

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2008

### "Words Are No Good": The Curse of Signification and the Curse of Faulkner's South

Michael Joseph St. Thomas  
*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### Recommended Citation

St. Thomas, Michael Joseph, "'Words Are No Good": The Curse of Signification and the Curse of Faulkner's South" (2008). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 10.  
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/10>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

“WORDS ARE NO GOOD”:

THE CURSE OF SIGNIFICATION AND THE CURSE OF FAULKNER’S SOUTH

By

Michael Joseph St. Thomas

B.A. Providence College, Providence, RI, 2005

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Masters of Arts  
in English Literature

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

Spring 2008

Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean  
Graduate School

Dr. Christopher Knight, Chair  
English Department

Dr. David Moore  
English Department

Dr. Michael Mayer  
History Department

St. Thomas, Michael, M.A., Spring 2008

English Literature

“Words are No Good”: The Curse of Signification and the Curse of Faulkner’s South

Chairperson: Dr. Christopher Knight

In this study I examine three of Faulkner’s novels that concern his fictional Yoknapatawpha County: *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). These novels, I argue, indicate a development in Faulkner’s relationship to the formalist hierarchy of art over real life. To show this development I will investigate the topic of language as an inadequate medium in characters’ relationships to nature and the past. In *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner presents words as something unable to achieve the transcendence his characters desire. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses* the author extends this suspicion of language to the value system of plantation society. Structured like a language, based on arbitrary differences, Yoknapatawpha’s social framework lacks transcendent authority. The South crumbles, Faulkner suggests, because language ultimately does.

In my intro I briefly outline the formalist framework as it appears in French Symbolism and later, New Criticism. In my chapter on *As I Lay Dying* I focus on Addie Bundren’s identification with the silent presence of the natural world. She despises words because they indicate a lack: her experiences with her children and with nature transcend representation. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner takes this same critique of signification and applies it to the social structure of the Southern plantation system. He depicts the South’s caste system as upheld by an edifice of symbols that attempts to mask class, race, and gender oppression. Eventually, Faulkner suggests, his region will have to recognize those horrors upon which it constructed its society. Finally, in my chapter on *Go Down, Moses*, I argue that Faulkner places the problems of signification squarely at the heart of human interaction with the natural world. Direct experience with transcendent nature is impossible because it is forever lost in the South’s history. Over the course of these three novels, we see Faulkner complicating the Symbolist hierarchy that heralds a work’s timeless insights over its cultural context.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: “Dark Voicelessness”: Nature and Female Presence in <i>As I Lay Dying</i> .....	13
Chapter 2: Symbolic Language and the Plantation South in <i>Absalom, Absalom!</i> .....	30
Chapter 3: “What Distance Back to Truth”: The Inevitable Representation of <i>Go Down, Moses</i> .....	47
Conclusion.....	65
Works Cited.....	68

## INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner has assumed canonical status in the world of English literature ever since Malcolm Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) placed him alongside American giants such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James. In mid-century the New Criticism, led by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, devoured Faulkner's novels and stories, especially those concerning Yoknapatawpha, his fictional Mississippi County. Populated with gambling, fighting men and silent, mysterious women, its events and legends seemed backwater palimpsests of Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, tailor-made for a formalist criticism that emphasized art's ability to access the universal.

This formalism provides a backdrop for my investigation into Faulkner's treatment of language in the novels *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*.<sup>1</sup> I will first outline this critical framework and explain its relevance to my project. The New Critical focus on the eternal aspects of literature often rendered the work's cultural context secondary. When noted as relevant, the social or geographical particulars from which a piece of literature arose were always subordinated to its form and overall meaning.<sup>2</sup> To apply this to Faulkner's case, Yoknapatawpha's peculiarly Southern issues—slavery, miscegenation, etc.—are merely mediums that allow him to access greater truths. For example, while recognizing the inherent relationship between Faulkner's fiction and its specifically Southern situation, Penn Warren argues that the

---

<sup>1</sup>Though *Go Down, Moses* consists of seven stories, Faulkner considered it a novel, and throughout this study, I will refer to it as such. See Joseph Blotner, ed. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*. (New York, Random House, 1977), 284.

