorienting the literate in saying "sour deens," here she does not simply make a declarative statement about her experience as if the utterance is separate from it and after the fact, her expression is that meaning too—"Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee." The expression of enjoyment on her face is not a pre-set expression of an expectation; it is the experience of the future as it rises toward her, in the now. It is an oral language that reterritorializes the linguistic landscape of *Light in August*, bringing the novel, finally, to the moment of its own presence.

CHAPTER FIVE—ABSALOM, ABSALOM!: THE SENSE OF A MIDDLE

It is not hard to see why *Absalom, Absalom!* received such a mixed reviews upon its publication, nor why it has generated so much critical attention in the last sixty-odd years. Published in 1936, and coming after *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner's tenth novel. By the time of its publication, in addition to the major novels, Faulkner had already published less critically acclaimed works including *Soldier's Pay* (1926), *Mosquitoes* (1927), *Sartoris* (1929), *Sanctuary* (1931), and *Pylon* (1935). During this same period, Faulkner also managed to publish two collections of poetry (*The Marble Faun*, 1924, and *A Green Bough*, 1933), two collections of short stories (*These 13* in 1931, and *Doctor Martino and Other Stories* in 1934), as well as two privately published short stories (*Idyll in the Desert* in 1931, and *Miss Zilphia Gant* in 1932). Between 1924 and 1936, then, Faulkner published thirteen major and two minor works of poetry or fiction. Four of these rank among the major works of American fiction. Between 1936 and 1962, Faulkner

would publish another thirteen major works of fiction, of which five (*The Hamlet, Go Down, Moses, The Town, The Mansion, and The Reivers*) have received nearly as much critical attention as the first four “great” novels.³² Clearly, at the time of the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner was at the height of his artistic abilities even if it would take him another thirty years to completely exercise them.

As Malcolm Cowley pointed out in the introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* (for a new edition in 1974), at the time of the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner was already a prolific, popular, and critically neglected author. Indeed, as has since been argued, Cowley’s introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* in 1945 did much to launch Faulkner’s literary career. Popularly speaking, however, Faulkner was already quite well known. By 1954, as Charles Poore pointed out at the time, Faulkner titles had sold in excess of five and a half million copies (*The Contemporary Reviews* 359). Given the differences between his popular and his critical reception, it seems odd in retrospect that those novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* among them, have so consistently been both championed and criticized for a structural instability that results in their being “difficult” novels to read.

Calling *Absalom, Absalom!* the most formally sound of Faulkner’s major works, Cowley sums up generally the difficulties of his structure in this way:

Some of [Faulkner’s novels] combine two or more themes having little relation to each other, as *Light in August* does, while others, like *The*

³²Publication dates from *The Portable Faulkner: Revised and Expanded Edition*, xxxv-xxxvii.

Hamlet, tend to resolve themselves into a series of episodes resembling beads on a string. In *The Sound and the Fury*, which is superb as a whole, we can't be sure that the four sections of the novel are presented in the most effective order; at any rate, we can't fully understand the first section until we have read the three that follow. *Absalom, Absalom!* . . . gains power in retrospect; but even here the author's attention seems to shift from the principal theme of Colonel Sutpen's design to the secondary theme of incest and miscegenation. (xxv)

Since that time, critical opinion of Faulkner's work has had to shed its nineteenth century understanding of the novel as a well-controlled narrative and adapt itself to the changes in practice that Faulkner, in many ways, helped to introduce. Cowley's remarks reflect, again, how crucial Faulkner's structural techniques were to an understanding of his texts. Faulkner's techniques were not only fundamental to an understanding of the modernist form, but heralded much of what would come later. The pastiche nature of the episodes in a story, the jumping from one point of view to another, the lack of apparent connection between parts of a whole, all show how Faulkner's texts helped establish those practices that would become associated with the modernist novel.

According to Richard Gray, in *William Faulkner: A Critical Biography*, the genesis of the story of Thomas Sutpen and its narration by Quentin Compson with the help of Shreve McCannon stretches back to "at least 1928," where aspects of *Absalom* may be seen in protean form in the short stories "Mistral" (1928), "The Big Shot" (1929), and "Evangeline" (1931), and of course, "Wash" (1933), much of which appears in the

novel. Gray writes “the process by which *Absalom, Absalom!* took shape—gradual, accumulative, circuitous and sometimes even repetitive—foreshadowed both the structure and the preoccupations of the finished novel” (204). Gray calls *Absalom, Absalom!* one of Faulkner’s most powerful novels, describing its layered complexity as an investigation of the

meanings of history: just what it is to be born, as Judith Sutpen puts it, ‘with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them’, from the past, present and future. It is also an extreme instance of the narrative as process: in which an elaborate network of coinciding and conflicting voices and genres replicate historical experience—and register being in time as a fluid, inconclusive movement, a matter of collective debate and continuing revision. (205)

Citing R.G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*, Gray argues that one of the important aspects of *Absalom, Absalom!* is its depiction of Quentin and Shreve’s quest for history as “detectives” that “dramatize the historical process as an active re-creation, a reinvention of the past by the present.” In this effort, they can be compared to Collingwood’s “ideal historian, who weaves together a ‘web of imaginative construction’ . . . ‘stretched between the fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities’” (207). The multiple narrative layers in *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, problematize those “fixed points,” Gray argues, so that the “view of history predicated” by the novel “is a version of Einstein’s theory of relativity or Heisenberg’s formulation of the uncertainty principle” according to which there

is no absolute view of historical events in the novel, no ‘God’s view.’ The relationships of before and after, and simultaneous with, depend on the observer’s position in relation to those events. Or, to put it another way, the object of investigation (in this case, the past) is altered by the actual process of being investigated; and the outcome of the investigation depends on the standpoint that was originally taken. (206)

The sense of indeterminacy in *Absalom, Absalom!* may be accounted for to an extent in the nature of the “fixed points” between which stretch Quentin and Shreve’s attempt to reconstruct a plausible history to explain the meaning of Thomas Sutpen’s story. At one end, there are the oral versions provided by the testimonies of Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and a series of “receding pictures: Quentin and Shreve at Harvard, Quentin and his father in Oxford, Quentin’s father listening to General Compson, General Compson listening by the campfire to Sutpen—all of which revolve around the act of storytelling, constructing a version of things (207). The other “fixed point” of “authority,” one no less slippery in its ability to convey a stable meaning, is Charles Bon’s letter to Judith.

This letter acts as a textual reference point for all of the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* as it participates in the overall attempt to make sense of Sutpen’s story. In *William Faulkner: Letters and Fictions*, James G. Watson calls Bon’s a “broken letter,” whose “epistolary incompleteness” both “generates and sustains the interest of its readers while at the same time it frustrates their attempts at a definitive reading” (127).

According to Watson the appearance of Bon's communication to Judith is especially important in terms of its form as a letter. He writes:

Janet Gurkin Altman has suggested that 'to write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experiences that take place between the letters.' In the case of Bon's letter, however, the coordinates Altman identifies are either deleted—the letter has no date, salutation, or signature—or suppressed. The world Bon shares with his addressee exists in the four-year space of war between letters rather than shared personal experiences, . . . [and because] so little is clear from the shadowy text itself, so much of its meaning must be reconstructed by his subsequent readers from available facts and their own reasonable inventions . . . (127)³³

Of course, the world "Bon shares" through the letter with Mr. Compson and Quentin exists in a space much greater than the "four-year space of war" between letters sent from Bon to Judith, and it is across this space that the novel attempts to reveal the meaning of Sutpen's story. In a sense, Shreve's "tell about the South," is a request to Quentin himself to map the coordinates of his relationship in space and time to that history that in large

³³ The quotation from Altman is from *Epistolarity*, 119.

part makes him who he is. The question Shreve asks his roommate is tantamount to his asking Quentin to tell him not *about* the South but *who* he is. The difficulties that Quentin encounters in this attempt have to do not only with the “shadowy nature” of the text of Bon’s letter as one of the (not-so) “fixed points” of authority, but also with the slippery nature of oral transmission which, like an act of interpretation, is “altered by the actual process of being investigated” (Gray 206). I would add that not only is the oral act “altered” by its investigation, it is altered by its very transmission. What Quentin hears from Rosa Coldfield and his father are their versions of the Sutpen story, distorted by their own interpretive efforts to understand it even as they tell it. While the oral tradition prizes devices to protect against the alteration of the story through time, the very existence of those devices signals that oral transmission is unstable by its very nature. In contrast to oral instability, however, the stability of the literate transmission of information through time is not absolute. While the text may “fix” language upon the page and guarantee verbatim repeatability, its reception is compromised by the act of interpretation itself in a way that mirrors the distortion of oral transmission. Neither orality nor literacy can function alone to express the connection in time between the past and the present. But together, these two principles of organization and transmission compliment each other in producing a form capable of embodying a meaning even if, in the end, that meaning itself is not uttered.

The terms that have been used to describe the overall narrative of *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, as well as Bon’s letter to Judith, illustrate some important differences between the oral and the literate in the novel. On the one side, information about Thomas Sutpen’s

career and the story of Henry and Charles, is supplied through a chain of oral narratives both direct and indirect that for Quentin create the two worlds in which he lives: the one “peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, [in which he listens] to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times,” and the other, in which he “was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South” (*Absalom* 9). Quentin’s narrative attempt, then, is not simply to discover the meaning of the Sutpen tragedy, but to “map [his] coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in order to tell someone else” who he is (Watson 127).

The balanced structure of “Barn Burning,” *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Light in August* illustrate, in different ways that the oral and the literate each participates as an informing principle for the overall structure of Faulkner’s texts. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the oral appears in the form of interruptions of and flights away from the gridded order of a literate form. Benjy’s section, for instance, is the interruption of an order that has yet to be established. An understanding of the overall structure of *The Sound and the Fury* requires that literate order after the fact, while the arrangement of the narrative threads that make up *Light in August* are juxtaposed according to shifts in narrative time that are themselves also shifts into and out of orality and literacy. In terms of orality and literacy, a patterned structure can also be deduced in *Absalom, Absalom!* Again, the relationship between these ordering principles is again tied to time. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, in terms of the novel’s content, Thomas Sutpen’s story constitutes the book’s literate past while Quentin Compson’s narrative is its oral present.

Such a relationship between story and narrative perhaps accounts for the fact that many readers of *Absalom, Absalom!* think of the novel as “belonging” to Thomas Sutpen. Even Faulkner viewed it in this way. In answer to a student’s question regarding the relationship between it and *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner says

To me [Quentin is] consistent. That he approached the Sutpen family with the same ophthalmia that he approached his own troubles, that he probably never saw anything very clearly, that his was just one of the thirteen ways to look at Sutpen, and his may have been the—one of the most erroneous. Probably his friend McCannon had a much truer picture of Sutpen from what Quentin told him than Quentin himself did . . .

No it’s Sutpen’s story. But then, every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he’s actually telling his biography—that’s all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself. Quentin was still trying to get God to tell him why, in *Absalom, Absalom!* as he was in *The Sound and the Fury*. (*Faulkner in the University* 274-75)

Faulkner’s answer is revealing. He begins by saying that Quentin is a consistent character from one novel to the next. Then he bluntly asserts that *Absalom, Absalom!* is “Sutpen’s” book. Yet, he goes on immediately to say that Quentin is “telling his biography.” Such comments reveal the serpentine relationship in the novel between its story and its narrative. The story that Quentin tells “belongs” to Sutpen in the sense that he is its main character. Yet the narrative that is produced by Quentin and Shreve is the “main

character” of *Absalom, Absalom!* and, so, in this sense the novel belongs to Quentin. What appear, then, to be weaknesses in Faulkner’s own design reveal what the novel takes up as the relation between the telling and the matter of that telling—what Genette calls the differences between *narrative* and *story*³⁴. The central action of Quentin’s story may be the central issue in Faulkner’s terms for the novel itself, the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, but the central action of *Absalom, Absalom!* is Quentin’s attempt through the telling of Sutpen’s story to come to terms with himself.

The difference between these two matters illustrates as well the tension between the literate and the oral. For Sutpen’s story is literate in the sense that it comes out of the past and as *past* it cannot change. Yet because so much of the story is the result of rumor, conjecture, and some admixture of eyewitness account in oral transmission, its “text” is not stable. In this context, literate trace vies with oral ordering to embody the material of the text of *Absalom, Absalom!*. This results in the seeming structural instability of the novel as a whole—and adds to it a curious irony. Sutpen’s story, like Sutpen himself, imposes and interposes itself, as if from nowhere, into Quentin’s attempt to come to terms with the meaning of his own life and the novel’s serpentine order reflects his effort to manufacture from the stuff of someone else’s life meaning for himself.

Quentin’s struggle with the material presented to him by Rosa Coldfield, and by his father’s secondhand accounts, is one of two points of reference from which Quentin may map his relation to the landscape of his world in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Quentin has inherited a history for which he feels he must become responsible. Shreve, his Harvard

³⁴ See Genette’s *Narrative Discourse, An Essay in Method*.

roommate, provides the opportunity to translate such a responsibility into action. Shreve's prompting questions, his half-guesses, his wrong-headed surmises, act to make Quentin's problem clear: Quentin must find some way to come into full possession of what his past and his circumstances have bequeathed him. He must, in a sense, like the man whose story he hears and attempts to tell, manufacture meaning from thin air or from the "faint spidery script not like something impressed upon the paper by a once-living hand but like a shadow cast upon it which had resolved on the paper the instant before he look at it and which might fade, vanish, at any instant while he still read: the dead tongue speaking" of the text (*Absalom* 129). The problem Quentin faces then, in *Absalom, Absalom!* have to do with the differences between the oral and the literate as they appear: the former a tale told by a ghost, the latter "the dead tongue speaking." The novel attempt in Faulkner's text, then, is to combine the oral and the literate narrative in a text that whose medium—like Bon's letter as Judith conceives it—is its message:

a scrap of paper—something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday, . . . (*Absalom* 127)

The relationship between the literate material and the oral material of the novel at first seems to express itself through fractured ordering. As a result, not unlike *The Sound*

and the Fury or *Light in August*, the plot(s) of *Absalom, Absalom!* must be extrapolated from their narrative transmission. For the novel has two plots: the story of Thomas Sutpen as transmitted orally through the narrations of Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve, and the story of the production of a narrative, itself a quest for the meaning of Sutpen's downfall, but also Quentin's attempt to "Tell about the South" or, perhaps more accurately, to tell about himself.

The structure of that narrative as *Absalom, Absalom!* is the combination of those two forms of transmitting meaning in language through time, the oral and the literate. As literate form, the novel freezes upon the page the oral attempt to tell the story. In so doing, the oral is literalized—laid out as upon a grid—for scrutiny and interpretation. Yet the very act of laying out the oral upon the literate grid opens up a space between the text and its understanding, a space between reader and text itself that must be filled with the surmises and half-guesses, the re-creation of interpretation. As Benjamin figured the difference between the oral and the literate, to *tell* about the South is to offer a transitory text that refuses to include its own explanation. But for Quentin to answer Shreve's charge, he must do what Benjamin argues the literate does. He must explain. The difference between the nature of telling and understanding (and explaining) is perhaps ironically figured in *Absalom, Absalom!* in Mr. Compson's relationship to Bon's letter to Judith, the object of his contemplation from Chapters II through IV. Mr. Compson complains that the letter "just doesn't explain," perhaps noting how its "epistolary incompleteness" causes it to function in the text the way Benjamin describes how oral storytelling resists explaining the "moral" it embodies. This underscores the nature of

Quentin's task in coming to an understanding of the text he wishes to tell: he must, like Lena Grove in *Light in August* re-oralize the literate in order to simultaneously tell it and, in doing so, make it his own.

Mr. Compson's interpretation of Bon's letter is not a re-oralization but a translation according to his point-of-view of its meaning and illustrates how the attempt to understand history distorts meaning according to the method of its own investigation. The seemingly imbalanced structure of the novel reflects the distorting nature of Mr. Compson's attempt to use the letter in a way analogous to Faulkner's own attempt, with the Appendix he wrote for *The Sound and the Fury* to stand as a kind of "key to the whole book." Bon's letter surely does not explain—since its intent is not to explain at all. Explanation is not part of the nature either of the oral or the literate expression of meaning. Rather, as Judith seems to intuit, Bon's letter is the form, the embodiment of their relationship—as a "passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, . . . a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday" (*Absalom* 127). Judith's expression compliments a line in Bon's letter to her that signals something important about the meaning that the letter itself embodies but does not explain. Bon writes in the letter that he and Judith "*are included among those who are doomed to live*" (132). But Judith's passing the letter to Grandmother Compson as a gesture, without regard as to whether the letter itself will be read or not, illustrates that these two conceptions of meaning are paradoxically related in *Absalom, Absalom!*: being "doomed to live" means that the message is also its medium as that "something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason

that it can die someday.” Hence, the meaning of Bon’s letter is not contained within it as a literate artifact, a piece of history, but rather as the web of living relations it creates in being transmitted through space and time—first in being delivered to Judith, but then in being released by her through its passing to Grandmother Compson and, ultimately, to Quentin. This passing of Judith’s letter as the embodiment of a meaning that is not at the same time its own explanation, resembles the way that *Absalom, Absalom!* oscillates between oral and literate attempts to contain and express meaning.

Part of the difficulty that Quentin as a narrator faces in coming to terms with the material of Sutpen’s story and its relation to his sense of the South and itself is a matter of organization. He, like Faulkner as a writer, must not only assimilate the story as he receives it—whether orally or literately—but also either discover or produce that arrangement best suited to the expression of meaning. Orally, that task is one that comes as a kind of step in the transmission of language through time. The teller (who is separate from the hearer) tells first, understanding comes after. In literate terms, these two activities happen at the same time—the transmission of language is always already tangled up with the interpretation of its meaning. Hence, the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* reflects orally how Quentin as auditor receives as and considers the information contained in the narrations of Rosa and his father, even as its final organization illustrates a literate arrangement of those narrations into juxtapositions best fitted to reveal meaning. According to orality, as Benjamin pointed out, the story follows a logic that is internal to itself and leaves the explanation to the literate act of interpretation. The novel, however,

conducts transmission and interpretation at the same time, so its form, always an admixture for Faulkner of the oral and the literate, is always also its own explanation.

The book contains nine chapters—an uneven number—and, like *Light in August* (which, unlike *The Sound and the Fury* also contains numbered chapters), this odd number contains one of the keys to understanding its structure. An odd number of chapters provides for a “middle” where an even number does not. An odd number of chapters provides for a consideration of a frame that is threefold with a beginning, middle, and an end. *Absalom* seems to be structured in such a way as to invite an understanding of its formal order to rely on just such a sense of a middle. And the novel offers a clue to its narrative structure (in a way that *Light in August* does not) in the final chapter when Quentin replays in his mind what he had seen at Sutpen’s dilapidated mansion:

. . . it was all the same, there was no difference: waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling, toward the faint light which fell outward from the last door and paused there, saying ‘No. No’ and then ‘Only I must. I have to’ and went in, entered the bare, stale room whose shutters were closed too, where a second lamp burned dimly on a crude table; waking or sleeping it was the same: the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or

sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he
lived:

And you are——-?

Henry Sutpen.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you came home——?

To die. Yes.

To die?

Yes. To die.

And you have been here——?

Four years.

And you are——?

Henry Sutpen. (372-3)

The curious order and repetition of the imagined conversation—so rendered in Quentin's memory of that night as he imagines it (perhaps tells Shreve)—offer a clue to the serpentine order of *Absalom, Absalom!*

The conversation, and the novel, resembles a Möbius Strip. Created by German mathematician August Möbius in the 19th century, a Möbius Strip is a continuous one-sided surface constructed from an elongated rectangle by holding one end fixed, twisting the other end 180 degrees and attaching it to the fixed end. If a Möbius Strip is

constructed from a piece of paper, one can trace a continuous line that appears on both sides of the paper without lifting the writing instrument from the surface, thus connecting the line's beginning with its end. If the two ends are then detached, the line drawn appears on both sides of the piece of paper without a break. The twist in the paper makes this possible.

The other aspect of the Möbius Strip that makes this possible is that it does not connect to anything outside of itself—something that it shares with Quentin Compson's increasingly disturbed psyche. Like the Möbius Strip, both the conversation and *Absalom, Absalom!* turn on themselves in the middle to join that middle to the outer boundaries of the narrative universe. So, just as in *Light in August*, a balanced pattern emerges in *Absalom, Absalom!* that militates against the perception that the structure of the novel is unstable.

Numbering and lettering the questions and responses in the imagined exchange between Quentin and Henry makes the pattern clearer. Quentin utters all the questions. The answers belong to Henry Sutpen. Each repeats himself in a pattern that resembles a Möbius Strip so that the conversation begins where it ends because it twists in the middle. Lettering Quentin's questions and numbering Henry Sutpen's answers reveals the pattern:

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|---|
| | <i>And you are——?</i> | a |
| 1 | <i>Henry Sutpen.</i> | |
| | <i>And you have been here——?</i> | b |
| 2 | <i>Four years.</i> | |

	<i>And you came home—?</i>	c
3	<i>To die. Yes.</i>	
	<i>To die?</i>	3c
3	<i>Yes. To die.</i>	
	<i>And you have been here—?</i>	b
2	<i>Four years.</i>	
	<i>And you are—?</i>	a
1	<i>Henry Sutpen.</i>	

On the left side, Henry's responses are numbered 1, 2, 3, 3, 2, and 1. On the right side, Quentin's questions are labeled a, b, c, 3c, b, a. Quentin's "3c" is so labeled because it is the only one that is a repetition of one of Henry's answers and functions as the precise turn in their conversation. As one can see, the conversation mirrors itself precisely in the middle with Quentin's repeating Henry's answer, "To die" as a question. This is juxtaposed to the only question, also belonging to Quentin, that is *not* a repetition ("And you came home—?"). From here, one may read the questions and answers forward and backward to find that they are palindromic—"To die. Yes. To die? Yes. To die." Such a center, then, constitutes the twist in the middle by which the conversation turns on itself. Quentin's uttering the only repetition of a repetition signals his importance as a kind of order making center for the whole—which is fitting since the entire conversation happens within his imagination.

If we were to extend the conversation *ad infinitum* it would resemble a fractal—endlessly turning on itself in a pattern that with each turn repeats the pattern of the whole

in miniature, thus: the beginning and ending of the pattern, “And you are——? Henry Sutpen,” function as liminal thresholds through which we pass into and out of the mirror-upon-itself middle: “And you have been here——? Four years. And you came home——? To die. Yes. To die? Yes. To die. And you have been here——? Four years.”

The conversation reveals that a sense of *alienation* haunts the entire novel. Sutpen was alienated at the door of the Virginia plantation. His setting aside of his first wife and child alienates his son—setting in motion a design that will tragically intersect with his own. Mr. Compson’s embrace of the alienation of nihilism is one response to the specter of Thomas Sutpen. By contrast, Rosa Coldfield’s outraged and impotent response to Sutpen’s furious attempt to found and build his dynasty reveals it as a kind of ironic and baffling assault against the ways of life in Yoknapatawpha. Rather than coming in the form of progress and change over and against the “old ways,” Sutpen’s “design” is, like the Puritans’ attempt to transplant English culture on American soil in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, an attempt to re-found by brute force of will a culture that has already died. In this sense, Thomas Sutpen’s design holds up a mirror to those in Jefferson, reflecting to them the image of their own failure. *Absalom* is, as a result, a haunted novel. Rosa Coldfield enlists Quentin’s aid in going out to Sutpen’s Hundred at the end of chapter V because “There’s something in that house . . . living hidden in it” (172). But, as the novel reveals, it is not only Sutpen’s place that is haunted. The Jefferson, Mississippi of Quentin’s imagination is populated entirely by ghosts.

Such themes have long been associated not only with Quentin Compson’s character in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but as the reason for his suicide in *The Sound and the*

Fury. Recognition of the importance of alienation as the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* is nothing new. But here, in the conversation as Quentin reiterates it in the last chapter, such a theme takes on a structural shape in miniature that reveals something of the relationship—the organic dependency—between the theme of the novel and its structure. And, as will become clear by the end of the novel, it also answers, to some extent, Cowley’s complaint that *Absalom, Absalom!* shifts its emphasis from “Colonel Sutpen’s design” to “incest and miscegenation.”

The conversation between Quentin and Shreve that forms the frame for the whole novel is oral, ostensibly taking place at Harvard. The first chapters of the novel, though they are in the literate form and framed in third person semi-omniscient point of view, actually reside in Quentin’s memory and form the basis of the oral conversation with Shreve at the end of the novel—so, rather than being literate, it is more accurate to see them as virtually literate. The italicized portions that interrupt the flow of the virtually literate portions of the texts are themselves the literate stuff around and upon and through which the oral narrative travels. If the novel really is structured like a Möbius Strip, then, the oral is the paper and the literate is the line traced upon it—not the other way around.

The novel, chapter by chapter, repeats in much the same way such a pattern if we plot the relation between narrators and shifts in time. Except for the middle chapter, chapter V, each of the nine chapters begins grounded in Quentin’s present—either by recourse to dates or by invocation of the word “now.”³⁵ There are two “nows” of

³⁵Chapters I through IV move between the Summer of 1909 and September of the same year in terms of the “now” of the telling; the matter of the telling runs from 1861 to Quentin and Miss Coldfield’s trip out to Sutpen’s Hundred in September of 1909.

Absalom, Absalom!: the now of 1909 Jefferson Mississippi (Chapters I-IV) and the now of Quentin and Shreve's dorm room at Harvard in the winter of 1910 (Chapters VI-IX). Chapter V functions to "twist" the novel on itself, effectively relating the beginning and ending of the novel to each other. Other important periods must be distinguished from each other either by being associated with the *narrative* (the stuff of oral "now") or the *story* (Sutpen's story, the literate past). The *telling* is divided between Quentin's experience with Rosa Coldfield and his listening to his father's stories of Quentin's grandfather's association with Thomas Sutpen. These two lines of discourse intersect each other, of course, with the details of the lives of Thomas Sutpen, Ellen Coldfield, and the Sutpen children (bastard or otherwise). The shifts in the novel are signaled either by the appearance of dates or by the weather. Weather, as elsewhere in Faulkner's fiction, is nearly always associated with the fluidity of the passage of the moment—hence, descriptions of the weather tend to cluster around sections of the novel devoted to the narrative, rather than to the story. If weather is to be seen as a kind of sign of the present, we may understand that, as a device of atmosphere, it functions as a cocoon for the past—just as Faulkner would describe the present to function as a *liminal* boundary; that is, as that passage of time whose experience gives a living texture to the past by overlapping, obscuring the difference between, joining in a kind of unending flow, the past with the present. Quentin's sense of this undivided dividedness is paramount to his

Chapter V is almost entirely the repetition of Miss Coldfield's narration of events leading up to and following Thomas Sutpen's death in 1869. This chapter ends before its central "event," the meeting of Henry Sutpen at the house, can happen. It is followed (interrupted) by Chapters VI through IX, which shift the telling to January 1910, and the location from Jefferson to Harvard.

struggle with the meaning of the story he listens to and tells and is exhibited in the passage quoted above with his feeling that “. . . it was all the same, there was no difference: waking or sleeping . . . waking or sleeping it was all the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived” (*Absalom* 372-3).

Such a relationship, too, offers an analogue for the relationship between narrative and story, between oral and literate: that is, the narrative is devoted rather simply to Quentin’s efforts to come to terms with what he saw on that night when he rode out to Sutpen’s Hundred with Rosa Coldfield in the summer of 1909, while the story is devoted to Sutpen’s design, his efforts to see it to perfection, its failure and his family’s disastrous demise. “Story” represents that past to which Quentin is linked but for which he also has yet to create a meaning in the connection; “narrative” represents his attempt to bridge the gap between that story and himself. In short, story = literate past; narrative = oral present; the novel’s form is the organic relationship between the two and is reflected in its structure.

The possibility that “it” could be the “same forever as long as he lived” plagues Quentin in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. For him, *the* most important aspect of life is the strength of will that it takes to make a difference, to leave an indelible mark, to overcome the forces of life such that one may claim to have *lived* in the world rather than to have been the victim of fate and circumstance. Quentin is not an eyewitness to the life of which he attempts to make sense. This circumstance, however, does not shield him from the connection he feels not only to Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen, but to Thomas Sutpen as well. Indeed, Quentin’s outlook is marked in both *The*

Sound and the Fury and *Absalom, Absalom!*, by his connection with the dead: “. . . the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, . . . and . . . Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South . . .” (*Absalom* 9).

Hyatt Waggoner, in his 1959 *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World* sets out the order of the book according to chapters, primary narrators, and subject matter in an effort to show (quite briefly) how the “total form of the novel implies the ultimate reason for the failure of Sutpen’s design”—namely, according to Waggoner, Sutpen’s propensity to treat people “as things.” Ultimately, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, “the form . . . says that reality is unknowable in Sutpen’s way, by weighing, measuring, and calculating. It says that without an ‘unscientific’ act of imagination and even of faith—like Shreve’s and Quentin’s faith in Bon—we cannot know the things most worth knowing” (183).

Such an explanation comports with a view of form as reflective of meaning so long as the novel belongs, as Faulkner maintained, to Thomas Sutpen. But because the novel does not belong to Sutpen alone, as Faulkner admits when he says that any character that speaks is always telling “his own biography,” its structure also reveals what is at the heart of Sutpen’s failure. Had the novel been in the form of Sutpen’s narrating his own tale—telling it, say, to Colonel Compson—then perhaps its structure would offer a clue to the mystery Sutpen seeks in asking, “Where did I make the mistake in [the design]?” But not being able to tell is not at the heart of Sutpen’s failure (for Sutpen), and so, ironically, is perhaps the root of that failure after all.

Faulkner has quite deliberately not put the novel into Thomas Sutpen's mouth. One is hard pressed to think of Thomas Sutpen sitting still long enough to tell so much. Faulkner has, however, filtered nearly the entire novel through Quentin's consciousness—even if he has other major narrators speaking through it. Except for Shreve's present-time interjected questions and surmises, Quentin's consciousness is the one through which all narrative strands must be filtered. The sections of the novel given to Rosa Coldfield happen in Quentin's memory. Except for the letter announcing Rosa Coldfield's death, the sections of the novel given to Mr. Compson happen in Quentin's memory. Sections of the novel that deal with Colonel Compson's narration are filtered through Mr. Compson but are located in Quentin's memory. Passages that offer Sutpen's own musings, again, come through Quentin's grandfather, to his father, and are located in Quentin's memory. Finally, interjections, half-mocking guesses, and interpretations uttered by Quentin's roommate, Shreve McCannon, are (sometimes mangled) *repetitions* of things that have already been narrated by Quentin himself.

So, Waggoner's untangling of the narrative is helpful in revealing something more than the root of Sutpen's failure. It reveals the connection between the literate past and the oral present. In addition, it reveals the relation between Sutpen's story and the Quentin's narrative as the organically unified source(s) for the meaning of a novel. And for Quentin, it is not merely the story about someone or something, but the story about someone or something and its meaning *for* someone that is important.

As Waggoner explains, in the “absence of chronologically related plot as the controlling factor, the relations between points of view govern the order of the chapters. Chapter One is Miss Rosa’s . . .

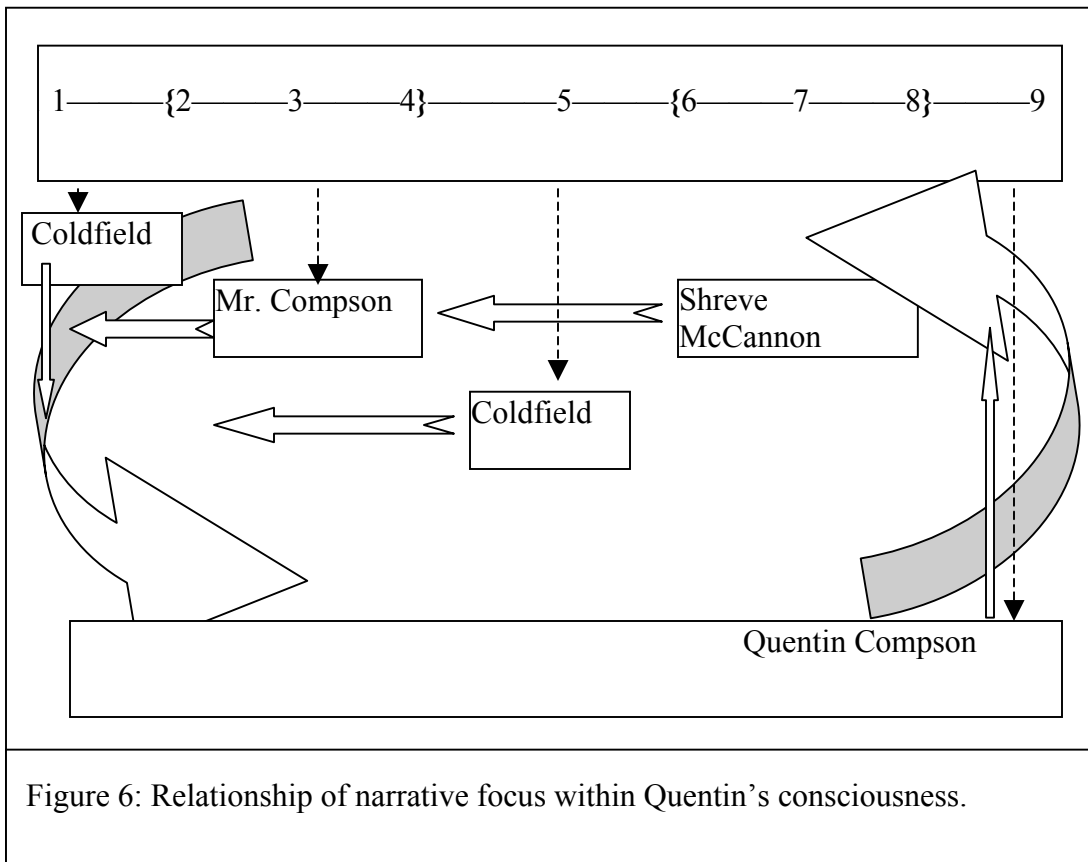
The next three chapters are Quentin’s father’s . . . Chapter Five is Miss Rosa’s again . . . Chapter Six is Shreve’s retelling of what Quentin has told him . . . Chapter Seven gives us Sutpen’s story, . . . as he told it to Quentin’s grandfather—and as grandfather told it to father and father told it to Quentin and Quentin told it to Shreve . . . Chapter Eight is Bon’s chapter, his story (and Henry’s, but chiefly his) as interpreted sympathetically by Shreve and Quentin . . . Chapter nine presents what might be called a general perspective on the whole tale. We are beyond the uniquely biased views of those who were closest to Sutpen [and] . . . Quentin and Shreve come into the foreground of the picture explicitly as narrators. (178-81)

The “relations between points of view,” however, mirror shifts between material in the novel that is either oral or literate. As the diagram following illustrates, *Absalom, Absalom!* Follows a structure that, like the conversation appearing in chapter IX between Quentin and Henry, is palindromic. Just as Stephen Ross discovered the importance of the insertion in “The Bear” of Part 4 to be crucial to an understanding of *Go Down, Moses* (as will be discussed), the juxtaposition of narrative threads as they appear in the order of narrative blocks contained in and between chapters shows the novel’s structure to be a matter of the relationship between the oral and the literate. Though the diagram

does not reflect the consideration of Bon's letter as one of the "fixed" points of authority for the boundaries of the narrative, it should be noted that the apparently unbalanced structure of the novel mirrors the consideration of this textual (and apparently literately "fixed point") in the narrative.

As Watson points out, Bon's letter is the "point of reference for Mr. Compson's narrative in Chapters II, III, and IV," (115) and is itself transcribed at the end of Chapter IV. Mr. Compson's contemplation of Bon's letter mirrors Quentin's contemplation of Mr. Compson's letter to him relating the matter of Rosa Coldfield's death in chapters VI through IX. Roughly speaking then the narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* reflects the relationship between the differing principles of order of the oral and the literate. Mr. Compson treats Bon's letter as if it is an oral transmission in the first half of the novel in the sense that it may be questioned by its "auditor" with some expectation of answer—though this expectation is frustrated by the literate silence of Bon's text. Quentin's contemplation of his father's letter in the second half of the novel reflects (literally) Mr. Compson's misunderstanding of the nature of Bon's letter in his (Quentin's) resistance to his father's imposition of interpretation upon expression in the transmission of language through time. Mr. Compson's oral transmission of the story to Quentin—whether spoken or written—is always an imposition of a literate interpretation upon the linguistic material that is transmitted. Hence, Mr. Compson's narration is always a distortion. Quentin's task is to extricate himself—symbolically figured in his spatial and geographical separation from the South in attempting the reconstruction of history from the vantage point of Harvard—from the distorting effects of his father's being too close to the material of his

telling. At the same time, Quentin must distance himself from the collapsing of space and time of Rosa Coldfield’s oral narration, which resides in his memory and, as such, is present to him. Hence, the organization of the narrative threads of *Absalom, Absalom!* reflects the ways in which the oral and the literate vie with each other to structure a text even as they reveal how the combination produces a balanced order that embodies medium *as* message.



For simplicity’s sake, chapters two through four and six through eight are bracketed in the diagram and given to “Mr. Compson” and “Shreve McCannon,” respectively. These designations, however, are to be understood to include substantial portions of narration from the points of view of both Quentin’s Grandfather, Colonel

Compson, Thomas Sutpen himself, and, in the later chapters, Charles Bon. As Waggoner's description makes clear, these latter characters are the sources of much of the narration in these sections of the novel. It must be stressed, however, the novel itself makes obvious that whatever words spoken by any of the Sutpens (including not only Thomas Sutpen, but his second wife, Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, their legitimate children Judith and Henry, as well as Charles Bon and in some cases Clytemnestra) are given to them by others and in no cases can with certainty be accepted as coming directly from their mouths. That is, the only first person speakers in the novel are Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Shreve McCannon, and Quentin Compson. As has been mentioned, there is third person narration, but it is embedded and devoted to descriptions of reality as experienced by Quentin Compson alone and appears only in sections of the book that belong to Quentin's memory. None of the primary characters from the story being told are allowed to speak solely through first person narrative.

The above diagram suggests some interesting relationships among points of view. The chapters given to Rosa Coldfield (one and five) constitute the beginning and middle of the novel. These two chapters are also heavily dependent upon and associated with Quentin's experience of the story of Sutpen's rise and fall as he learned it from the novel's only living oral eyewitness. Chapters two through four are dependent upon the flip side of Quentin's experience of Sutpen's story and are correspondingly dependent upon what he learns from his father. As many critics have noted, Mr. Compson's version of Sutpen's appearance in Jefferson is more distant and logical—less hysterical—than Rosa Coldfield's. Chapters six through eight, designated in the diagram to belong to

Shreve McCannon, really represent the second half of the novel if we see that the first half has been devoted to two conflicting views of the principal character (chapters one through four), with a climactic middle chapter given to the only living eye-witness, followed by the announcement of her death (ironically in a letter from her chief narrative adversary, Mr. Compson, in the beginning of chapter six) which itself functions to initiate a re-capitulation of everything so far and makes possible a working through of the material about Charles Bon, Judith and Henry Sutpen, and, finally, setting up another climax: Quentin's imaginative revelation, in chapter nine, of what he saw that night when he traveled out to Sutpen's Hundred with Rosa Coldfield. To tangle matters a little more, the matter toward which Quentin's narration moves in chapter nine is a re-visiting of the matter at the center of Rosa Coldfield's narration in chapter five so close and palpable that Quentin can "taste the dust. Even now, with the chill pure weight of the snow-breathed New England air on his face, he could taste and feel the dust of that breathless (rather, furnace-breathed) Mississippi September night" (*Absalom* 362).