<sup>2</sup>This subordination is evinced by caveat in the preface to the third edition of Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. The disclaimer acknowledges the primacy of form over context as it attempts to reconcile them: "Form, of course, does not exist in a vacuum. It is not an abstraction. [...] Poems come out of a historical moment, and since they are written in language, the form is tied to a whole cultural context" (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), xiv.

attraction of his art is that it offers “a release into life, into the sense of a grand and disturbing meaningfulness beneath the crust of life, into a moral reality beneath the crust of history.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Conrad Aiken, quoting Henry James, claims that Faulkner considers the accidents of his fiction—the South—as the “circumstances of the interest” of his art, but not the interest, the substance, itself.<sup>4</sup>

A major reason that New Criticism adopted Faulkner so readily is a shared influence: the formalism of the late-Romantics and French Symbolist poets.<sup>5</sup> Faulkner’s first published work, a poem entitled “L’Après-Midi d’Un Faune” (1919), is a re-working of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem of the same name, and his first published book, a collection of poems entitled *The Marble Faun* (1924), takes Paul Verlaine’s “Le Faune” as its central image.<sup>6</sup> For my project, the importance of Faulkner’s connection to the Symbolists is not specifically a similar descriptive style—an “aesthetic of suggestion and intimation”<sup>7</sup>—but that which enables this aesthetic, the Symbolist framework summarized by Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (which Faulkner read):<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Penn Warren, ed. *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> For the influence of French Symbolism, see Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), x, 3. Alexander Marshall III, “William Faulkner: The Symbolist Connection.” *American Literature* 59.3 (Oct., 1987), 389-401, David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 36, and Judith L Sensibar, *The Origins of Faulkner’s Art*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), xvii, 5-8.

<sup>6</sup> Minter, 35-6.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall III, 400. He quotes Mallarmé’s famous lines: “To *name* an object...is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem...to *suggest* it, there’s the dream.”

<sup>8</sup> Sensibar, xvii.

And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it.<sup>9</sup> Symbolist poetry, like its New Critical successor, sets up a hierarchy of the universal over the particular, synchronic over diachronic, timeless over temporal, ideal over real. We can trace this dualism to British Romanticism and John Keats, who, in his long poem *Endymion*, wrote: “All lovely tales that we have heard or read: / An endless fountain of immortal drink, / Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink” (21-25).<sup>10</sup> Art is foremost a space for inquiry into the eternal, and the “tales” themselves are participants in the “immortal” fountain. We also see this emphasis in Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which praises the “Cold Pastoral” of the Hellenic frieze because its characters, frozen in time and therefore timeless, “doth tease us out of thought / As doth eternity” (44-45).<sup>11</sup> Art is most valuable as a form that enables its audience to escape the bonds of worldly existence.

Late in his career, in a 1955 interview in Manila, it appears that Faulkner, despite his reputation as an author who wrote specifically about the American South, heralded the timeless aspects of his art:

I think that the setting of a novel is just incidental, that the novelist is writing about truth; I mean by truth, the things that are true to all people, which are love, friendship, courage, fear, greed; that he writes in the tongue which he knows, which happens to be the tongue of his own native land. I doubt if environment or

---

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1919), 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> John Keats, *Poetical Works*. (London: Macmillan, 1884). Bartleby.com, 1999. [www.bartleby.com/126/](http://www.bartleby.com/126/). 29 Feb 2008.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

country can be enough inspiration to write a book about, that the writer is simply using the tool which he knows. I write about American Mississippi simply because that is what I know best.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Faulkner's approach to his region cannot be rendered so simply. The South was more important to Faulkner than he lets on in the Manila quotation, and a close reading of his work indeed yields a vexed relationship to this Formalist tradition. Early in his career, especially in the poems of *The Marble Faun* (his first published work) we can see Faulkner already challenging this aesthetic vision from within. In these poems, he clearly struggles with Keats' primacy of art over life: the poems concern an inanimate faun who laments that he cannot answer "the world [that] breathes and calls" but he instead must remain "marble-bound."<sup>13</sup> Karl Zender argues that Faulkner gradually desired to "embed his symbolic meanings in the facticity of his native region," and points to an unpublished commentary on the early novel *Sartoris* in which the author claims that he wants to "bind into [a] whole a world which for some reason I believe should not pass utterly out of the memory of man."<sup>14</sup>

If "the setting of a novel is just incidental," why would Faulkner not want the South to fade from human memory? What is it about the South that he could not avoid addressing in the midst of his "writing about truth"? In this study, I will look closely at how Faulkner approaches these ideas in three works of fiction that generally mark the

---

<sup>12</sup> James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962*. (New York: Random House, 1968), 202. See also his letter to Malcolm Cowley, November 1944: "I'm inclined to think that my material, the South, is not very important to me. I just happen to know it, and dont [sic] have time in one life to learn another one and write at the same time." In Blotner, ed. *Selected Letters*, 185.