One begins to see, then, how finely balanced *Absalom, Absalom!* actually is. Like the *microstructure* (to take some liberty with Genette's term here) of the conversation between Quentin and Henry at the end of chapter nine, the novel's outer edges (chapters one and nine) work as a kind of liminal bridge to its center (chapter five) and the Möbius Strip analogy works for the structure of the entire novel—with the mid-sections of either half (chapters two through four and chapters six through eight) balancing each other in being associated with the novel's two intermediary narrators—Mr. Compson and Shreve McCannon. These two narrators resemble each other in that each must rely upon

someone closer still to the story for whatever information he possesses about Sutpen. Each (for different reasons) also distorts that information in recasting it. In their distance from the story at hand, Mr. Compson and Shreve McCannon mirror each other just as Rosa Coldfield (closest Mississippian resident to the matter of the story) mirrors Quentin Compson (most removed Mississippi native). Rosa Coldfield and Quentin also share intimately one crucial aspect of the story with which each is involved—and that connection is the heart of chapters five and nine—the trip out to Sutpen’s Hundred to satisfy Rosa Coldfield’s suspicions, articulated (significantly) at the end of chapter five:

‘There’s something in that house.’

‘In that house? It’s Clytie. Dont she——.’

‘No. Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living hidden in that house.’ (*Absalom* 172)

Absalom, Absalom! contains at its heart a dual action—that of telling and that of taking a journey. Viewed in this way, it is obvious that from the point of view of Quentin, the only action he undertakes is to ride out to Sutpen’s Hundred with Rosa Coldfield in the summer of 1909. We have access to this action only through the novel’s narrative present, at Harvard during the winter of 1909. Yet, in order for the one action to have meaning the other action must take place. For Quentin to understand (and for us to appreciate) what he saw that summer night in 1909, the entire narrative action must take place.

In terms of the oral and literate shifts in the novel, it must be admitted that the novel is, like Benjy’s section in *The Sound and the Fury*, almost entirely ordered orally.

Except for the letter that Mr. Compson gives to Quentin in Chapter VI, as well as the one that he reads at the end of the novel, (in addition to bracketed and italicized speech or thought), *Absalom, Absalom!* is perhaps Faulkner's most oral novel. Even Charles Bon's epistolarily incomplete textual utterance, in many ways as a result of the lack of date, salutation and signature, acts as a kind of oral utterance. But its orality, unlike that *Go Down, Moses*, and the entirety of *The Reivers*, is different from what we may have come to expect. The oral, as has been argued, orders reality holistically, immanently, and comically. Again, to call the oral comic is to speak of its open-endedness, its suggestion of possibility, and its underscoring of human freedom and the integral relationship in the present between the past and the future. The oral imagination orders linguistic reality according to what is most significant to the speaker in the moment of telling, rather than to the order of the matter of the telling in chronological, literate, time. As a result, oral narration is spherical and, as *Absalom, Absalom!* illustrates, rather like the Möbius strip—twisted in the middle so as to join beginning and end together as the formal boundaries for structural order.

In Faulkner's novels, oral narration is most affected by the circumstances of the narrator in his or her relation to the present moment and that moment's concomitant relation to the material narrated. In this sense, the narrative of Faulkner's novels, as Gray pointed out, is analogous to the indeterminacy of relativity. Everything depends upon one's point of view. Orality in the novel appears differently than it does in, say, the epic poem. According to that earlier form, there is implied no greater relation between narrator and story than exists between the story and its audience in that moment. Narrator

and audience, for the epic, are the same. As a result, the nature of the story told orally stands unaffected by its relationship to its teller (except, of course, in that teller's selection of repeated phrases and order). It is not until the appearance of the novel per se (Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* stand as early examples), that the relationship between the narrator and the story begins to be problematized, linking the nature of the relationship between the narrator and story in the novel more to that which exists between the speaker and the poem in lyric poetry, rather than to similar relationships in epic poetry or tragic drama. Perhaps this explains, then, the early association between the novel and the comic, since comic drama from its earliest appearance problematized the relation between the story and its telling in a way not present in the epic poem or tragic drama.³⁶

If we observe what information we receive from the novel's first half—chapters I through IV—and in what order, we begin to experience the making of sense of Thomas Sutpen's story from Quentin's point of view. Even if the order in which we receive the information is not ultimately a true reflection of the order in which Quentin himself received it, it is reflective of the imaginative attempt to reconstruct history even as that history is told. The narrative ordering of materials reflects the dual action of telling and understanding. The action of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not Sutpen's life but the telling of that life. Obviously, Faulkner expresses with such an arrangement that the meaning of human

³⁶ One early, obvious, example may be found in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. Similarly, the earliest lyric poetry is often spoken in the first person—collapsing the difference between speaker and audience in relation to the poem in a way that does not apply to either epic poetry or tragic drama—in which the difference between speaker, poem/drama, and audience is strictly regulated.

life is to be found not ultimately in its experience (Benjy's section of *The Sound and the Fury*) but in its experience when connected to its expression as story. In addition, *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals the meaning-making nature of *telling* in a novel that combines the seemingly opposed paradigmatic laws of oral and literate imagination. The literate passages in the novel, those in which third person omniscient point of view is present, are an oral construct in Quentin's mind. This perhaps explains his ultimate failure in coming to terms with the material of his narrative, since as construct, Quentin remains ever at one remove from the objective reality he wishes to connect with. This is further underscored by the embedding of the seemingly oral flights from those literate sections (the italicized passages that seem to bring the reader into direct contact with the Sutpen material). In the end, the story and the narrative fail to connect to each other because of the Möbius Strip-like quality of each. The Möbius Strip "works" because it is connected to nothing but itself. But it's a trick. And so too is the story and the narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* There is no essential relationship between the paper and the line drawn on a Möbius Strip. Paper is still connected only to paper, line only to line—in *Absalom*, Quentin's oral present connects to itself while Sutpen's literate past does the same.

Thomas Sutpen's story is actually literally expressed very early in the novel:

*It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—
Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the
land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore
violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And*

married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only—(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa says—(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson). Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (9)

As is apparent throughout the novel, however, the foregoing passage is rendered as raw, untranslated semi-unconscious thought even while it constitutes a literate rendering of the order of materials in the novel (in that the events narrated are in chronological order). Faulkner's combination of the oral and the literate here is ironic. Under normal literate terms, the passage ought not to call attention to its incomplete and fragmentary nature. Faulkner subsumes the literate into the oral to suggest the impossibility of expressing meaning through one or the other mode simply. Meaning ultimately must come from the combination of the two. The overall structure of the novel, along with its apparent instability, suggests the inability of orality to express adequately the meaning that is at the core of both Thomas Sutpen's and Quentin's stories. At the same time, however, the exquisite order and balance revealed in the ordering of the overall structure show how form and content combine, how the oral and the literate work together, to render a meaning that is available to the reader even if it is not available to its chief narrator.

The structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* reflects a struggle between the oral present and the literate past that works itself out through the devices of making a main character

the narrator of the story of another (non-present) character, thus subsuming the frozen literate form within the living oral paradigm. The teller(s) of his story must breathe whatever life there is for the story of Thomas Sutpen into it. Quentin's task is to re-oralize the literate—even when the material is transmitted by oral means. As the beginning of the novel makes clear, these tellers in some sense are among the dead. And this, then, becomes both the paradox and the key to unlocking the mystery of this novel: it is for the living to breath life into the dead past, completing for it whatever meaning it is to have after the fact of its own conclusion. The form of Thomas Sutpen's failure is his impatience. Charles Bon's letter is the trace and embodiment of his love for Judith, important and "included among those who are doomed to live" precisely because it is, for Judith, a "something that might make a mark on something that *was* once for the reason that it can die someday" (*Absalom* 127). Thomas Sutpen would have that meaning before the central action of his story is complete. So, his impatience leads to that impiousness that exacerbates Rosa Coldfield and confirms Mr. Compson's nihilism, but which neither, without the help of Quentin and Shreve can express.

If we return to the imagined conversation between Quentin Compson and Henry Sutpen on the night that Quentin rides out to Sutpen's Hundred to discover what is "living hidden" there, we see how the macrostructure of the novel confirms both the relationship between the oral and the literate as principles of order for *Absalom, Absalom!* and how the resulting structure underpins the novel's theme of alienation. The imagined conversation does not appear in the text until the end—but forms the completion of an action which was arrested at the end of the fulcral chapter V. Hence, the Möbius twist is

between that middle chapter and the end of the novel, effectively closing the structure upon itself and insuring the impossibility of any closure for Quentin in terms of meaning, since the surface of this structure is all horizon.

The two questions that function to “twist” the conversation—“And you came home——?” and “To die?”—reveal what is at the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!*, namely, the paradoxical relationship between going home and death. In a sense, the two thematically link the paramount issues of the text: what lies at the mysterious heart of *alienation*, the sense of being a stranger in one’s own home, the sense of horror that the fate of one’s life is to die, the knowledge, finally, that “coming home” means leaving life. Quentin’s narrative career in *Absalom* ends neither in tragic finality nor in comic resolution but in modernist ironic confusion. And this because Quentin, like Thomas Sutpen, cannot be his own all in all. As a result, *Absalom, Absalom!* must end in ambiguity. To Shreve’s final question, Quentin can only answer in the negative, “I don’t hate the south! I don’t. I don’t hate it. I don’t! I don’t!” (*Absalom* 378). Quentin can neither embrace nor deny his connection to the South. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the novel of the disjunction between the lived and the told, between the oral and the literate, in which the lived is lived without telling and the told is told without living, dooming all to a separation between what belongs to ghosts and what belongs to the bodies to which those ghosts had once been souls. More simply put, *Absalom, Absalom!* is about the failure of the soul to re-member the body—which itself is a failure to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, between story and narrative. So, if Quentin’s oral present, the

narrative, is the paper forming the surface of a Möbius Strip, then Thomas Sutpen's story is nothing more than a literate phantom trace that marks its surface but does not penetrate.

CHAPTER SIX—GO DOWN, MOSES: ORAL/LITERATE MEMORY

Go Down, Moses is not regarded by some as a novel at all. In the Appendices of *Who's Who in Faulkner*, Margaret Patricia Ford and Suzanne Kincaid list *Go Down, Moses* among “Collections” rather than novels. Many of its chapters were published independently as short stories.³⁷ Yet Faulkner thought of the book as a novel, indicating that a mistake was made in publishing “The Bear” separately as a short story, when some material that made it confusing was included that ought to have been, in Faulkner’s opinion, excised: “‘The Bear’ was a part of a novel. That novel was—happened to be composed of more or less complete stories, but it was held together by one family, the Negro and the white

³⁷ After the initial publication of *Go Down, Moses* in 1942, “The Bear” and “The Old People” were published as part of a collection called *Big Woods*, in 1955. Additionally, both “The Old People” and “Pantaloons in Black” had already been published separately in 1940; “Go Down, Moses,” had been published in 1941; “The Bear” and “Delta Autumn,” in 1942. Only “Was” and “The Fire and the Hearth,” were released exclusively as a part of *Go Down, Moses*, the novel (*Who's Who*, 115-8).

phase of the same family, same people. ‘The Bear’ was just a part of that—of a novel” (*Faulkner in the University* 4). Indeed, when *Go Down, Moses* is viewed as a novel the matter in question here becomes very important, as will be seen.

While critical reception of “The Bear” has been generally favorable, attitudes toward the novel are marked by a general recognition that it marks a decided turn in Faulkner’s style. Daniel Singal, citing Andre Bleikasten, sums up the general attitude in *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*. He writes that, as of 1940-41, “since the mid-1920’s he had published thirteen novels—almost a book a year. In the remaining two decades of his life there would only be seven book length-titles, of which *The Mansion* alone can compare with his earlier work in terms of artistic merit, and then only near the bottom of the range Most striking of all, a very different kind of tone began to appear in his texts” (Singal 256). Singal’s diagnostic argues that Faulkner’s chronic alcoholism culminated in an acute incident during a hunting party in rural Mississippi in November of 1940 that brought him close to death and quite possibly precipitated a particular brain injury that resulted in the loss of his modernist prowess as a writer.³⁸ *Go Down, Moses*, written during this period, resembles for Singal a book written by a single author “at different stages” of his career. “Part of the time brilliant, but in places conspicuously flawed,” the novel documents the alcoholic incident as the watershed moment and turn in Faulkner’s career (261-2).

³⁸ Singal’s full argument opines that absent the modernist Faulkner, the “Victorian Faulkner” re-exerted its control over his writing and the late novels reflect this in their nineteenth-century tone and moralistic attitude.

Arguing that *Go Down, Moses* is more a “short story-cycle” than a novel, R.C. Fedderson claims that during the period during in which the work was produced Faulkner, among other modernist novelists, “derived a powerful sense of continuity from the artistic impulse itself, that is, aesthetic coherence and unity” in which the reader experiences from such “integrated collections” that the “whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Fallon & Fedderson, et al., xxvi). Fedderson’s argument is that the short-story cycle offered a form according to which modernist fragmentation yields to the readers’ sense of “patterns and themes” that lurk below the surface and between the individual narratives, suggesting an aesthetically unified whole.³⁹

In a work dedicated to examining those male narrators who most exemplify what Judith Lockyer calls Faulkner’s “career-long exploration of what language can and cannot achieve,” she describes *Go Down, Moses* as among those later works “troubled” by Faulkner’s “desire to encompass all, to have his words stand free of all the altering presence of the other . . . a novelist who struggles with the lure of the absolute word” (*Ordered by Words*, ix, 120). So, where Singal theorizes that the rise of the moralist in Faulkner late in his career is the result of a physiological condition brought on by alcoholism, Lockyer argues that, even

³⁹ The phrase “patterns and themes” Fedderson quotes from a work by Robert Luscher called “The Pulse of *Bloodline*,” from *Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, (Ed. David C. Estes: Athens, U of GA P, 1994: 62-88).

though it fails, the late style represents something that has been nascent in Faulkner's writing from the beginning.⁴⁰

As with Faulkner's earlier major works, the difficulty presented to the reader by *Go Down, Moses* is rooted in its seemingly unstable form as well as its apparently disjointed theme(s). Like especially *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem* (see *The Wild Palms*), *Go Down, Moses* juxtaposes (at least) two distinct thematic threads, scattered among seven individual stories. As Singal points out, after reviewing the order in which the several parts were worked on, revised, culled together, and then sent to print in mid-December of 1941, *Go Down, Moses* seems initially to have been a contemplation of race in the south that was hijacked by the story of Ike McCaslin's coming of age and his communion with nature in "The Bear," and his repudiation of his birthright as a result.

Singal argues that Faulkner's Ike McCaslin in "The Bear" is an "Adam prepared" by the careful tutelage of Sam Fathers, "for the Fall." Over and against this Ike, however, Singal argues, one must explain the "shrill, pathetic, backward looking old man of 'Delta Autumn,' that superannuated Adam who had stubbornly based his existence on his outmoded memory of the Garden." As he put *Go Down, Moses* together, Faulkner "needed not only to address this vital issue of continuity within Ike's story but simultaneously to shore up the

⁴⁰ Indeed, Lockyer's work traces the tendency from Horace Benbow, through Quentin Compson, the narrative of both *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*, to the narrative careers of Ike McCaslin and Gavin Stevens, connecting them finally to Faulkner's desire to connect his private attempts at craft with his public sense of the role of the poet in civilization, as exemplified by his Nobel Prize Speech.

contrapuntal structure of the novel as a whole” (Singal 280). Singal’s study of the pre-publication data of *Go Down, Moses*, suggests that Faulkner’s remedy for this was to write section 4 of “The Bear” in which Ike and his cousin Cass Edmonds discuss Ike’s repudiation of his legacy. In the end, Singal argues, the section is so different from anything Faulkner had written before that it fails either to connect the two “Adams” or to balance the overall structure of *Go Down, Moses*. Singal’s analysis is correct in identifying Ike McCaslin’s character as the key to the novel’s theme and structure. His method and thesis—that of the “Victorian” Faulkner attempting to re-exert its creative pre-eminence against Faulkner’s weakened modernist tendencies—obscures, however, some of the insights revealed by his analysis of the shaping of the text of *Go Down, Moses*.

Stephen Ross contends that part 4 of “The Bear” turns the “collection of stories in *Go Down, Moses* into a *psychic* text” (*Fiction’s Inexhaustible Voice*, 157). The section not only reflects Ike’s moral education, Ross argues, it “represents his consciousness.” For Ross, Faulkner’s achievement is not only in explaining “themes inherent in the novel’s other narratives” and in dramatizing “attempts to articulate [their] significance,” but in subordinating those concerns to the “textual representation of Ike’s consciousness,” illustrating “not a falling off of Faulkner’s art but rather one of his more radical and arguably successful experiments in psychic voice” (158). Ross sees this success in terms of part 4’s being a representation of consciousness as “parenthetical text contained within a larger discourse . . . *inserted*—rather than added on . . .” He goes on:

As part 4 is itself bracketed by the rest of “The Bear” (and “The Bear” by the rest of *Go Down, Moses*), so its own structure builds on parenthetical insertions. The pages dealing with the ledgers interrupt the debate between Ike and Cass . . . [and] the ledgers in their turn are interrupted by a parenthetical story Like sets of brackets, the various discourses of *Go Down, Moses* surround and zero in on Ike’s central discovery. (158)

The schematic that Ross produces illustrates the nesting of parenthetical insertions moving from left to right, from *Go Down, Moses* (the novel), “The Bear”, part 4, the debate, and through the ledgers toward the “zero set” in the middle of “Ike’s central discovery,” represented for Ross as the psychic voice of Ike’s consciousness before continuing through the bracketed narrations in reverse order from the ledgers outward through the debate, part 4, “The Bear” to *Go Down, Moses*. And while points out that short “parenthetical interruptions in speech” are possible, “lengthy interruptions require written embodiment” (158).

So, Ross’s reading suggests, successfully I think, that the position of the zero set—the representation in the text of the psychic voice of Ike’s conscious insight into the meaning of the ledgers and their relationship to the whole McCaslin history—in the center of the *novel* (as opposed to a collection of discrete narratives), underscores how structure itself reinforces an interpretation of a text. Furthermore, Ross’s insight seems to underscore Faulkner’s own sense that some novels gain from an arrangement of their narrative blocks, “like

dressing a showcase window” (*Faulkner in the University* 45). Faulkner may have felt that *adding on* the 1945 Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* made all of its narrative blocks fall into place, but his re-arrangement of the narrative blocks of *Light in August* and the “insertion” of part 4 into “The Bear” indicate a development in his understanding about the best juxtaposition of the “pieces” of those novels that did not, like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses* “follow a simple direct line such as a story of adventure” (45).

The nesting of the bracketed narratives that Ross identifies falls precisely into the order suggested by the diagrammatic map produced according to orality and literacy to illustrate how *Go Down, Moses* oscillates between the oral and the literate as organizing principles for its narrative strands. I would by no means suggest a one-to-one correlation between the scheme that Ross has produced to illustrate Faulkner’s successful representation in *Go Down, Moses* of psychic voice with my oral/literate paradigm for the novel, but would note the structural parallels between the two. Ross argues that the pattern he sees “requires that each inserted text in some way differentiate itself from the texts that contain it, or that it contains” (159). Ross explains these differentiations in terms of the way that Faulkner’s text distinguishes narrative voice through graphic markers, their lack, “syntactical and textual features,” and the addition or deletion of “typographical signs.” While I do not dispute his view, I would argue that the overall structure may be seen in terms of shift between oral and literate modes as Ike attempts to

come to terms with the meaning of the ledgers and their relation to the articulation he seeks as relation of part to whole. This does not merely reflect the text's attempt to produce an arrangement the whole of which is greater than the sum of its parts, but Ike's own attempt understand himself as one part of that human recording that is *Go Down, Moses*. In terms of orality and literacy, Ross's four legitimate registers of voice represent the way that a *literate* text displays and represents orality as voice.

As in Faulkner's earlier works, then, orality and literacy figure prominently in an explanation of the structure and story of *Go Down, Moses*. In thematic terms, each individual story relates to the others through the (thematically) central section of the novel, "The Bear." Each, in its turn, also offers a different illustration of the relationship between orality and literacy as the key to the structure of the whole. And in this novel, that relationship is in racial terms. On the one side, what Singal calls the theme of "interracial miscomprehension" underpins "The Fire and the Hearth," and "Pantaloons in Black," which Singal calls the book's "thematic centerpiece" (266)—and "Go Down, Moses," the final chapter in the novel. Not only are these stories linked by their concentration on race, but, as Singal points out, each also features a burial as a prominent aspect of its story.

On the other side are Faulkner's other themes, the hunt and the vanishing wilderness. These stories are dominated by "The Bear" and include, according to Singal, the remaining chapters, "The Old People," "Delta Autumn," and

(apparently) “Was.”⁴¹ They are linked in their having to do with some aspect of the hunt or with the wilderness or both. Singal mentions that a portion of “Delta Autumn” is devoted to the theme of race, but that that theme is overwhelmed by Ike’s “rambling, racist screed” against “the destruction of the wilderness through capitalist greed” (276).

When the sections of *Go Down, Moses* are considered with these themes in mind in the order in which they appear in the published work,⁴² a different picture emerges about the contrapuntal structure of the novel. As it turns out, the individual stories do not set up contrapuntally as they build upon each other by a kind of thematic accretion that oscillates between orality and literacy. When one looks at those aspects of orality and literacy that underpin each of the sections and considers that they intersect *through* “The Bear” in the material that Faulkner said that he wished had been excised when it was published as a short story (*Faulkner in the University*, 3-4), then the balanced structure begins to appear.

The novel begins with the story “Was,” which has to do with the twin McCaslins, Uncles Buck and Buddy, and is historically the one most remote from the “present.” “Was” chronicles the twins’ attempt to retrieve a runaway “slave” (here bracketed because of their anti-slavery notions), Tomey’s Turl: an attempt

⁴¹ Singal spends most of his analysis on “The Fire and the Hearth,” “Pantaloon in Black,” “The Bear” and “Go Down, Moses,” though in the order in which they were written, not in the order in which they were published. Less attention is paid to “Delta Autumn” and “The Old People” but these stories are described in general terms, though no analysis of their text takes place. Curiously, Singal does not write about “Was” at all.

⁴² Singal treats them according to the order of their production.

not so much to retrieve “property” as to avoid marrying Sophinsiba Beauchamp. Both themes of race and the hunt are present in this story, though the hunt here (like the burial in “The Fire and the Hearth”) is treated ironically. “Pantaloon in Black” follows and is the heart-wrenching story of the loss of Rider’s wife and his tragic lynching. As Singal rightly argues, this story brings into stark relief the differences between black experience and white misperception, underscored by Faulkner’s ceding the narrative to a white couple in the end and reducing the narrative of Rider’s pathos to the level of racist gossip. This story is followed by “The Old People,” the first story in *Go Down, Moses* that concentrates on the hunt and the rape of the land in modern times. This story introduces Ike McCaslin as a boy and tells the story of his tutelage and initiation into the sacred world of nature through the ritual hunt. As such, it is the connection between *Go Down, Moses* and that other forgotten and invisible people, the native Americans, whose relationship to the McCaslin line functions as an important connection in Ike’s repudiation of his inheritance later in the novel. Importantly, too, Sam Fathers’ pedigree includes both black and Native American ancestry while Sam’s negotiation of the white world represented in the hunt figures to connect all of the threads to Ike’s initiation and maturation. The centerpiece of the novel follows next, in “The Bear,” which continues the story of the sacred hunt and the culmination of Ike’s education by Sam Fathers in the killing of Old Ben, the trap-footed symbol not only of nature, but the white man’s alienation from it.

“The Bear” is followed by “Delta Autumn,” which brings the theme of race and miscegenation back to the fore. With “The Old People,” Delta Autumn” bounds “The Bear” on the other side with an episode from Ike’s old age and thematically reconnects *Go Down, Moses* to the theme of race and the McCaslin clan as it was introduced in “Was” (since the mother of Roth Edmond’s bastard child is related to the McCaslins on Tomey’s Turl’s side). Finally, the novel ends with “Go Down, Moses,” returning to the question of race and the motif of burial. Significantly, “Go Down, Moses” leaves the story of Ike McCaslin in the past, shifting its emphasis to a present most contemporaneous with the book’s publication (in the story of Gavin Stevens’ efforts to make funeral arrangements for Samuel Beauchamp—the son of the Beauchamps of “The Fire and the Hearth”), bringing *Go Down, Moses* to a present just beyond the novel’s first sentence.

The time frame for the novel is important to understanding its overall structure. *Go Down, Moses* begins, in “Was”

Isaac McCaslin, ‘Uncle Ike’, past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one

This was not something participated in or even seen by himself; but by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, grandson of Isaac’s Fathers sister and so descended by the distaff, . . .

not something he had participated in or even remembered except from the hearing, the listening, come to him through his cousin McCaslin born 1850 and sixteen years his senior and hence, his own father being near seventy when Isaac, an only child, was born, rather his brother than cousin and rather his father than either, out of the old time, the old days. (*Moses 3-4*)

So begins part one of “Was” and establishes the temporal “present” of *Go Down, Moses*. It is 1942 and Isaac McCaslin is seventy-four years old.

“The Fire and the Hearth” mentions that Lucas Beauchamp is sixty-seven years old. Lucas was born in 1874. Hence, the present time for this section is 1941. The “Old People” includes that Ike is seven years old, placing it in 1874 (since Ike was born in 1867). This section contains a linkage to Lucas Beauchamp in “The Fire and the Hearth,” since 1874 is also the year of his birth. Section 4 of “The Bear” begins “then he was twenty-one” (*Moses 254*), making the year 1888. Though “Pantaloon in Black” and “Go Down, Moses” do not offer references that may place them precisely in time, we may assume that they also take place in or near this present time, since they occur after the invention of the automobile and especially in reference to the fact that the wife at the end of “Pantaloon” snidely says she’s going to the “picture show” (*Moses 159*).⁴³ Given such detail, we would need a date nearer 1941 than earlier to justify such language. Given the

⁴³ These two stories are also linked in that they alone go over material that is not directly connected to Ike McCaslin’s story.

importance also of the year according to Singal (in terms of Faulkner's life) it makes sense to place the present in 1941—and contemporaneous with Faulkner's life as he puts the materials of *Go Down, Moses* together.

Hence, the temporal sequencing of *Go Down, Moses* looks like the following. "Was," "The Fire and the Hearth," and "Pantaloons in Black" are set in 1941. "Was," however, encapsulates a story that happens in 1859. "Old People" begins when Ike is seven years old, so it is placed in 1874. "The Bear" moves us to 1883, then through the years of Ike's maturation, culminating in 1888 (before looking forward to his thirty-fifth year in 1902 in the ledger sequence in section 4).⁴⁴ The fourth section of "The Bear" is also linked in time, however, with "Was," since the ledger entries cover action from as early as 1832 and as late as 1874 (significantly, up to but not beyond Ike's seventh year). "Delta Autumn" may be placed in 1941, since Ike is now an "old man" and the beginning of "Was" identifies his age as seventy-four years. But this section includes important reference back to the events obliquely related to the matter of "Was" in the person of the unnamed woman who has given birth to Roth Edmond's child—she is related to the McCaslin's through Tomey's Turl, of "Was."

Finally, the last chapter of the novel, entitled "Go Down, Moses," entails action that is either contemporaneous with Ike's old age or just beyond it in the present. Again, significantly, the matter of this story is connected directly back to

⁴⁴ Arguing that *Go Down, Moses* was a novel, Faulkner said that Ike can "look forward" to his thirty-fifth year at the end of "The Bear" because "the rest of the book was part of his past too (*Faulkner in the University* 4).

earlier material since it entails the death of Lucas and Molly Beauchamp, characters from “The Fire and the Hearth,” and also entails action not directly connected to Ike McCaslin, just like “Pantaloon in Black.” The linkage is strengthened thematically by the inclusion in this last story of the matter of a burial. In addition, that the story begins with the census taker and the discovery of Samuel Beauchamp’s identity thereby, “Go Down, Moses” signals a reversal of the miscommunication between black (oral) and white (literate) worlds.

Diagramming the stories in terms of their relations in time, they may be rendered thus:

(1859 story time)	1941—Was (narrative)
	1941—The Fire and the Hearth
	1941—Pantaloon in Black
1874 (Ike 7 yrs old)	Old People
1883 (Ike 16 yrs old)	The Bear
1888 (Ike 21 yrs old)	The Bear (& looking forward to 1902)
(1832—1874, range of Ledger dates)	
	1941—Delta Autumn (1859 ref. Birth of Amodeus)
	1941—Go Down, Moses

The novel’s present time is established through two bloodlines that are joined at the end of the novel, that of Isaac McCaslin, “father to no one” and Lucas Beauchamp, part of the miscegenation of the McCaslin clan, brought to its final

fruition in the incest of the unnamed son of Carothers “Roth” Edmonds and the unnamed woman in “Delta Autumn.” Ike is related on Roth’s side, significantly, illegitimately, since his Father’s twin, “Buddy” never married and an unnamed sister bore an unnamed child who then was parent to Carothers McCaslin “Cass” Edmonds, father of Zack Edmonds, father of Carothers “Roth” Edmonds. Ike is related, on the other side as well, of course, through his grandfather, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin through his relationship with “Tomasina,” and thence through Tennie and Terreal Beauchamp (“Tomey’s Turl,” of “Was”). Hence, “Delta Autumn” brings full circle those issues presented initially in “Was” and is connected to “Go Down, Moses” in that it is Samuel Worsham Beauchamp’s burial that Gavin Stevens is engaged to accomplish.

The above diagram does not seem to suggest anything of a balanced order. But it is knit together by another thread—that narrative thread that constitutes the first sentence of the novel (“Isaac McCaslin, ‘Uncle Ike,’ . . . uncle to half the county and father to no one” (*Moses* 3)), is picked up again in “The Bear” (“then he was twenty-one” (254)), and continued throughout the ledger-reading scene, later in section 4 of “The Bear,” and finally joined to the surface present of “Delta Autumn” in the confrontation between Ike and Roth Edmonds’ paramour. I would argue that this thread then connects to that story closest to being contemporaneous with the novel’s publication, “Go Down, Moses.”

If we plot the structure of the novel in terms of its temporality and make note of its thematic modulations, horizontally, while paying attention to the ways

in which the novel vacillates from section to section from oral to literate, a pattern begins to emerge (see Figure 7, following). The novel begins with “Was,” which is a thoroughly oral tale circumscribed by the white world. Though it includes Tomey’s Turl, it does not offer any access to his psychic reality. The novel then moves to a novelistically sophisticated consideration of the consciousness of a black character in “Fire and the Hearth.” This section represents a kind of literate sophistication in counterpoint to the thematically simple orality of “Was.” The following section, “Pantaloon in Black,” offers an oral entrance into the very being of Rider, but does so within a section of the novel that reveals the gulf between black and white experience by ceding the narration over to the white couple at the end, to illustrate how black oral authentic being is “lost” in the transmission and translation of white orality. “The Old People” then picks up another strand of orality, but this time, steeped not in the anecdotal, but the ritual, forming the beginning of Ike’s initiation.

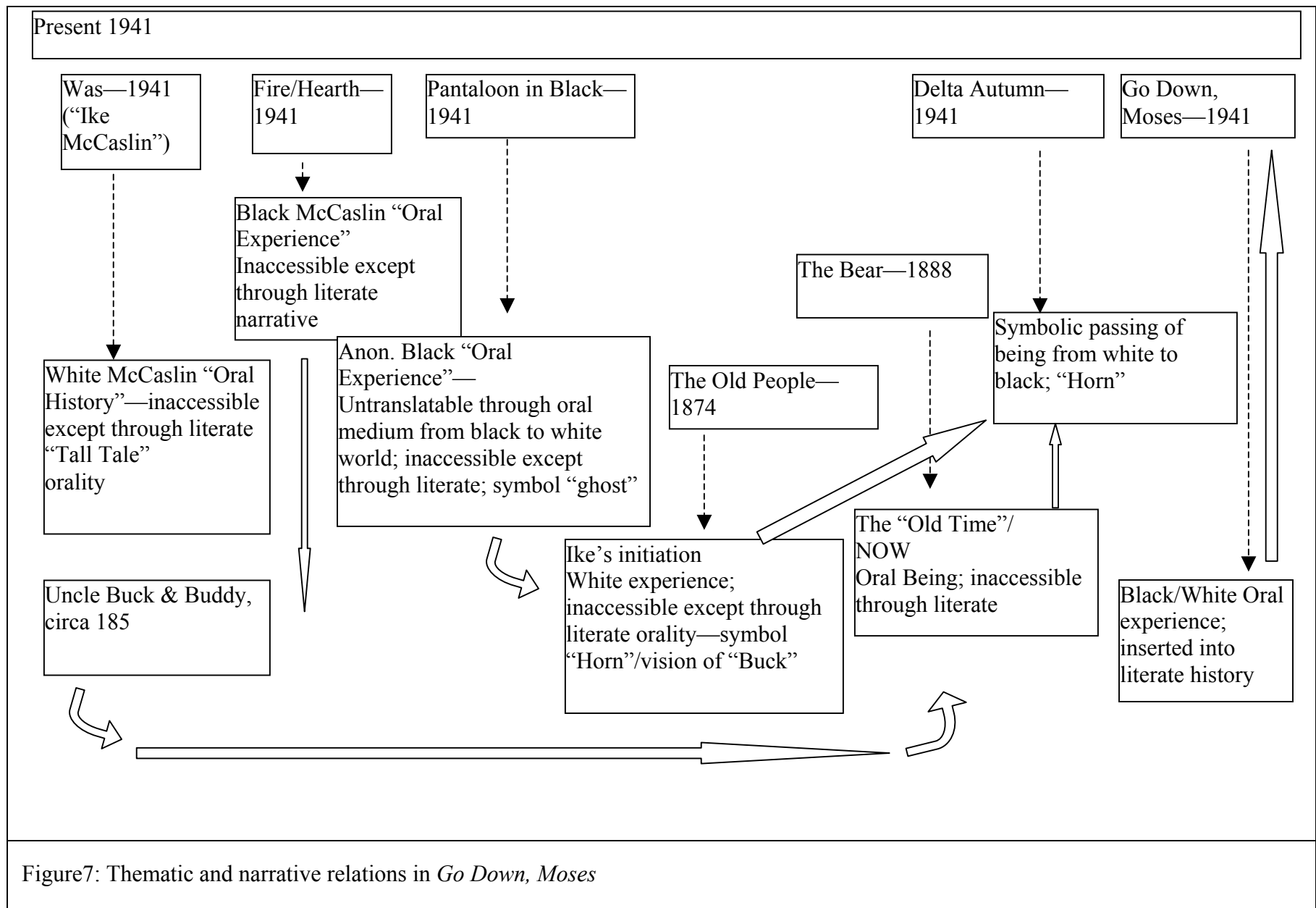


Figure7: Thematic and narrative relations in *Go Down, Moses*

“The Bear” follows and entails the fruition of Ike McCaslin’s training in the ways of the authentic world under the tutelage of Sam Fathers—himself the product, significantly, of Native American, black, and white worlds. “Delta Autumn,” then takes up the consequences of Ike’s education and his inability to properly articulate—either orally or literately—the meaning of that education. Finally, the novel ends, like so many other of Faulkner’s works, as the narration moves outside of Ike’s immediate orbit. “Go Down, Moses,” as in the Old Testament story, offers an ambiguous resolution to Ike’s problem in the story of Gavin Steven’s attempts to help Molly Beauchamp craft an appropriate end to the story of her son’s life and death.

So, Singal’s insights into the figural and thematic linkages in the texts underscore that *Go Down, Moses*, while intricate, is more balanced structurally than first appears to be the case. Something of Faulkner’s whole project comes to the fore in this novel. The themes of white guilt and sin, the “other” of black-being, the erasure of the native American legacy from the American soil in the South, and the individual’s attempt at a full apprehension of his own meaning within the context of all of it is at work in this novel. Lockyer puts it in terms of Faulkner’s lifelong attempt at the “all encompassing word” and she is correct. But, that word is both oral and literate—and so long as these are separate from each other, no apotheosis is possible.

The above diagram indicates in the order of the chapters and the matter that makes the story for each. Broken arrows indicate the thematic and symbolic linkages between the different chapters. Hence, “Was” is thematically linked to the fourth section of “The Bear” in taking place during the time frame represented by the ledgers. It is also

linked to “The Fire in the Hearth” in presenting an episode key to Lucas Beauchamp’s ancestry. These two sections are connected in turn with “Delta Autumn” and “Go Down, Moses,” at the end, in the relationship between the incest in both Lucas’ and Ike’s background that culminates in “Delta Autumn” in the unnamed woman’s appearing at camp to assert her familial right and in “Go Down, Moses” entailing the burial of Lucas and Molly’s son, Samuel.

“Pantaloon in Black,” which at first does not seem to connect directly to anything in *Go Down, Moses* is linked to Lucas Beauchamp’s story in offering a psychologically and literately realistic articulation of its main character’s interior life. Yet, it includes the stuff of the old oral tale in the embedding of a ghost story within its frame. This tale is critically fractured in its orality and literacy in a way that “The Fire and the Hearth” is not. While the ghost story within “Pantaloon” in content is oral, its presentation is literate. This lends irony to the end of the story, which is oral in reverting to the poor white husband and his wife discussing and distorting Rider’s story. Something of the loss of the oral tradition is rendered here and bitterly underlined in the final comment by the wife: “I’m going to the picture show.” The cinema, as successor of literacy “re-oralizes” by turning everything into alienated entertainment and the wife’s comment sets Rider’s tragedy *below* such entertainment in the scale of values, thus underscoring the “miscommunication” between black, oral authentic experience and the white literate world it confronts.

The first three chapters of *Go Down, Moses* oscillate between the alienation of the oral and the literate, and between the black and the white. “The Old People” reverses

form and content once again. Here, the Ike McCaslin thread begins in earnest and Faulkner embeds orality within the literate form in a way that he has not done so before *Go Down, Moses*. As a young boy, Ike's initiation entails his listening to tales of the "old times" as told by the mixed-race Sam Fathers. What is different here, however, is that its relation to literacy does not problematize the presentation of orality. For the literate in "The Old People" does not frame the oral tale, it is re-oralized:

And as he talked about those old time and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew, gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy's present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted. And more: as if some of them had not happened yet but would occur tomorrow, until at last it would seem to the boy that he himself had not come into existence yet, that none of his race nor the other subject race which his people had brought with them into the land had come here yet; that although it had been his grandfathers and then his Fathers and uncle's and was now his cousin's and someday would be his own land which he and Sam hunted over, 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 Fathers voice the mouthpiece of the host. (171)

The literate re-oralizes what Sam Fathers voices, rendering the experience immediate, bringing Ike into the presence of the old times. The old times in this context are not simply the past—as it has been so far represented in the novel. Rather, it is an abiding and eternal now that pervades the land in which Ike and Sam Fathers hunt. Here the novel does not merely re-oralize, it encounters its own oral progenitor form as form. The result is that the wisdom of Sam’s discourse gives way as discourse to full expression, gaining for the novel a new energy. What is new in Faulkner’s fiction here is that the encounter with the oral is not an encounter with the palliated orality of modern literate societies (as has been seen in the earlier novels) but an encounter with the real oral tradition, available, as it were, for the first time in the New World, in which preliterate peoples (like Sam Fathers) mingle with the literate ones, like Ike’s grandfather, father, uncles, and cousin, and finally Ike himself. Part of the turn, then, in Faulkner’s style has to do with the discovery of the literate’s ability to translate the oral without subjugating it to the striated space of chronology. Ike experiences that the “old times” are, as Faulkner said in another context, not even really past.