<sup>13</sup> William Faulkner, *The Marble Faun and The Green Bough*. (New York: Random House, 1924 and 1933, reprinted 1965), 12. For the well-noted influence of Keats and the Grecian Urn on Faulkner, see Brooks, *Toward Yoknapatawpha*. 5-6, and Minter, 36-7

<sup>14</sup> Karl Zender, *Faulkner and the Politics of Reading*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 121.



beginning, middle, and end of his most canonical period:<sup>15</sup> *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). These novels, I argue, indicate a development in Faulkner's relationship to the tradition I have just outlined. To show this I will investigate the topic of language as an inadequate medium in characters' relationships to nature and the past. In *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner presents words as something unable to achieve the transcendence his characters desire. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses* the author extends this suspicion of language to the value system of plantation society. Structured like a language, based on arbitrary differences, Yoknapatawpha's social framework lacks transcendent authority. The South crumbles, Faulkner suggests, because language ultimately does.

The earliest of the novels I consider tells the hillbilly odyssey of the Bundren family as they carry their mother's corpse to burial in the town of Jefferson. Over the course of the story the natural world emerges a silent presence that transcends the limits of language and signification. In her lone narrating chapter, Addie Bundren, the matriarch whose death sets the story in motion, bemoans the inadequacies of words. They can never indicate those things they aim to represent, she claims, and she aspires to the silent presence of the natural world and her female body. Nature, to Addie, is a "dark voicelessness" that communicates to her and in which, in her unspoken interaction with her children, she also participates (*ALD* 174).<sup>16</sup>

The novel is about white tenant farmers in the South, and does not engage issues such as slavery, reconstruction, or even the Civil War. Like *The Sound and the Fury*,

---

<sup>15</sup> A period that Philip Weinstein calls his "temporary allegiance to modernism" in *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 114.

<sup>16</sup> Page references to Faulkner's novels will be abbreviated as follows: *AA*: *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1990); *ALD*: *As I Lay Dying*. (New York: Vintage, 1990); *GDM*: *Go Down, Moses*. (New York: Vintage, 1973); *SF*: *The Sound and the Fury*. (New York: Vintage, 1990).

written one year earlier, *As I Lay Dying*'s multi-perspectival narration focuses intensely on the philosophical and psychological aspects of one family. Yet while the private troubles of the Compson family are firmly situated in the larger contexts of slavery and reconstruction, the questions Addie raises about language and nature might have been raised anywhere, and in the novel the Southern-ness of Yoknapatawpha emerges only in the Bundrens' colloquialisms.<sup>17</sup>

In *Absalom, Absalom!* we find a similar questioning of language's limits. Quentin Compson desperately tries to narrate the life of the slave-owning patriarch Thomas Sutpen, yet in the end Sutpen eludes his grasp. Whereas the Bundren's story offers no link between its philosophical themes and the plantation South, Quentin's narration firmly connects Addie's concept of language as an ineffective medium to the circumstances that led to the rise and fall of this system. Quentin is haunted by those people and events he wants to narrate: the "back-looking ghosts" of the Civil War, the "fever which had cured the disease" (7). Yet we realize, as Quentin does, that the disease—slavery—has not been cured. Instead, in the story of Thomas Sutpen, we witness the collapse of a value system that has attempted to achieve meaning through differences—in race, class, and gender. Like Sutpen's mansion, which his half-black daughter burns at the novel's end, the South can no longer ignore those people who have fallen into the gaps of its rigid hierarchy. Quentin's frustration with using words to capture this history is unresolved. Asked why he hates the South, Quentin pants quickly, "*I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*" (303), still unable to comprehend his

---

<sup>17</sup> The opening and close of *The Sound and the Fury* situate it firmly in the post-bellum South: the golf course where we find Benjy at the outset is the result of the sale of what remained of the Compson's plantation to pay for Quentin's education at Harvard; the novel ends with Luster, the descendant of slaves, driving the screaming Benjy around the confederate monument in the center of Jefferson.

complicated and troubling relationship to his homeland in words, as Addie says, that “dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (*ALD* 171).

In Sutpen’s “design”—his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to establish a slave-owning dynasty—Faulkner plumbs the origins of the Southern curse of slavery. Nearly thirty years before the Civil War, Sutpen rides into the town of Jefferson, Mississippi seemingly from nowhere, without a history.<sup>18</sup> He builds a plantation in attempts to father a male heir and found a dynasty, a design set in motion by a single event in Sutpen’s youth: his rejection at the door of a plantation mansion by the plantation owner’s black servant. This encounter, which I will examine in greater detail in my second chapter, marks Sutpen’s fall from innocent childhood in West Virginia (“[h]e knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why” [AA 184]) to a specific time and place: the Virginia of plantations and class distinctions, where land was “divided neatly up” and social standing was understood by the existence of “objects to be wanted” (179).