The passage bears the marks of orality in its intimacy, in the shift of time frame that subtly makes everything present, connecting all to a future. The gridded space of the literate—the “chancery book” that documents literate “ownership” of the land—here is “faded and archaic,” subject to literate time in which things age and decompose. That is, the relationship between Ike and the land according to the chancery is one of master/slave, or one in which the literate imposes ownership upon the land whose designation it records. But, in the orality of Sam Fathers spoken wisdom, Ike’s

relationship is transformed into a “guest/host” relationship, according to which he, as auditor, is guest of the land itself, which speaks. It is not merely that Sam’s orality makes the past present to Ike. It is rather the reversal: it makes Ike present to the ongoing reality of the old times according to which nothing is ever really past.

The other touchstone in this important chapter in *Go Down, Moses* is the scene in which Ike kills his first buck. It is important for Ike in embodying his ritual transition from boyhood to manhood, and Sam’s marking him with the blood of his kill. His initiation leads him to his first vision (not just auditory inclusion) of the old times. It is several years later and during the hunt Ike laments that he misses the opportunity to get a shot at the deer. But, this leads him to a vision of the Buck itself:

Then the boy saw the buck. It was coming down the ridge as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its death. It was not running, it was walking, tremendous, unhurried, slanting and tilting its head to pass the antlers through the undergrowth, and the boy standing with Sam beside him now instead of behind him as Sam always stood, and the gun still partly aimed and one of the hammers cocked.

Then it saw them. And still it did not begin to run and Sam standing beside the boy his right arm raised at full length, palm-outward, speaking in that tongue which the boy had learned from listening to him and Joe Baker in the blacksmith shop, while up the ride Walter Ewell’s horn blew them in to a dead buck.

‘Oleh, Chief,’ Sam said. ‘Grandfather.’ (183-4)

What Ike hears in Sam Fathers oral tales, and what he witnesses and experiences here transcends the traditional differences (especially across racial lines) that have ever kept the oral and the literate separate or at odds in Faulkner's fiction. It is perhaps this scene that most exemplifies how Ike will be transformed into what Singal calls an "Adam prepared for the Fall." And far from contradicting that preparation in his later shrill encounter with the unnamed daughter of Cass Edmond's child, that assessment will be confirmed by Ike's gesture at the end of that encounter.

One telling detail in this scene is in Ike's sense that the Buck walks "out of the very sound of the horn which related its death." This makes of the buck something of a ghost from the old times whose embodiment is in the articulation of the sound of the horn. Yet the buck is real. So Faulkner links the oral wisdom of Sam Fathers tales in his salutation, rendered partly in the language of the old times, "Oleh" and then translated by the literate, "Chief," "Grandfather." We may compare this to Rider's vision of his wife's ghost "wawkin," during which he says, "Hits awright. Ah aint afraid" (140). Here the address by Rider is one of oral intimacy, in the phonetic language of their essential and abiding connection to each other. Significantly, the appearance of the ghost in that scene is announced by the howl of a dog. Like the sound of the horn, the dog's audible wail opens up the oral space within which the apparition may make its presence known.

The horn, of course, will become important in "Delta Autumn" in Ike's ritual gesture in bequeathing it as the inheritance in the McCaslin line to the mother of Cass Edmond's child. It is significant because it offers a kind of closure to Ike's initiation into a relationship with the old times and its transmission to the future. That conferral is the

essential connection between the past and the present as it is bound up with the relationship in the McCaslin line, articulated by Ike between the black and the white, between the oral and the literate, until Ike has encountered on his own the essential connection between the world of the oral and the world of the literate.

That encounter is revealed in the text in two ways. In “The Bear,” it will be symbolically figured in Ike’s encounter with Old Ben—in which he must shed the trappings of literacy, in watch and compass. Later, Ike as an old man will confer the meaning of his encounter across racial lines in the presentation of the horn to Cass’s paramour.

But before that, Ike comes into increasing contact with the reality of what the bear symbolizes:

an abjectness, a sense of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods, yet without doubt or dread . . . he knew only that for the first time he realized that the bear which had run in his listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember and which therefore must have existed in the listening and the dreams of his cousin and Major de Spain and even old General Compson before they began to remember in their turn, was a mortal animal and that they had departed camp each November with no actual intention of slaying it, not because it could not be slain but because so far they had no actual hope of being able to. ‘It will be tomorrow,’ he said. (200-01)

For Ike, the bear's mortality is the key to his connection with that world that its existence symbolizes. That is, the bear is not merely symbolic—it is real. Hence, the bear's actual existence reveals that real connection—that presence—that is the connection between the past and the present in the “now” of the encounter that Ike will have with the bear. Like his envelopment in the “oral now” of Sam's telling, the bear's existence represents that “now” in which even Ike exists with “The Old People” as if they “had not happened yet but would occur tomorrow.” That is, like the ghost of Rider's wife for him, the actuality of the bear for Ike will constitute the continuity in time as presence, connecting a past to a present that looks forward to a present (it is for this reason that Rider is not afraid, for which he says, “let me go with you”). In “Pantaloon,” that continuity is forever abrogated by the disjunction between the oral experience of black authentic being and the literate striation of white expression—so much so that the story of Rider can only be known by second hand, as rumor, and then distorted by the alienating “miscommunication” between the races.

In “The Bear,” these seemingly unbridgeable realities are linked in Ike's experience. In this sense, “the best of all telling” in “The Bear” represents for Ike that side of white discourse that would have remained unavailable to him without his encounter with the oral tradition that Sam provides. Ike now sees a deeper side to the white story of existence that allows him to conclude that Sam's wisdom is not so much alien to his own family line as it is a story about its true origin and destiny. So, *Go Down, Moses* is not about the apotheosis of an individual. It is not about Ike's coming into his own majority, as so many of Faulkner's stories have been.

Ike's first, solitary encounter with "Old Ben" reveals the ways in which the novel brings together its oral and literate threads in the form of an action and an experience that itself is (seemingly) beyond words. In order to encounter Ben, Ike must shed the vestiges of the time-bound, mapped and gridded, literate space of the white world that he inhabits:

He had already relinquished, of his will, because of his need. In humility and peace and without regret, yet apparently that had not been enough, the leaving of the gun was not enough. He stood for a moment—a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the other from his overalls and hung them on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and entered it.

When he realized he was lost, he did as Sam had coached and drilled him: made a cast to cross his backtrack [and found the tree] before he really expected to . . . [b]ut there was no bush beneath it, no compass nor watch, so he . . . made his next circle in the opposite direction and much larger, so that the pattern of the two of them would bisect his track somewhere, . . . and now he was going faster though still not panicked, his heart beating a little more rapidly but strong and steady enough, and this time it was not even the tree . . . and he did what Sam had coached and drilled him as the next and the last, seeing as he sat down on the log the crooked print, the warped indentation in the wet ground which

while he looked at it continued to fill with water until it was level full and the water began to overflow and the sides of the print began to dissolve away. Even as he looked up he saw the next one, and moving, the one beyond it; moving, not hurrying, running, but merely keeping pace with them as they appeared before him as though they were being shaped out of thin air just one and lost forever himself, . . . emerging suddenly into a little glade and the wilderness coalesced. It rushed, soundless, and solidified—the tree, the bush, the compass and the watch glinting where a ray of sunlight touched them. Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon’s hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun’s full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It didn’t walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion . . . (208-9)

Here Ike’s encounter with the “old times” in the form of Old Ben must happen after he has abandoned his trust in the navigational tools that aid in the plotting out of mapped and gridded space. Once lost, his following what Sam had “coached and drilled” him to do, crucially, does *not* act as substitute for compass and watch—for, this strategy of negotiating the smooth space of the wilderness does not lead him back to the place from

whence he came. Significantly, it leads him to the bear and following those crooked prints, “as they appeared before him as though they were being shaped out of thin air,” he is lead back to where he left the compass and the watch.

It is at this moment that Ike sees Old Ben—”immobile” and “fixed”—next to his compass and watch, as if he, the bear, is the reference point against which all measurement of time and space must be made. Of course, since that reference point is “motion,” itself, the compass and watch are powerless to apprehend it. Wilderness itself “coalesces” bringing the bear into relief against a background of which he is always and already a part. So, Ike is a momentary witness to the wilderness from which the white world has been generally alienated. His tutelage by Sam Fathers has prepared him for this moment and the moment to come in which the bravery of Lion will succeed finally in killing Old Ben. It is to this that Ike acquiesces—not the inevitable destruction of the wilderness, but the impossibility of its destruction.

On his last visit to those woods as a boy, after Sam’s and Lion’s deaths and burials, Ike finds the wilderness unchanged for all the apparent change encroaching upon it: “Then he was in the woods, not alone, but solitary. The solitude closed about him, green with summer. They did not change, and, timeless, would not, anymore than would the green of summer and the fire and rain of fall and the iron cold and sometimes even snow . . . summer, and fall, and snow in their ordered immortal sequence, the deathless and immemorial phases of the mother who had shaped him if any had toward the man he almost was, mother and father both to the old man born of a Negro slave and a Chickasaw chief who had been his spirit’s father . . . (323, 326). Ike begins to see that his

education by his “spirit’s father,” Sam Fathers, his initiation into the hunt, his encounters with Old Ben, have been preparing him to come to terms with his relationship to the land itself. Walking out to find the graves of Sam Fathers and Lion, Ike

did not even use the compass but merely the sun and that only subconsciously, yet he could have taken a scaled map and plotted at any time to within a hundred feet of where he actually was; and sure enough, at almost the exact moment when he expected it, the earth began to rise faintly, he passed one of the four concrete markers set down by the lumber company’s surveyor to establish the four corners of the plot which Major de Spain had reserved out of the sale . . . [those markers] visible . . . lifeless and shockingly alien in that place where dissolution itself was a seething turmoil of ejaculation tumescence conception and birth, and death did not even exist.

Ike’s education is nearly complete. He is experienced enough as a hunter that, in contrast to his being “lost” in his first encounter with Old Ben, now he could have “taken a scaled map and plotted at any time to within a hundred feet of where he actually was.”⁴⁵ But, there is one more element that Ike must encounter before his education is complete.

Presently, he encounters a rattlesnake. And as in the scenes in which he saw the

⁴⁵ Note the mixture of terms for space and time here, resembling in a more sophisticated way the fusion of time and space by the thoroughly oral Lena Grove in *Light in August*. Ike’s knowledge makes right the relationship between the gridded space of literacy and the rhizome like smooth space of nature. Unlike the surveyor for the lumber company, who must measure and mark, Ike has no need for even headstones to locate those places in the earth that conceal Lion, Sam, and Old Ben.

apparitions of the buck and Old Ben, he encounters here the elemental presence of death in the garden. As it glides away from him, Ike can

not quite believe that all that shift and flow of shadow behind that walking head could have been one snake . . . [and] standing with one hand raised as Sam had stood that afternoon six years ago when Sam had led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child, speaking the old tongue which Sam had spoken that day without premeditation either:

‘Chief,’ he said. ‘Grandfather.’ (329-30)

The symbolism here is perhaps not obvious, as Ike’s character has just remarked that in the natural world to which Sam and Lion and Old Ben have been released, death does not exist. But that is only true, in a sense, from the vantage point beyond the horizon of Ike’s present. In these moments of encounter, Ike has in a sense straddled two worlds at once—and the snake, equal among the inhabitants of that other idyllic world is a reminder to Ike of the necessity of death as that final passage into that spirit world where even Old Ben would get his mangled paw back, “then the long challenge and the long chase, no heart to be driven and outraged, no flesh to be mauled and bled” (329).

This moment in Ike’s maturation is placed in the text after his poring over the ledgers in part four of “The Bear” and functions as oral authentic experience in hindsight to make comprehensible his engagement with the long record of the McCaslin’s relation to the land in the semi-literate terms that the ledgers themselves represent. These form for the novel an almost ancient example of what Faulkner called in the Nobel Prize speech the “long human recording.” That section (4), so troubling and so different from anything

else Faulkner has written to this point, flashes forward to 1895 to the time when Ike attempts to explain the repudiation of his birthright to Cass. Interpolated within the scenes above, the encounter with the ledgers acts as a counterpoint to Ike's education in the wilderness, his coming to terms with that other, tangled portion of his inheritance: the fragmentary and alienating record of the McCaslin family's life upon the land.

The narrator describes what it is Ike seeks in the ledgers after he is old enough to realize that they contain something that he cannot get (or perhaps contain something that he will not believe) from any other source:

As a child and even after nine and ten and eleven, when he had learned to read, he would look up at the scarred and cracked backs and ends but with no particular desire to open them, and though he intended to examine them someday because he realized that they probably contained a chronological and much more comprehensive though doubtless tedious record than he would ever get from any other source, not alone of his own flesh and blood but of all his people, not only the whites but the black ones too, who were as much a part of his ancestry as his white progenitors, and of the land which they had all held and used in common and fed from and on and would continue to use in common without regard to color or titular ownership, it would only be on some idle day when he was old and perhaps even bored a little since what the old books contained would be after all these years fixed immutably, finished, unalterable, harmless. . . .

(268)

But what Ike finds is neither “immutably finished” nor “unalterabl(y) harmless.” What he finds is the fragmentary literate recording of an entire history that connects to the whole human recording in dovetailing with Ike’s explanation of his repudiation, since that explanation not only includes a rehearsal of the ownership of the land in question, but the matter of the long human recording from that other book, the Bible. Ike and Cass’s reading of the ledgers in this context forms a parallel to Quentin and Shreve’s attempt to tell the story of Thomas Sutpen. But, in *Go Down, Moses* Ike has the advantage of the literate trace upon which to build the oral story, where in *Absalom*, with the exception of Charles Bon’s letter, there is only oral legend and imaginative reconstruction. The difference could not be more stark: in legend, Sutpen has grown too large for the telling, but the lives of those whose purchase, sale, or death, have grown in the semi-literate scrawlings of the twin identical hands too small. Yet, the literate reveals that which the white oral tradition suppresses in a story like “Was,” or that semi-literate orality distorts, as in “Pantaloon.”

The ledgers represent a kind of first literacy—the kind that, in ancient times, confines itself to record keeping and centers on the inventory of property. But because these ledgers come out of a past whose economy trafficked in human bondage, they necessarily hint at what the oral telling in “Was” cannot express. That is, the tribalism of the white oral tradition to which “Was” belongs suppresses that which goes against the canons of the tribe. Hence, Tomey’s Turl’s experience cannot be accessed in the first chapter of *Go Down, Moses*. According to the conservatism of tribal orality, only the canon can be spoken. But the ledgers re-oralize the conservatism of Uncle Buck and

Buddy's orality and act as a kind of semi-literate, semi-oral dialogue. This dialogue is semi-literate and semi-oral for the same reason: the entries preserve the dialect of Buck and Buddy's speech as their cryptic shorthand records their barely literate written "speech."

When we consider that "The Bear" is thereby connected to all of the stories that have appeared in the novel before it—either by enclosing and connecting it to them through the thread of present narrative begun in the first lines of the novel ("Ike McCaslin, 'Uncle Ike,' . . . uncle to half a county and father to no one" (3)), or by the inclusion of entries that fill out and amplify upon episodes that have been previously alluded to, then we see how "The Bear" functions as the center for the entire novel. Referring back to the diagram of the interrelationships between the sections, we can see how all of the thematic threads flow through "The Bear" toward the novel's conclusion in "Delta Autumn" and "Go Down, Moses."

But the ledgers themselves, beyond revealing what the oral tradition itself will not expose, the viewpoint of the "other" which Faulkner has supplied in the chapters "Fire and the Hearth" and "Pantaloons in Black," also reveal how literacy as a recording of orality cannot express the "story" that part four of "The Bear" tells. As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the oral preserves the living breathing give and take of history through time—but changes with each transmission. The literate protects the transmission through time, but, as the ledgers and Charles Bon's letter illustrate, gaps that would be filled by the oral are left blank in the literate record—and must be filled, as Quentin and Shreve's efforts illustrate, by imaginative surmises and interpretation. The ledger entries constitute the

suppressed unconscious of the “other” subjugated by the oral tradition in “Was,” or the “miscommunication” between the worlds of Lucas Beauchamp and Rider and their counterparts in Zack Edmonds and the poor white couple. Ike McCaslin seeks to rectify such “miscommunication” between past and present in the idiosyncratic part four of “The Bear.” Having pored over the ledgers, and knowing what he knows as a result of his education by Sam Fathers and his experience of the “old times” through the “telling” at the camps along with his first person encounters with the wilderness, Ike’s attempt in part four of “The Bear” is to utter that understanding that has so far eluded expression in *Go Down, Moses*.

But, of course, his attempt is a failure. Singal argues that the debate between Ike and Cass, in Section four of “The Bear” ends in a draw. Perhaps this is so. But Ike does succeed in the repudiation of his birthright, even if Faulkner does not end the novel there. That Faulkner has section five follow, which takes the reader back to the scene in which Ike, as a younger man, completes his education in confronting the necessity of death, militates against Singal’s argument regarding the sheer difference between the Adam “prepared for the fall” and the Adam who clings to his Eden. Rather, it calls for an understanding that for Faulkner preparedness informs the Fall with meaning. Ike’s education and experience prepares him for the necessity of the Fall in order for any of the suffering to be worth the sheer pain and trouble. Had Faulkner ordered the *Go Down, Moses* otherwise he would have failed to underscore the importance of the knowledge that Ike gains as a result of submitting himself to Sam’s tutelage. For Sam’s father, Ikkemotubbe, had also been known by another name, “Du Homme,” “the Man,” which

was sometimes shortened, in a kind of retroactive re-oralization, as “Doom.” And it was Ikkemotubbe’s relation with the land in the first place (since it was he who sold it to Carothers McCaslin) that made possible Ike’s present situation both vis-à-vis his blood and his relation to the wilderness.

In the end, the only people whose relationship with the land is innocent are those who have descended from slaves. And yet their relationship to that land is one of suffering since it neither “belongs” to them nor they to it. Ike’s education, in large part, brings him to an understanding that the land belongs to no one. Section four of “The Bear” is his attempt to work out the consequences of that reality in a world that has been built upon ownership not only of the land, but ownership of those who people it. Hence, in *Go Down, Moses*, Ike’s attempt to repudiate his birthright is also an attempt to repudiate that portion of his responsibility by birthright for the sins that have bequeathed him the land in the first place. This attempt must end in failure because, as Faulkner said,

There seem to be three stages: The first says, This is rotten, I’ll have no part of it, I will take death first. The second says, This is rotten, I don’t like it, I can’t do anything about it, but at least I will not participate in it myself. I will go off into a cave or climb a pillar to sit on. The third says, This stinks and I’m going to do something about it. [Ike] McCaslin is the second [stage]. He says, This is bad, and I will withdraw from it.

(Faulkner in the University 245-6)

And this is precisely what Faulkner has Ike attempting to do in the fourth section of *Go Down, Moses*. But in “Delta Autumn” he is not allowed to do so.

Ike laments in "Delta Autumn" the human forgetting of what he has learned in "The Bear." But in this story he is confronted with the living consequences of that aspect of the ledgers in part four of "The Bear" that the white orality of "Was" suppressed. Hence, Ike is tested here and the contest between the oral and the literate comes to the fore at the level of story content. Ike's entire education and experience has prepared him for the moment when the unnamed woman appears with the "proof" of what the meaning of the ledgers ultimately is, and brings into relief his attempts to come to terms with what modern progress has meant in the gradual mingling of blood lines and its consequences to the whole human enterprise. Singal reads Ike's rant regarding the diffusion of "stock" (as it were) in the intermingling of races that punctuates "Delta Autumn" as a racist rejection irreconcilable with the Ike that has heretofore been presented as the "Adam" who is prepared for the Fall. Yet Faulkner's consistent rejection of the trappings of success (most brilliantly depicted in the rise of the Snopes clan in the "Snopes Trilogy" that immediately follows *Go Down, Moses*) suggests that Ike's harangue is directed by his feeling that the mixture of white blood with black will lead to no good for that people whom he has previously in the novel identified as "better" than white. His diatribe in "Delta Autumn," then, is not against the idea that the "other" might come to succeed as a result of its mixture with white blood, but that the "other" might come to harm by being mixed with the sinfulness that Ike has repudiated in his rejection of his (white) birthright. But Ike is wrong again, too (and so, perhaps, is Faulkner).

The scene in which the unnamed mother of Cass's child appears is especially significant in its immediacy and realism. It is presented novelistically, subsuming the oral

to the literate but as in “Barn Burning,” in a way that allows the oral a space in which to speak. The literate interprets the oral in “Delta Autumn” and links, offers a stage finally, upon which the oral may confront verbally literate authority. Ike is presented with a woman that he expects to appear. He has even been vouchsafed with a means (apparently) to deal with her. That means, an envelope with money and the oral message that Roth said “No,” is the culmination of two of the threads of the entire novel—the literate rejection of the oral reality. Significantly, Ike deals with her only because a relation has laid that burden upon him—a kind of symbol of the impossibility of his refusing his birthright. Singal is right to identify this as a crucial scene in the novel, for it brings all of the issues to bear. But Ike’s action (not his words) militates against rejecting *Go Down, Moses* as a failure as a novel.

In the ledger scene, in “The Bear,” Ike is confronted with what the record can express regarding the McCaslin family’s participation in what Ike finally realizes is “rotten.” But, until he is confronted with Roth Edmond’s paramour and the fruit of his incest, its full meaning does not really come home to him despite the fact that his engagement with the ledgers has convinced him to repudiate his birthright. That action was motivated, in some sense, out of his experience in the wilderness and especially with his encounters with the Buck and Old Ben. But his education ended with his encounter with the snake too, so “Delta Autumn” is a necessary last movement in his coming into his full majority as an individual.

Roth indicates that the answer to the unnamed woman’s implied request of him can be contained in the envelope with the money he has secured for her. Ike asks him

what he promised and he says “Nothing! This is all of it. Tell her I said No” (356). So, something of the oral and the literate is combined here. The money is intended to embody the message that Ike is to repeat. That is, the “No” is embodied by the money contained in the envelope as the articulation of the relationship between Roth and the mother of his child. Yet Ike is confronted with someone who brings with her the contents of an envelope as well. Yet this envelope is the embodiment of a different kind of fiat. Ike’s understanding of his birthright is about to be transformed since it will appear to him as flesh and blood prior to its spiritualization through the process of death and “Adam” will be confronted with the consequences of actions *as they are* rather than as they were or as they will be according to Ike’s prior encounters with the “now.” The ledgers represent for him the literate trace of the past that nevertheless communicates something more than the tribal orality will allow to be spoken. In “Delta Autumn” he is confronted, finally, with the utterance that is also its own meaning at the same time. Such an utterance participates in orality as Benjamin described it: as that story that does not “explain,” but offers a “moral” that waits, not so much for interpretation (which is a literate act) but for understanding and acceptance.

In “Delta Autumn,” then, Ike is confronted finally with the embodiment of the sum total of his inheritance and his birthright in all of its forms. He is finally in the presence of the consequences of the incest and miscegenation as well as the spiritual inheritance that his tutelage by Sam Fathers entails. That embodiment identifies Ike McCaslin, finally, and simply by saying “You’re Uncle Isaac” and rejecting Roth’s answer to her by saying “That’s just money” (358). And as much as Ike would like here

too to repudiate his birthright, he cannot. After attempting to reject it, to reject his full responsibility to everything that *Go Down, Moses* identifies as belonging to him, Ike almost spontaneously hits upon the one thing that the woman has come for.

The woman confirms the incest and even the fact that Roth did not know she was a blood relation. Ike, initially reacting in horror—not really to her black blood, but to the willful incest, pleads, “Then what do you expect here?” to which she responds, “Nothing.” Exacerbated, Ike cries, “Then go . . . Get out of here! I can do nothing for you. Cant nobody do nothing for you!” But before she can leave Ike gives her the money that Roth has left for her. She says that she does not need it, but she takes it anyway. Sensing somehow that this is not right, Ike says “Wait” again:

although she had not turned, still stooping, 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 old 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: he said harshly now: ‘It’s a boy, I reckon. They usually are, except that one that was its own mother too’” (362).

Finally Ike comes into contact with the flesh and blood consequence of the whole long living of the McCaslin line of which he is the inheritor. In a sense, his education by Sam Fathers would have been wasted had it been only for a boy in isolation from everything

else. Ike has come into contact with the literate trace of the stain that is the result of human sin upon the land, now that he has touched the consequence that is the stain of McCaslin upon the flesh, communing finally with the “other” that the novel has been moving toward since its beginning. His response is immediate and, one might say, unpremeditated, like his use of the language of the “old time” in the presence of the snake. He asks the woman to turn so he can dress. He cannot get up, but points: “There . . . On the nail there. The tent-pole.” “What?” she asks. “The horn!”

‘The horn.’ She went and got it, thrust the money into the slicker’s side pocket as if it were a rag, a soiled handkerchief, and lifted down the horn, the one General Compson had left him in his will, covered with the unbroken skin from a buck’s shank and bound with silver.

‘What?’ She said.

‘It’s his. Take it.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Yes. Thank you.’ (362-3)

Here Ike seems to recognize the horn as symbolic of the relationship between him and the authentic world that is the only birthright that he possesses that can be bequeathed. But in the moment it is an illegitimate gesture since Ike has repudiated his birthright. Like the land that Ikkemotubbe sold to Carothers McCaslin, it has been stolen. Ike must come to understand that his birthright is his in trust only and that in passing it on he does not bequeath it so much as relinquish it. He suggests to the woman that she take the horn and the child back north, where she too can repudiate. But she corrects him: “Old man,” she

says, “have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?” (363).

Though Ike does not deliberately recall it here, we might do well to remember his thinking before he read the ledgers in section four of “The Bear.” There, he wonders over the cramped hand of his great-grandfather:

just *Fathers will* and he had seen that too: old Carothers’ bold cramped hand far less legible than his sons’ and not much better in spelling, who while capitalizing almost every noun and verb, made no effort either to explain or obfuscate the thousand-dollar legacy to the son of an unmarried slave-girl, to be paid only at the child’s coming-of-age, bearing the consequences of the act of which there was still no definite incontrovertible proof that he acknowledged, not out of his own substance but penalizing his sons with it, charging them a cash forfeit on the accident of their own paternity; not even a bribe for silence toward his own fame since his fame would suffer only after he was no longer present to defend it, flinging almost contemptuously, as he might a cast-off hat or pair of shoes, the thousand dollars which could have had no more reality to him under those conditions than it would have to the Negro, the slave who would not even see it until he came of age, twenty-one years too late to begin to learn what money was. *So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger* he thought. *Even if My son wasn’t but just two words. But there must have been love* he thought. *Some sort of love. Even what he*

would have called love: not just an afternoon's or a night's spittoon

(269-70)

So, Ike in this moment is not content merely to repeat Old Carother's providing for the child without some kind of acknowledgement too (or at least he will not allow Cass to repeat it). In giving the woman the horn, Ike bequeaths a symbol not only of his essential connection to her and her child (as well as Cass's) but also of their essential and particular connection to the land that produced both. For while the horn is used in the hunt to signal the kill, it is also "out of the very sound of the horn which related its death" (184) that Ike had seen the buck walking after his initiation into the hunt as a boy. And this horn forms for Ike one of the essential and ritual symbols of a connection to the land: a connection that is neither white nor black nor Native American, just human.

In this light, the anonymous woman's comment brings into relief the final thoughts that Ike has as "Delta Autumn" comes to a close. Rather than seeing his narrative as a racist screed, one might see that Ike formulates a kind of insight regarding the irony of the consequences of a freedom that does not distinguish itself as a kind of license in the world. Ike's insight is the result of a forgetting about what man has learned of love. And this lesson connects to those truths that speak to the heart that Ike has heretofore failed to make a "case" for in his repudiation of his birthright.

The relationship between one section of *Go Down, Moses* and another is thoroughly oral. While the sections are in chronological order, the action at the center of each does not relate in a cause and effect way to the other sections. So, though the novel may be described as following a tragic sequence—exposition, inciting action, rising

action, climax, falling action, and denouement—its sections do not *follow* each other in the causal way we associate with tragedy. Or, rather, we might say that the sections do not follow each other in any direct way. It is not until Ike's past is not only embodied by his present, but is expressed in his response to the presence of the strange woman who confronts him with the "incontrovertible proof" of his specific responsibility, that *Go Down, Moses* may give birth to a new era.

Orality makes available to history that to which literacy does not have access. At the same time, literacy makes available the experience of orality that orality itself cannot express. The paradox is born out in the fragmented novel, *Go Down, Moses*. Yet, its ending bears out that some accommodation between the two seeming binaries can obtain. In some ways, in this sense, *Go Down, Moses* is a braver novel than those that have come before it in Faulkner's body of works. Its final section is given over to Gavin Stevens, as if to signal that the torch has been passed concerning Ike's attempt to shepherd the old ways through the passage of one way of being to another. "Go Down, Moses," as an expression, recalls all that the women in the last section of the novel mean in invoking Pharaoh's crime in the loss of a son. At the same time, *Go Down, Moses* resonates with the sacrifice that Ike McCaslin seeks but cannot find until the end—that of the individual who will shepherd his people to a new way of being, the reward for which he will not be allowed to enjoy.

Like Moses' story in the Old Testament, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* participates in the differences between the old oral covenant and the new literate proscription, forever inscribed on stone. And in both cases, the failure of future generations will have to do

more with the letter than the spirit of the “law.” *Go Down, Moses* then has to do with the contest between “nomos” and “logos” as Deleuze and Guattari describe the contest between “smooth” and “striated” space. Only in this novel, that contest is entirely in flux. Literacy has not yet come into its full ascendancy; orality has not completely died out. Hence, Ike’s passage is truly in-between, and the self-organizing way in which his story articulates itself must look forward, like that of Moses, to some future that he can neither predict nor participate in.

As if to illustrate that reality, the last section of the novel is given over to the end of one strand of the story with which Ike has no immediate part. But Gavin Stevens’ participation, his attempt to do what is right in the face of old custom, signals that Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha cycle is taking a turn—toward the Snopes Trilogy, in which the next generation will set about to fashion an answer to a new kind of threat to human continuity through time, and *The Reivers*, the only fully comic novel Faulkner ever wrote.

“Go Down, Moses,” begins with the census taker’s questioning Samuel Worsham Beauchamp and ends by identifying him for “the record.” The fluidity of Sam’s oral identity is stopped by this literate recording and so its recording leads to death. That is, the literate can only make entries into the book of the dead, not the book of life. It is with this latter book that Molly Beauchamp is interested in the final chapter of “Go Down, Moses” and it is for this reason not only that she would have a “proper” burial, with its attendant pomp and ritual, but that it is important for her that the burial be published in the newspaper. The obituary will act as a re-oralization of the census taker’s recording, which effectively functioned to end his life and was rendered in the newspapers:

“Mississippi negro, on eve of execution for murder of Chicago policeman, exposes alias by completing census questionnaire. Samuel Worsham Beauchamp” (374). This newspaper account is a literate reduction of Sam’s identity to his race and his crime. The obituary, by contrast, essentially takes what was made remote and alienated by its literate recording and turns it symbolically into something that is intimate, personal, and tribal. The recording of Sam Beauchamp’s death and burial provided by the obituary functions as a re-interpretation of his entry at the literate hands of the census taker into the book of the dead, and represents a truce across the oral / literate divide.

Gavin makes the arrangements for the return of Samuel’s body from Chicago and goes to visit Mollie in the days before her son is to arrive “home.” Entering her home, he takes his place around the hearth “on which the ancient symbol of human solidarity and coherence smoldered” (380), that same hearth for which Lucas Beauchamp had forsaken his search for the buried coin in “The Fire and the Hearth,” that same smoldering that he and Mollie had kept going since the day they were married. Here we may recall that Molly had threatened divorce from Lucas not because of the extravagant waste of his time in hunting for the buried money, but because she was afraid that he would unearth it. As she had explained to Edmonds then, “God say . . . What’s rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware” (102). So Molly desires to render to earth that which belongs to earth until “I resurrect it.”

Sitting at the hearth with Molly and her relations, Gavin Stevens, like Ike McCaslin, is confronted with the specter of his own responsibility, not for the arrangements for Sam’s funeral, but for his own part in the sin that has brought the long

human recording, in this instance, to this moment. The women begin their lament for Sam's death in speaking a kind of dirge, in strophe and antistrophe:

‘Sold my Benjamin. Sold him in Egypt’

‘Sold him in Egypt. Oh yes, Lord.’

And suddenly Stevens cannot breathe and begins to leave, nearly running down the stairs, thinking “*Then there will be air, space, breath.*” Composing himself momentarily at the door, Molly Beauchamp stays him there while the lament continues behind her. “I’m sorry,” Stevens says, “I ask you to forgive me. I should have known. I shouldn’t have come.” “It’s all right,” Molly answers him. “It’s our grief” (380-1).

It is telling that Gavin Stevens does something here that Ike did not. Gavin asks for forgiveness. Molly’s answer to him is telling too—she tells him “It’s *our* grief,” perhaps indicating that essential connection between the races that has been expressed only in negative terms across the divide of orality and literacy to this point. The moment is telling in another way, since the text does not render the lament as Faulkner had rendered the sermon in *The Sound and the Fury*—by capturing its dialect and rendering it upon the page in a kind of “art-speech.” Here, the lament is simply made audible, and just before he asks forgiveness, Stevens is made audience to the simple dignity of “the third voice—a true constant soprano which ran without words beneath the strophe and antistrophe of the brother and sister” (381). While the literate form captures the oral in the sermon in *The Sound and the Fury*, here it is represented in its own terms and, significantly, *listened to* and heard by the white, literate world that Stevens represents.

But “Go Down, Moses” ends ironically upon a note of misunderstanding. The arrival of the casket is attended by “the idle white men and youths and small boys and probably half a hundred Negroes, men and women too, watching quietly.” The procession travels around the town square, “circling the Confederate monument and the courthouse while the merchants and clerks and barbers and professional men who had given Stevens the dollars and half-dollars and quarters and the ones who had not” (381-2), and Stevens and the newspaper editor follow it out of town, “past the metal sign which said Jefferson. Corporate Limit.” At the end of the pavement, however, they can no longer follow the hearses rapid “line of flight” away from the striated space of the literate white world. Stevens cuts the engine and watches the hearse and the car he had hired to carry the family to the burial vanish into the dust of the gravel road ahead of them.

It is here that the editor tells Stevens that, despite the fact that she cannot read, Molly had insisted that he put a notice in the paper regarding her son’s burial. To underscore the distance between these two literate men and Molly Beauchamp, Faulkner renders Molly’s speech (“Is yer gonter put hit in de paper?”) in the kind of “art-speech” with which he had captured the sermon at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, re-opening a kind of gulf between white and black worlds. This is underscored by the noting of the sign for the city limit, as the text renders it orally (the sign does not “read” Jefferson, it says it) and further by Stevens’ misunderstanding of Molly’s desire. He thinks she just wanted her son “to come home right” and in a sense he is correct. But it is not for her that

the funeral procession has taken place. Rather, it is for the whole community, who indeed attends to the passage of Sam Worsham Beauchamp.

Molly Beauchamp wants the newspaperman to put it “in de paper” so that “Miss Belle will show me whar to look and I can look at it. You put hit in de paper. All of hit” (383). It is with this desire for language to contain and express “all of it” that *Go Down, Moses* has struggled throughout. And Molly’s easy relationship to the literate here, as something to look at that represents a meaning that only she can know, fully reverses the subjugation and erasure the authentically oral has suffered from the literate throughout. *Go Down, Moses* is not the novel re-oralizing its discourse (as in Faulkner’s earlier modernist examples) but one which encounters its own progenitor form as form, the “third voice” “a true constant” which runs “without words” below and beneath the literate/oral utterance of the narrative.

Faulkner re-connects this last story to the first chapter in the book with a repetition of the dialogue that ended “Was.” The last sentence of that first chapter is “It seems to me I have been away from my home a whole damn month” (30). Similarly, “Go Down, Moses” ends with Stevens rejoinder, “Let’s get back to town. I haven’t seen my desk in two days” (383). But the repetition is not ironic closure. Uncle Buck’s utterance comes at the end of a tale that belongs in the oral tradition but which suppresses, in its conservatism, the expression of the dark side of its meaning. Gavin’s utterance comes at the end of a story in which that meaning has been given the space for its full expression. And in the line of flight that the hearse and Molly Beauchamp’s car make away from Stevens and the newspaper editor, we see the reversal of the miscommunication between

black and white, oral and literate worlds. For unlike “Was,” the “other” is allowed to speak in “Go Down, Moses” and she utters perhaps the sentence that the entire novel has been moving toward: “it’s our grief,” verbalizing orally that meaning that Ike McCaslin dedicated his life to understanding, and for which he honorably repudiates his birthright, revealing that it is not in the repudiation of the consequences of that birthright that closure may be achieved, nor even in its literate explanation, but in its acceptance.

**CONCLUSION—THE REIVERS: LITERACY AND THE ORAL
NARRATOR**

If critics have generally turned away from *Go Down, Moses* frustrated at William Faulkner's turn in style, then they have also dismissed *The Reivers*, his final novel, as not frustrating enough. Published twenty years later and just before his death in 1962, *The Reivers* has been rejected for both thematic and structural reasons. In terms of theme, *The Reivers* reads for some like a nostalgic look back at a golden time of innocence that never really reflects the realities of the time in which it was set. If one might defend *Go Down, Moses* as the result of Faulkner's attempt to connect the particular experience of an individual to its mythic and universal underpinnings (though some would not call this a defense at all), then according to many the same cannot be said for *The Reivers*. The story, while it takes up themes that have been important to Faulkner throughout his career and that touch upon serious issues of race and gender, never seems to place its protagonist Lucius Priest in any real danger. The story's final outcome, in the

boy's incorporation by his Grandfather into something like the order of the gentleman, simply does not resonate. Told through according to the view of the paternalistic "Grandfather," and written during a time of great political and social upheaval, many might see the novel as fairy tale without a dragon. As a story of a rite-of-passage, it seems calculated in terms of pure ritual: the dangers passed are necessary for the transition from boyhood to manhood, but one feels that the stakes for Lucius after all, unlike Sarty Snopes, are really not that large.

Most critics have been content to explain this startlingly uncharacteristic novel in terms of Faulkner's having drunk dry the well, or in terms of his settling into his public reputation and his private domesticity according to which he would repair to Virginia, buy his estate, and live out the end of his days up to his "arse" in "delightful family" and fox hunts (Gray, 359). Some, like Singal, blame the ravages of alcohol for the late decline. Others argue that Faulkner grew increasingly troubled by the implications of his prose in terms of the attitudes they betrayed and, when confronted with the real complexities of the modern world, he simply "fled" (Williamson 341). In contrast to such views, Noel Polk read in Faulkner's last novel a return to the dark Oedipal shadows of *Sanctuary* in order to "reinscribe" upon it "his older, somewhat wiser, self who had, by the fifties, watched his own daughter up and doubtless became aware of what kind of dark house Roan Oak had been" (*Children of the Dark House* 91). Yet even if Polk's ready seems to defend against the general feeling of decline in his work, it still evokes an image of a novelist writing out of nostalgia.