Separated forever from his innocent boyhood, Sutpen formulates an identity rooted in the differences and divisions of the plantation system. Unlike the psychological questions that the Bundren’s journey explores, in *Absalom, Absalom!* notions of the self are inextricable from social context. As historian Eugene Genovese notes, the South’s social system, “especially in its plantation setting and in its paternalistic aspect, made white and black southerners one people while making them two.”<sup>19</sup> As a plantation patriarch, Sutpen’s identity is dependent upon those whose oppression sustains his

---

<sup>18</sup> Faulkner claimed in a letter to Malcolm Cowley that Quentin regarded Sutpen as “originless.” Quoted in John Irwin, *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Genovese’s Gramscian approach, in his early studies of the South, lends itself to this dialectical conception of identity: “Masters and slaves shaped each other and cannot be discussed or analyzed in isolation.” In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), xvi-xvii.

design. As we see in Faulkner's depiction of the inception of this design (the moment at the mansion door), the social parameters of the plantation system create Sutpen's oppression of slaves and of women, not the other way around.<sup>20</sup>

*Go Down, Moses* is considered one of Faulkner's most reader-friendly novels because of its distinctly regional topic: race relations in post-bellum Mississippi. As Arthur Kinney notes, Faulkner's dedication of the novel to "Mammy,"<sup>21</sup> the black servant who acted as surrogate mother to him and his siblings, marks a "deep devotion, loyalty, and sense of place," and makes the novel "the most personal of Faulkner's works."<sup>22</sup> Though *de jure* slavery had vanished after the Civil War, black codes, sharecropping, and later, Jim Crow laws, kept the caste system in effect.<sup>23</sup> As we move through the novel's seven stories, we witness the immobility of blacks who, though they have been "freed" by Lincoln, still occupy subordinate social positions: they are still tenant farmers (Lucas and Molly Beauchamp), or inexplicably violent criminals (Rider from "Pantaloons in Black," Samuel Beauchamp from "Go Down, Moses").

"Was," the opening story, is set in motion by one of Uncle Buck's recurrent chases of the escaped slave Tomey's Turl. Though the comical pursuit occurs before emancipation, its premise—a hunt that engages blacks and white but always ends with a reassertion of the established social order—guides the rest of the novel's interactions

---

<sup>20</sup> See Eugene D Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*. (New York: Pantheon, 1969), in which he argues that the "patterns of slavery [...] determined race relations" and "produced an especially virulent racism." 4, 237.

<sup>21</sup> Faulkner's epigram reads: "To Mammy / CAROLINE BARR / Mississippi / [1840-1940] / Who was born in slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood and immeasurable love and devotion."

<sup>22</sup> Arthur F. Kinney, *Go Down Moses: The Miscegenation of Time*. (New York: Twayne, 1996), xiii.

<sup>23</sup> C. Vann Woodward argues that Jim Crow laws, rather than "spr[ing] up immediately from the [...] Peculiar Institution," took effect late in the nineteenth century as a result of the fatigue of a series of checks on racism in the South: the fall of "Northern liberalism [Reconstruction], Southern conservatism [*noblesse oblige*], and Southern radicalism." In *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 25, 69.

between races. Thus, the topic of big-game hunting that pervades the stories (especially “The Old People” and “The Bear”) is closely linked to that of race relations. As Eric Sundquist notes, “[t]he metaphors of game, ritual, and pursuit that pervade the stories reveal their related strategies by referring, in almost every instance, to the struggles between hunter and beast or white and black.”<sup>24</sup> The novel emerges from this paradigm of the hunted slave, and, insofar as this is a regional paradigm, *Go Down, Moses* challenges its own author’s doubt that “environment or country can be enough inspiration to write a book about.”<sup>25</sup>

In my reading of *Go Down, Moses* I will focus on how this novel weds the themes of nature and history by rendering the idyllic Southern wilderness *as* past. Rather than a living reality, the “wild immortal spirit” is an irrecoverable presence lost in its history. The hunting stories, especially “The Bear,” portray this wilderness as already “doomed” when the young Ike McCaslin encounters it (*GDM* 192-3). *Go Down, Moses* offers nature to its readers as something already a story, transferred to us, as to Ike, in hearing and listening “out of the old time, the old days” (4). The centering action of the novel, Ike’s refusal to accept his inheritance of land, is ultimately a rejection of a symbol’s ability to serve as an adequate medium between human subject and nature or the past. On one level Ike repudiates his family’s slaveholding past, but his repudiation is also a rejection of the symbols of ownership that appear in his family’s ledgers. The words on a property deed, Ike claims, can never indicate a true relationship between human subject and what it seeks to own (nature or other humans). In this novel Faulkner links the question of representation in Southern society with something more universal: the human need to

---

<sup>24</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 134.