What such views have in common is a kind of shared shock at the sheer decline in the quality of his fiction from *Go Down, Moses* forward. If *The Reivers* may be understood in terms of Faulkner's own nostalgia for a world either once lived or nicely situated in an Arcadia of the Southern past, then the critics themselves seemed to have succumbed to a kind of nostalgia of their own for the disturbing, troubling, and challenging texts of the earlier career. An irony appears in the fact that *The Reivers* was produced during a time when Faulkner had finally achieved the kind of popular acceptance and acclaim that any author would envy. As Lockyer points out, the last years seemed to be fueled by his taking active responsibility for his role as "national author," as he spent them traveling for the State Department and speaking to students about the one thing he had avoided discussing for most of his career—literature (*Ordered* 120). Polk further points out that while he was writing *The Reivers* "the man who all his life had resisted bourgeois respectability was giving speeches about the meaning of home . . . and waxing even a bit sentimental about the value of normalcy" (*Children* 91). A further irony may be seen in the fact that his popular reception and critical disapprobation at the end of his career mirrors a rise in the critical reception of his work immediately following the publication of *The Sound and the Fury*. Then, popular readers were turned off by his deliberate obfuscation of plot for style, while critics recognized that his style was the hallmark of his genius.

The situation, then, is the reverse of that chronicled in the popular reviews early in Faulkner's career. As David Vern had written back in 1936 (after the

publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*): “One might expect by now that an attitude towards the man had begun to crystallize But every new Faulkner book is received like a first novel. All judgments are tentative pending . . . ah . . . surprise” (*Contemporary Reviews* 155-6). It is precisely because an attitude about Faulkner’s fiction *had* crystallized that *Go Down, Moses* and *The Reivers* have generally been regarded as inferior novels when compared to his earlier career and the “surprise” now is on the part of his critics—detractors and champions alike—at just how different *The Reivers* is from anything that Faulkner has produced before.

In this sense, each of his novels must be judged upon its own merits before it is compared to those that have come before it. To assume that each novel is a continuation in a life-long effort to produce the singularly perfect work, I think, is to misunderstand not the artistic endeavor in general, but to apply general principles regarding the valuation of art back upon the artist himself. And in this case, such an activity can cloud the picture as much as clarify. The critical task, then, is a balance between paying attention to those central themes, to the narrative and formal practices that have informed earlier individual efforts with special attention to a work that must itself also stand alone. This approach has for a long time allowed readers and critics alike to light upon this or that aspect of an artist’s work that identifies it as belonging to a single genius, but at the same time, recognize it for the singular expression that it is.

Faulkner's individual texts are tied together by his repeated interest in the relationship between the tale and its telling. Perhaps one of the aspects of *The Reivers*, then, that are so off-putting is its lack of the problematizing of that relationship. Whatever particular story Faulkner has committed himself to giving form, it had seemed, he has always at some level called attention to the expression of story as language *in* language. But *The Reivers* does not seem to fit in that category. *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are two examples of this problematizing of the material of the story and its transmission as narrative. In *The Sound and the Fury* that problem is displayed, in *Absalom* it is contemplated. In *Light in August*, Faulkner's Lena Grove captures expressionistically the reality of the presence of orality in a literate world, while Joe Christmas represents the victim of the lack of communication between oral and literate realities. *Go Down, Moses* reverts to the problem of story and transmission as narrative again but the problematic takes place on a meta-narrative level, of which each chapter is a part but according to which that problematic is not mediated between those chapters. As a result, the message that is transmitted from the past to the present points toward a future but is embedded within a collage that cannot speak it.

The disjunction between the oral and the literate in Faulkner's texts has revealed the different ways the oral and the literate combine to structure a text. When the disjunction between them is so complete that oral experience may be displayed and contained in the text but not spoken, the result is the oral

disorientation of the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury*. When that disjunction takes the form of the separation of the oral from the literate, in antagonistic relation, then the result is the structurally (seemingly) distorted texts of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In the former, oral memory rises out of the past and presents itself to his consciousness *as the present*, overwhelming his literate sense of the relationship between temporal modes. In the latter, his oral experience in the present fails to assimilate the material of the past and so that past is not embodied as a text that can live outside of his consciousness, making the meaning of Thomas Sutpen's story clear to him but incommunicable. When the oral and the literate determine the structure of the narrative within a text that contains them as modes of the imagination as well as structuring devices for social and cultural order, as in *Light in August*, then the text will oscillate between the boundaries of the literate and the oral, between the striated and seemingly ordered past and the rhizomatic and seemingly smooth space of the present.

In the early novels, Faulkner experiments in a variety of ways with the consequences of the confrontation between orality and literacy, both as consciousness transforming "technologies" and as determiners of social, cultural, and narrative configurations. And while this disjunction in the early novels leads to disorientation and, in terms of some of the characters, disaster—at the level of story and narrative—it does not necessarily lead to the production of a text that is itself disordered. In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner intensifies his contemplation of

the oral and the literate while at the same time expanding the realm of influence for each as a structuring device in society as well as in narrative. In contrast to the novels that have come before, while Faulkner reverts to yoking seemingly unrelated narrative blocks together by violence, he expands the story of *Go Down, Moses* beyond the confines of the characters that inhabit the novel. The task he sets for Ike McCaslin, thereby, is to account, literally, for *everything*. And while Judith Lockyer has argued that Ike's situation participates in Faulkner's increasing movement toward a narrative expression of the "absolute word," *Go Down, Moses* ends with Ike's finding that his response to his birthright is not a word at all, but a gesture. As is perhaps fitting for the title of the novel, *Go Down, Moses* ends not with Ike's giving the hunting horn to the unnamed mother of Cass Edmond's child, but with Gavin Steven's participation in the burial of Sam Beauchamp, another symbolic gesture that he does not fully understand, that speaks a communal acceptance of one of "its own." In a reversal of Lena Grove's breathing new life into the sardines she buys by calling them "sour deens," Gavin participates in a communal act that incorporates what was alien and other back into the communal family to which it belongs, momentarily at least bridging oral and literate worlds in the expression of "our grief" and its inscription into the written record.

The question is, however, whether the authentically oral experience can itself be inscribed within the literate. Molly Beauchamp asks the editor to put "hit" in the paper, "*All of hit*," (*Moses* 383, emphasis added) but "Go Down,

Moses” makes clear that neither the editor nor Gavin Stevens quite understands the value of that inscription to the old woman, since she cannot read. Faulkner offers a clue, however, to the true relationship between the literate and oral memory in Molly’s placating the editor’s bemusement in her explanation that ““Miss Belle can show me whar to look and I can look at it”” (383).

Molly speaks here of written language not as the expresser of meaning but a totem that calls to mind an event that it contains but cannot express. Molly Beauchamp knows that the marks upon the page are inadequate to communicate. But they may, in an ironic reversal of the authority of the written “over” the world she inhabits, act to point at the authentic experience that her oral culture passes from generation to generation in memory, oral tale, and song. In this sense, the scene illustrates one of the key differences between the literate and the oral in terms of the expression of meaning through time.

As Jack Goody argues in *The Power of the Written Tradition*, writing has influenced the oral memory we normally associate with the oral tradition. As Goody argues, primarily oral cultures do not remember verbatim verbal constructions in the way that literate cultures have assumed. They do, however, display the use of mnemonic visual devices in order to jog the memory of associations—but these systems, Goody argues, fall short of being a “language system” for the storage and retrieval of information in the way that books and computers are used in a literate culture (29 and *passim*). By contrast, it is precisely the verbatim record that the literate attempts to transcribe, and in doing

so, it fools the literate imagination into seeing fragments as incomplete where an oral imagination would see them for what they are: as containers of memories that they themselves do not express but nevertheless make available. It is in this sense that Molly Beauchamp desires to have the editor put “hit” in the paper in *Go Down, Moses*.

For Molly, the word on the page in the paper does not represent knowledge in the way that it does for the editor. Rather, it stands for and refers to the reality of her memory of her son, taking on the status of sacred object representing what only her memory can know, and which were expressed communally in the Negro spirituals. She insists upon his transcription into the literate record, but does not depend upon that record for her authentic knowledge of his value and being. At the same time, In fact, perhaps all of Faulkner’s illiterates (with the exception of Benjy, perhaps) stand to written language in this relation. At the same time, as Ike’s poring over the ledgers illustrates, the written record, in being the fixed text cannot contain or fully express the living experience of which it is a trace. In Faulkner’s novels this constitutes for some characters a crisis of knowledge—for if the variations of the oral memory do not preserve that which the literate record seems to fix, and that record is always fragmentary, then how can the past be transmitted into the present?

It seems that one way to account for the radical difference in style of *The Reivers* may be accounted for in this way: Faulkner sets down, whole and complete, a story in the mouth of two narrators at once—one that stands in

relation to the “text” as the oral and the other who stands in relation to the text as the literate. The resulting tale, then, has the appearance of a story that stands in relation to its narrative without anxiety. But, this is only an appearance.

The Reivers casts the narrative as encapsulated within the oral utterance.

The novel begins “Grandfather said.” While most critics treat the rest of the novel as if Lucius Priest narrates it, telling of his experiences when he was a boy in 1905, the bracketing at the beginning sets that narration at one remove from its being told from only Lucius Priest’s point of view. That is, “Grandfather said” signals that while the story at hand was told to the auditor at one time from the mouth of “Grandfather” (i.e. Lucius Priest), the present narrative is the result of its *repetition* by some unnamed grandchild of Lucius Priest. For, of course, the “Grandfather” of Lucius cannot be the one to whom the first line refers, since he could not know that which is related from the personal, psychic, experience of Lucius. But, if Lucius as “Grandfather” had at some point sat down and told this story to some grandchild, then the narration could begin “Grandfather said:”

But *The Reivers* contains information within the oral tale that is clearly literate in nature, but is transformed. In the novel’s first two chapters, it might be said, the whole of Yoknapatawpha history is reviewed, from Dan Grinnup, descendent of “the Huguenot Lois Grenier who crossed the mountains of Virginia and Carolina after the Revolution and came down into Mississippi in the seventeen nineties and established Jefferson and named it” to Boon Hogganbeck, a “holding corporation” for the Edmonds/McCaslins, Major De Spain, and

General Compson, a “mutual benevolent protective benefit association, of which the benefits were all Boon’s, and the mutuality and the benevolence and the protecting all ours,” himself part Chickasaw and, “depending on the depth of his cups. . . a royal lineal descendant of old Issetibbeha himself (*The Reivers* 8; 18-9). In between, Lucius Priest reviews the importance of the camp referred to as “the McCaslin Camp,” but formerly the “De Spain Camp,” situated twenty miles from Jefferson on “a portion of old Thomas Sutpen’s vast kingly dream that not only destroyed itself but destroyed him too” (20), mentions the rise of the Snopes clan (24), as well as the competition between Lucius’ Grandfather and Colonel Sartoris resulting in the introduction of the automobile to Jefferson, Mississippi (with a sidelong glance discounting its earlier appearance at the hands of the “incorrigible and bachelor” Manfred de Spain). Finally, “Uncle” Ned McCaslin, “inherited” by the McCaslin/Priest clan, “with his legend (which had no firmer supporter than Ned himself) that his mother had been the natural daughter of old Lucius Quintus Carothers himself and a Negro slave” (31) is introduced. As in all of the earlier novels except, perhaps, *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner weaves together bits and pieces of that familial and communal history that he feels is important as context for the story to follow.

What is interesting to note is that the bits and pieces he includes here make some connection to every major story in his body of works: the Sartorises recall *The Unvanquished* and *Sartoris*; the Compsons *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*; De Spain, “Barn Burning,” and *The Snopes Trilogy*; the

McCaslins *Go Down, Moses*; the Snopeses, *The Snopes Trilogy*. Briefer mentions of Gavin Stevens (*Intruder in the Dust, Light in August, Go Down, Moses, The Snopes Trilogy*), Doc Peabody (*As I Lay Dying*), the Hampton sheriff dynasty (*Intruder in the Dust, The Snopes Trilogy*), Walter Ewell (*Go Down, Moses*), Sam Fathers (“Had Two Fathers,” *Go Down, Moses*), and Tennie’s Jim (*Go Down, Moses*) seem to confirm that the beginning pages of *The Reivers* attempt to connect the final novel to everything that has preceded it.⁴⁶

While such knowledge may indeed reside in a single memory, its presentation within the story of Lucius’s coming of age is a literate interpolation into the oral tale. This the result of the novel’s multiple narrative voice. The matter that is encapsulated within the narrative boundary set off by “Grandfather said” is supplemented with information that comes out of the “old times” of Yoknapatawpha County, serving as contextualizing historical information but which would probably have not been a part of the story that a Grandfather would tell to his grandchildren about his childhood. That is, this other material and the labyrinthine connections that it makes between the story of Lucius Priest and everything that has gone before are the incorporation into the oral tale of “history.” In addition, this “history” constitutes the history of the community that would *not* have made it into the official record—but which would have been part of local lore. By allowing the interpolation of these other threads, *The Reivers*

⁴⁶ References are from *Who’s Who in Faulkner* and Brook’s Character Index at the end of *The Yoknapatawpha Country*. They are not exhaustive.

solves one of the central problems for characters that struggled with the question of the transmission of meaning through language in time. In being "reminiscent," *The Reivers* is at one and the same time the process of recollecting the past and its narration at the same time.

The relation between story and narrative in several ways marks the text. As has been noted, the inclusion of that historical material that connects the present tale to every thread in the Yoknapatawpha stories represents a kind of literate "record" within the oral tale. But the narrator's asides and interruptive interpolations also stand to reveal a set of relationships in *The Reivers* that is important for an understanding of the relation of the oral to the literate.

In terms of narration, the oral and the literate act together as determinants of the novel's form in a way that is distinct from Faulkner's earlier novels. The horizontal movement of the plot is oral in that it follows the events "as they happened" without determining them. The literate presentation of the material, however, is marked by discursive forays into areas of historical or biographical detail that can only be available to a literate imagination. In *The Reivers* such interruptions are not interruptions at all, they merely incorporate themselves into the oral narrative "flow" and, as a result, are not productive of a fracturing of the text. The result is a kind of organic harmony between the two modes. Such organicism does not mean there are no discursive interruptions to the flow of the narrative. But what digressions there are are not of the same type that one is used to in Faulkner's novels. Nor are they new.

The novel establishes the oral nature of the tale to follow with “Grandfather said.” At the same time, this graphic sign, not enclosed in quotation marks, is *not* utterance.⁴⁷ The words work to situate the narrative within the context of speech but not in the form of speech: the oral *as* the literate. As the first chapter proceeds, the initial discursive interruptions are highly mannered and, parenthetical—graphically underscored as narrative breaks that interpolate “speech” sublimated to writing. The introduction of parentheses identifies the language offset as a kind of dramatic aside, suggesting the situation of the telling: that of a grandfather speaking to one or more of his grandchildren about something of importance from the past. In the beginning of the novel, these parentheticals recur enough to establish the shadow of orality over the whole tale, as if Faulkner wishes to dramatize the importance of the oral within the context of the human need, from generation to generation, to transmit itself in language through time. The fact of the form of these interruptions in parentheticals, at the same time, signals the ways in which the literate is equipped with a range of techniques to *display* that which in orality would require the actual presence of an auditor. By the time Faulkner writes *The Reivers*, the ways in which texts call attention to the mechanism of their own transmission has become so internalized

⁴⁷ According to Richard Gray, one of the final adjustments Faulkner insisted on making to the manuscript of *The Reivers* was to remove the words “Grandfather said” from the first sentence and have them placed alone, “in capitol letters to supply a frame for the entire telling of the tale” (Gray 360).

as to be visibly invisible. The dramatic asides do not appear as interruptive speech, but a literately cocooned within parentheses and thereby oralized.

The full sentence that follows the novel's first two words, "This is the kind of a man Boon Hogganbeck was," in a sense, identifies one of the central concerns of the novel. It is the kind of statement that could never adhere to the character of Joe Christmas, for instance, because the tragedy of his situation was that because he did not know who he was, he could never enact who he should be. In retrospect we understand the novel to be the coming of age story of Lucius Priest. But that story takes place within the context of other stories and so is situated, in a kind of comic version of *Moby Dick* within Boon Hogganbeck's misadventure to Memphis and back. What follows immediately is curious: "Hung on the wall, it could have been his epitaph, like a Bertillon chart or a police poster; any cop in north Mississippi would have arrested him out of any crowd after merely reading the date" (*The Reivers* 3). A "Bertillon chart" is a graphic instance of a system developed to identify the characteristics of an individual, usually by noting physical singularities, and especially associated with the tracking of a criminal, of which the fingerprint is perhaps the best-known aspect. Faulkner suggests that the Saturday morning's misadventure with the gun serves as a kind of Bertillon chart identifying those aspects of Boon's character (not in physical terms) that mark him as a unique individual.

This is an ironic illustration of the relationship between the oral and the literate. That which can only be revealed in words and actions, in some sense, can

never be reduced to the striated and diagrammatic reductionism of a “chart.” Yet, the first paragraph of *The Reivers* indicates that the episode that follows functions to convey the same kind of information that such a chart could, in short hand, represent, underscoring how the written sign can reveals its relation to its oral progenitor as a graphic reminder that does not contain the full meaning, but recalls it. The initial episode in *The Reivers* reveals the character of the man, Boon Hogganbeck, contextualizing the story of his traveling to Memphis to see Corrie as the act of a someone rash enough to cause the kind of trouble he does on that Saturday morning, resulting in the firing of the gun, a broken window, injury to a young girl who “got in the way” and the swearing out of “two-mutual action bonds” to keep the peace between Boon and Ludus (*Reivers* 16).

Following the first paragraph, the narrative continues, “It was Saturday morning,” and then describes Lucius’ presence in his father’s livery office at the moment that Boon “jumps” in looking to retrieve the gun customarily held in the office desk. The reference to the date (which is never given) means that the incidents of the day become so famous that the very mention of the “crime” would be enough information to identify the hapless perpetrator—not the mention of the name as reminder of the crime. In a seeming reversal of Addie Brunden’s attitude regarding language, Boon becomes the Bertillon chart of his own character. Reference to his actions indicates a date; but the date does not necessarily refer to his identity.

The setting of the telling of the story is 1961, while the events take place in 1905,⁴⁸ brings Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha cycle to "present day" in terms of it's being contemporaneous with publication. The wry comment regarding the date, then, might also be an indication of the enduring fame, locally speaking, of the event referenced—a part of the oral lore of Jefferson, Mississippi—one among many such comic episodes having to do with Boon Hogganbeck.

The mere mention of a date also continues Faulkner's habit of linking the meaning of human affairs and time. Somehow, time's register is always connected in Faulkner's stories with the events they contain, as if to signal both their particularity and their universality. The fact of a date is indicated, but not a specific date. The month and season are referenced ("it was May" and Lucius must catch up to the end of a baseball game he has substantially missed) but no year is indicated. The references to the present are enclosed within the telling by Lucius as a sixty-plus year-old-man without recourse to details belonging to that time (that is, in the beginning of the novel the parentheticals work to establish the teller's relationship with the events of the story ("Grandfather") as well as with his listeners, though this latter aspect, like the year 1961, can only be inferred, since no direct reference to auditors is made within the novel).

The oral exists, then, encapsulated within what only the literate can make available. That the incident to be related is specific is important enough to be the

⁴⁸ Cleanth Brooks, in *The Yoknapatawpha Country*, identifies the year as 1961 and the year of the events in the story as 1905 (see pp 350 and 349, respectively).

center of what is told, its universality evident by the lack of specificity in terms of key details. The universal for Faulkner rises only out of the particular—just as Genette describes for the novel as form itself. Time in Faulkner’s fiction, then, cannot be recorded in dates, but must be encountered as the “motion” of actions transmitted from the past as narrative.

As the first chapter details the incident on that “Saturday morning” in May, the narrator has recourse to interrupt his narrative that will connect it to his auditor’s present. At first, this is done with casual asides (“(week’s); (it was May); (not mine: your great-grandfather’s); (Jefferson, Mississippi, anyway)” *The Reivers*, 3-4). As the chapter continues, however, those that re-establish the relationship between teller and auditor, story and audience supplement such clarifying remarks: “(That’s right. A Hampton was sheriff then too); (The weekly pay of drivers was two dollars; this was 1905, remember)” (10; 13), as well as those that, in a more complicated way, seem to do both at once:

‘(you will have already have noticed how both of them had completely dismissed Boon from the affair; neither Ludus to say, ‘Mr. Boon knows these mules wont be in tonight; aint he the boss until Mr. Ballott comes back in the morning?’ nor John to say, ‘Anybody that would believe the tale you brought in here tonight in place of them mules, aint competent to be the boss of nothing. And I aint even good convinced yet that his name is Boon Hogganbeck).’ (12.

The beginning of this aside, “you will have already noticed,” is a bit of direct address to the immediate auditors implied by the first two words in the novel (GRANDFATHER SAID:) reconnecting the story with its narrative, which is clearly oral. The rest, however, is literate in the sense that it offers a scenario that never happened—if we understand what is available to the oral as that which actually either happened or was said. That is, as so many different treatments of orality make clear, the capacity for lying in oral culture is not the same as it is in literate culture—making of the production of fiction something entirely different for orality as for literacy. In literacy, it seems, fiction is readily available and indicated herein because the aside, “you will have already noticed,” would not find a place to be uttered in a purely oral tale.

The Reivers, then, is a capstone novel, bringing together everything that Faulkner has been thinking about from the beginning of his career. He includes every familial connection for the Yoknapatawpha saga as well as every technique he has experimented with in terms of narrative. Yet, this narrative experimentation has somehow been changed in *The Reivers* (significantly subtitled “*A Reminiscence*,” perhaps indicating its nature as a recollection of past events as well as Faulkner’s recollection of his narrative techniques).

Out of these enfolding techniques, once Boon and Lucius (and Ned) have successfully taken possession of the stolen car and are on their way to Memphis, Faulkner allows the story to proceed according to conventional novelistic technique and it becomes Lucius’ story in the sense that Faulkner keys the now

third-person omniscient narration upon Lucius' experience (as he had in "Barn Burning" with Sarty's). This transition happens in the second chapter, in which Boon's seemingly natural affinity for the automobile is introduced. The narrative describes how Boon thinks that a local mechanic, Mr. Buffaloe, is in an "instantaneous, accord and understanding" of Boon's need to get Lucius' Grandfather's car into Buffaloe's hands and the owner "out of town" (27) so that Boon can be taught how it operates. But the text includes the line "That was how Boon told it," and reveals the difference between Boon's understanding and the actual meaning of the story related. In this subtle way, Faulkner calls attention to the ways in which stories from the past are the combination of competing versions of themselves.

As this chapter proceeds, the narrative presence of the GRANDFATHER recedes into the background, appearing only in clarifying parentheticals that offer details regarding order and chronology:

'No,' she said. 'We must wait for Mister Priest.' Maybe it wasn't a victory, but anyway out side—Boon—had not only discovered the weak point in the enemy's (Grandfather's) front, by supertime that night the enemy himself would discover it too.

Discover in fact that his flank had been turned. The next afternoon (Saturday) after the bank was closed, . . . (36)

In the foregoing quote, the appearance of offset speech is clearly literate in the sense that it represents straight dialogue that is at the same time reported by the

narrator (“she said”) but not in such a way as to call attention to the narrator’s memory of the utterance and that utterance as spoken. In the next sentence, however, the offset appearance of “Boon” is a clarifying piece of information that is directly supplied by the narrator (in this case, Lucius as a boy) while the parenthetical interpolation of “Grandfather’s” constitutes an interruption by the novel’s framing narrator, Lucius as an old man. This is followed by the inclusion in the following sentence of the parenthetical “Saturday,” which is a clarifying interruption of one narrative voice (Lucius as a boy) by the other (Lucius as an old man).

Though this technique seems minimally interruptive of the narrative flow, it subtly calls attention to the relationship between the oral and the literate by recalling the highly rhetorical nature of the transmission of information from one generation to the next. The entire novel resides within the memory of Lucius Priest in the oral sense as the stuff of his youth that forms the matter of a “reminiscence” to be passed on to the future generations of his family in the form of an oral tale. Yet, within that tale, Faulkner includes the literate novelistic portrayal of Lucius as a boy experiencing the events of his story in the first person, illustrating how the literate as novel can communicate experience and its meaning through time in a way that the oral tale cannot.

The text that follows remains in the literate narrative style and tells straightforwardly the story of Boon, Lucius, and Ned’s misadventures as they travel in the stolen automobile to Memphis, lose the car, steal a horse to “win” it

back, and initiate (as an accident of circumstance) Lucius into the “ways of the world.” The details of this story constitute the milestones in Lucius’ “coming of age” and if *The Reivers* were only concerned with those milestones as they are presented in this narrative thread, then the general misgivings about this novel are understandable. But Faulkner’s subtle intertwining of the oral and the literate in this novel stands as a corrective against its being received as a merely conventional tale in which Faulkner reverts to a nostalgic look back at a time that in reality was clearly not so simple—especially in terms of race and gender.

It seems that in this narrative thread, Faulkner presents the relations between the sexes and between black and white races in too simplistic terms. In fact, the presentation of the material has lead many readers to conclude, as has been mentioned, that *The Reivers*’ rose-colored vision of those relationships betrays the complicated and ingenious musings regarding them in the earlier, darker novels. Even Cleanth Brooks, long one of Faulkner’s most ardent critical admirers, says that the novel is “valedictory” in tone (Brooks 349) as a result of the over-simplification of the darker elements just below the surface of a story that takes a boy into the underbelly of Memphis and into the world of prostitution, gambling, and crime in general.

But here one must remember that the enfolding of this literate narrative within an oral frame takes on some of the nature of that oral frame in the same way that “Was” in *Go Down, Moses* did. That is, the old orality suppresses that which does not validate the values of the tribe. The comic story of Buck and

Buddy in “Was” suppresses the experience of Tomey’s Turl, an experience perhaps similar to those of Rider and Lucas Beauchamp, which must be revealed in literate novelistic form, rather than oral form. Here too, in *The Reivers*, then, one explanation for the fact that the text does not take up the darker implications of Corrie’s subjugation by men in the profession of prostitution, or those suggested by Ned’s simplified presentation in the text as a kind of black trickster-figure are precisely because the oral order that frames the novel GRANDFATHER SAID represents the family tale from Lucius’ point of view as an old man looking back, reminiscing, and such memories have a tendency to be 20/20. At the same time, however, the presence of the literate psychological experience of the boy Lucius suggests that these experiences do touch upon those darker aspects of Faulkner’s worlds but cannot be expressed in words because this thread is given over to the narrator as a boy.

The Reivers is not then the denial of those dark issues that have during Faulkner’s career been so central to his efforts as a novelist. Rather, their presentation here reveals how the combination of the literate and the oral can function as the transmission of the past through the present to the future, since the relationship between the narrator as Grandfather and the narrator as boy is accomplished through its implied linkage to that other narrator, the unnamed grandchild in whose mouth the entire novel resides. Rather than allow the disjunction between the oral and the literate, then, to fragment the text precisely because of the difference between the ways these two modes operate, Faulkner

indicates in this text how that which is suppressed in the oral transmission may be revealed within the literate narrative that that oral transmission always implies but never expresses fully.

In the end, the relationship between the oral and the literate in Faulkner's fiction is ironic. On the one hand, the old orality that passes away in the face of the new literacy is revealed as unable to bridge the gap between the story it tells as the embodiment of a "tradition" that includes but does not express the deep psychological meanings and experiences that its events entail. There is a gap between language and what words would "say about." At the same time, the literate is revealed often as the fragmented and "fixed" record of a past that cannot by itself transmit the essence of the meaning of its message without being re-oralized. When the literate is not re-oralized, it has a striating effect on orality, distorting its meaning by reterritorializing it according to the gridded space of the literate rather than the smooth space of the oral.

The text of the novel must be "read" in order for it to be "heard." It is the combination of the rhizomatic nature of the oral transmission of information that, as Goody and others have shown, does not always succeed in bringing everything along with it as it travels through its smooth space. By the same token, the gridded and striated space of the literate, while it can contain that which the oral often forgets or creatively amends, cannot give access to the lived experience to which its words refer.

The end of the boy Lucius' s tale reveals ironically, I think, Faulkner's tying up of the loose threads of the long human recording that his novels embody. For the trio—which represents all spheres: youth and age, innocence and experience, black, white, and Indian (in the appropriation by Faulkner for this novel of Boon's connection to native American blood) as well as the connection in the Boon/Corrie relationship to gendered relationships—are successful in their layered gambits. They win the horse race and retrieve the car, while Corrie quits her profession and marries Boon and bears him a child. All are restored to Jefferson, thereafter, where the boy Lucius is incorporated as a young man into the adult world, having learned that his responsibility for his actions must be born by him according to the code of the gentleman. Significantly, his Grandfather tells Lucius “Nothing is ever forgotten. Nothing is ever lost. It's too important” (302). It is for this reason that only Lucius can take responsibility for his own actions, learn to live with them—not merely in the sense of accommodating them, but truly live with them. This is the code of the gentleman: “A gentleman accepts the responsibility of his actions and bears the burden of their consequences, even when he did not himself instigate them but only acquiesced to them, didn't say No though he knew he should” (302).

Though this takes the form of a moral, in some ways it suggests what Faulkner's fiction has been driving at throughout his career—the coming to terms with what it means to live with the consequences not only of individual actions, but their connections to the actions that form part and parcel of that past that

makes the individual who he or she is and form the fabric of the individual's relationship to everything else. It is easy to cast *The Reivers* aside as a novel that resolves its darker issues in too simplistic a way—in the marriage of Boon Hogganbeck and Everbe Corinthia, for instance—and see it as a kind of late figural turning away from the implications that grew out of Faulkner's earlier fiction. But *The Reivers* bears the mark of a complex understanding of cultural, racial, and gendered interaction even if it reveals that interaction in a comic rather than a tragic setting.

As John Duvall argues in terms of the relationship between the fiction of Toni Morrison and William Faulkner, their complex handling of these relationship, continually “question the value of the traditional” in “a proliferation of difference” that becomes so “great that the very concept of ‘normal’ begins to dissolve.” In terms of Faulkner specifically, Duval points out that this is so, in part, because an “African-American oral tradition in narrative and music (the blues, spirituals) surrounded Faulkner throughout his life and undoubtedly marked him in ways he could not have articulated”:

But clearly Faulkner did not wish to repudiate black culture, as his dedication of *Go Down, Moses* to Caroline Barr (Mammy Callie) indicates. The title of this novel, along with stories such as “That Evening Sun,” reveal Faulkner's awareness of African-American culture. So that even though Faulkner's portrayal of black characters in a number of instances seems stereotypical, the kinds

of figurations that ultimately confirm white identity . . . he nevertheless was attempting a cultural synthesis (*Unflinching Gaze* 11).

I would apply Duvall's insight to Faulkner's complex handling of gendered relationships throughout his career as well. In these terms, Boon does not "rescue" Corrie from her corrupted life—she rescues him from his. And their relationship in the end illustrates perhaps how the "traditional" relationship between men and women has been transformed (something strongly suggested by Lena Grove's "rescue" of Byron from his life of avoiding troubles).

The success or failure of Faulkner's characters, their fates, have been tied thus far to their relationship in oral and/or literate terms to the world in which they move. If they are characters who move in worlds in which the demands of the oral and the literate overlap, frequently their stories are articulated in the context of the superimposition of one over the other, or the miscommunication between the two. If they are characters that deliberately set out to construct a narrative (like Quentin Compson or Ike McCaslin) that accounts for the alternative structuring principles of the oral and the literate, their fates and those narratives will take the shape of the success or failure of that endeavor.

In each case, the endeavor is tied to the meaning of events that touch the lives of Faulkner's characters through time. Sometimes Faulkner limits the reach of the temporal mode—tying it to a particular character's experience (as in the case of Sarty Snopes, in "Barn Burning"). Sometimes he widens its scope to entail

the meaning of events as they influence individuals connected to a family (the Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*). Sometimes an individual's struggle is to link his experience to the larger meaning it takes within the context of an entire region (*Absalom, Absalom!*). Faulkner's texts likewise often deal with a confluence of several pasts, a mixture of localized individual experience, familial past, and communal/regional past (*Light in August*). Other times, Faulkner's linkage runs the gamut from the individual to the universal (as in *Go Down, Moses*).

What any of these efforts entails, what they all have in common, is the transmission in language of the meaning of human experience through time. If the attempt is localized to an individual, the form of that transmission is personalized memory. If the attempt crosses the boundary of individual experience and reverberates through a family or a community on a larger scale, then that transmission will take one of several forms, articulated in oral, literate, or oral/literate terms. Furthermore, such a fictive transmission will be embodied in a text whose shape begins to be structured according to the principle of that transmission. As has been shown, the modernist tendencies of Faulkner's earlier major texts tended to exhibit the qualities produced in or according to a confrontation of the structuring principles of the oral and the literate. Yet even as those earlier novels seem to articulate the endless deferral of a unified meaning (both for the novels and the characters who inhabit them), they also gravitate toward attention to the enduring dignity of the lives of those characters whose

struggles they entail and whose stories they tell. This in turn is related to the stable structures of Faulkner's novels. For even if for the individual character the gap between the two organizing principles results in uncertainty, the arrangement of Faulkner's narrative threads seems to sustain them.

If these earlier novels seem to struggle (successfully) with the confrontation of the oral and the literate as organizers and embodiments of narrative meaning-making, then as Faulkner's career progresses they also entail the literate confrontation with the oral as the authentic progenitor of the literate's own form. In this sense, Faulkner's characters fall in one of two groups. There are those who persist despite the confrontation between the oral and the literate—Sarty Snopes, the female Quentin Compson, Dilsey, Lena Grove and Byron Bunch, Sam Fathers, Lucas and Molly Beauchamp, and the unnamed grandchild of Lucius Priest—and those who fail to make a connection altogether, or perish in the confrontation—Quentin, and Jason Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*; Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* (and Shreve, who fails to make a connection) along with Thomas Sutpen and his clan, as well as the other failed narrators of his saga, General Compson and Rosa Coldfield, Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower in *Light in August*, and, tragically, Rider in *Go Down, Moses*. One cannot help but notice that those characters that persist belong to the marginalized in a world where the old orality seems swept away in the face of literacy.

But it would be too simplistic, as the nuanced structure and balance of each of his novels reveals, to conclude that Faulkner has been romantically

chronicling the passing away of an older, more noble, way of life (represented by orality) as modern progress (literacy) establishes its new order through subjugation and violence. Furthermore, Faulkner's complicated understanding of race and gender militate against a reading that interprets his novels to lament the passing of an order that, itself, entailed slavery in particular and racism and misogyny in general.

If we look back over the course of Faulkner's career, we should take note of the crisis that seems to attend the character confronted fully with the meaning of his own existence within the seeming flux of history as it rushes forward from the past. In too many cases in Faulkner's fiction that sense of the onrush of the past that exerts its pressure upon the present is articulated in the character's attempt to come to terms with present meaning as it relates to that which has gone before. This aspect of Faulkner's fiction sets it squarely within a literate culture, one that seems to understand contemplation itself to be the confrontation of the meaning of the present moment as it relates to the past—not only in individual terms, but in terms that reach out and touch other members of the family, community, and those who inhabit a space between past and present, literate and oral.

But literacy fundamentally makes available *and* cuts one off from the past. As the earlier novels make clear, Faulkner's characters have approached those stabilized texts, when available, as if they represent some symbology from a time that is inaccessible, whose meaning is no longer available. Even when writing has

functioned in those earlier novels in the temporal present, it has been treated as a hieroglyphic whose meaning requires a priest's dedication to translate. And when it has been translated it has been in oral terms. In "Barn Burning" the meaning of the hieroglyphics of literate sign upon the labels of sardine and deviled ham is translated by Sarty's stomach—but not into words. In the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury*, the meaning of the sacred text is translated in oral terms in the form of a sermon, rendered in the "art speech" of the (new) dialect in which it is given—in literate terms only because it stands over and against the novelistic "speech" that would interpret it. Or in Lena Grove's re-oralizing of the literate sign in purchasing the "sour deens," and thereby making them her own, breathing into its name a new life. Each of these instances represents moments of confrontation between the oral and the literate according to which variation and difference results in the creation or addition of something new to that which has seemed either inaccessible or fixed and unalterable.

The idea that the literate fixes that which was once not fixed in orality, or unifies that which is communal, introduces a kind of difficulty in coming to understand the literate and the oral in Faulkner's texts. As the example of Lena Grove illustrates, the oral has the power to transform the literate in a way that does not parallel the literate's transformation of the oral. The ledgers in "The Bear" represent a version of the literalization of oral memory in their rudimentary tracing of familial experience as a recording of events that forms a fragmentary and running dialogue between Uncles Buck and Buddy. Ike's engagement with

the material introduces him into that dialogue, and his conversation with Cass mirrors the kind of creative and interpretive process in which Quentin and Shreve engage in attempting to make sense of the Sutpen saga. The difference between these two last examples, however, is that in *Absalom, Absalom!* there is no written record, no fixed text—even Bon’s letter to Judith, without salutation or signature, remains elusive—to refer to in order to correct variations of the Sutpen tale that creep in as a result of its “performance” in the here and now. So, the resulting narrative becomes the ghost of a narrative that can never be told.

By contrast, the fragmentary nature of the record in the ledgers that Ike reads represents not merely that fragmentation that happens to the archeological remnants of a once fully embodied artifact. The text itself was produced *as fragmentary*. It offers a clue regarding the McCaslin past, but cannot offer anything like a fully articulated narrative. Ike must attempt to supply that himself. On the other hand, that fully articulated narrative in its very orality suppresses other aspects of life (Tomey’s Turl’s first person experience) that do not valorize McCaslin tribal mores. Ike’s experience has taught him that the transmission of his familial culture, its legacy and his birthright, involves more than what the words attempt to communicate. His frantic inarticulation at the end of “Delta Autumn,” punctuated by the gift of the horn, contrasts sharply with Lena Grove’s easy transformation of *sardines* to “sour deens.” She not only purchases them, she makes them her own.

The attempt by the character not only to receive the literate or oral transmission from the past, but also to make it his or her own is the underlying effort throughout Faulkner's career. This effort is affected by the relationship between the oral and the literate. Each mode of organization treats of the same "stuff": language. And it is not merely a matter of its method of representation. Certainly, the oral can be contained by the literate, through a series of typographical norms that have come to stand in and symbolize the oral within the literate. Yet those markers are only traces of the "logic" of the oral within the literate. If the character can make what is "other" her own, then, of course, she can pass it along. If he cannot, then, like Joe Christmas or the Compson brothers (each for different reasons), he will remain alienated or impotent. *The Reivers*, then, ought to be looked at in light of the differences between the way the literate and the oral cope with the attempt to transmit or relate the past to the present in Faulkner's fiction. As has been argued, this is essentially bound up with memory and the form in which that memory is transmitted from one individual to another, out of a past and into a present so that it may combine here to form a future. In *The Reivers* Faulkner has structured this effort within a text that elides the difference between the story and its transmission as narrative by encapsulating the oral tale within a literate imagination. As a result, the story is allowed at one and the same time to be its expression and the embodiment of its interpretation. In being so, it reveals that Faulkner's effort has not been to forge out of the combination of the literate and the oral any kind of "new" orality, or even an

oralized literacy. Rather his effort has been to reveal that the “old” orality never really passes away—but is expressed anew *through* the literate. If the text is always already oral, then when the literate acknowledges its progenitor form *as* form, for Faulkner the oral becomes the soul of the literate, the literate the embodiment of the oral.

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