<sup>25</sup> Meriwether and Millgate, eds, 202.

relate to the world in symbols. In doing so, he complicates formalisms' dichotomy between universal and particular. In positing the problems of his region as everyone's problems, he does not seek to escape the South but to investigate it more fully.

I cannot raise these questions of Faulkner's treatment of language without also doing so of his portrayal of women. This is especially evident in my first chapter, where the maternal body of Addie functions not just as a central figure but one that questions the efficacy of the symbolic function of language. Though I do not aspire to a predominately feminist reading of these three novels, I do turn to the wealth of feminist criticism on Faulkner, an author who famously claimed that though he thought women "marvelous" and "wonderful," he knew "very little about them."<sup>26</sup> And in published interviews he often offered views of women as extensions of the cycles of nature, opposed to men, who are essentially artists.<sup>27</sup> Men, he suggested, create and communicate in the symbolic order, while women are life-bearers, and throughout his fiction women are constantly portrayed as mute and mysterious. Diane Roberts notes that Faulkner's major female characters are silent absences in his novels, seldom given voices, "the lacuna that paradoxically fills the lives of everyone around her [...] the supreme invention and *idée fixe* of men's lives, yet whose voice is rarely heard."<sup>28</sup> *The Sound and the Fury*'s Caddy Compson is perhaps the prime example of such a figure: though in many ways the central character of the novel and the object of desire for Benjy and Quentin, she is silent, voiceless, inexplicably complex, and identified by descriptions of

---

<sup>26</sup> Joseph L. Blotner and Frederick L. Gwynn, eds. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 45.

<sup>27</sup> See Loïc Bouvard's 1952 interview in which Faulkner claimed: "The most important thing is that man continues to create, just as woman continues to give birth." In Meriwether and Millgate, eds., 73.

<sup>28</sup> Diane Roberts, "Eula, Linda, and the Death of Nature." In *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1996*. Donald M Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 162.

her body. Citing the incident when Caddy climbs a tree to glimpse her grandmother's dead body and reveals the "muddy bottom of her drawers" to her brothers below (*SF* 38-9), Philip Weinstein claims that "a young girl's muddy drawers has the entire text in thrall."<sup>29</sup> *The Sound and the Fury* revolves not around Caddy as speaking subject (for it gives her no voice) but around her silent body.<sup>30</sup>

The relationship between Faulkner's men and women seems not to be much of a relationship at all. Rather than interact in language, men talk, while women are silent; men occupy textual space, while women linger in the "breaks and empty spaces"<sup>31</sup> of Faulkner's works. This understanding is especially relevant to my first two chapters. In the first, I address Addie Bundren's hatred of words and ultimate alliance with the "dark voicelessness" of nature. She identifies her husband with language—he is "the shape and echo of his word" (*ALD* 174)—while she associates herself with silence. This association is perhaps more overt in the female silence of *Absalom, Absalom!* (which, more so than any other Faulkner novel, is about spoken words). As Weinstein comments, "Deprived of an intersubjective frame within which they might think their spontaneous thoughts and speak their unpredictable words, [*Absalom's* women] are all representations of the other, beyond relationship."<sup>32</sup> I argue that in Quentin's uncompromising attempt to discover the past through narration in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the most meaningful link with the past is the climactic burning of Sutpen's Hundred by Dilsey, Sutpen's silent, surviving daughter.

---

<sup>29</sup> Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject*, 116-7.

<sup>30</sup> See Zender's chapter "A Voice for Caddy Compson" in *Politics of Reading*, where he argues that too often feminist critics view Faulkner's silent female bodies as his own vision, rather than his mimesis of "a tragic dilemma of modern womanhood" (71).

<sup>31</sup> Susan V. Donaldson, "Subverting History: Women, Narrative, and Patriarchy in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Southern Quarterly* 26.4 (Summer 1988), 21.

<sup>32</sup> Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject*, 23.

To quote Julia Kristeva, Faulkner's exploration of language as medium for understanding nature and the past constitutes a struggle with the human "desire for language" and "a quest for a little more truth, an impossible truth, concerning the meaning of speech, concerning our condition as speaking beings."<sup>33</sup> How does Faulkner's quest express itself along gender lines? How does Faulkner grapple with the question of language in relationship to the peculiarly Southern manifestation of gender—the patriarchal plantation? How does this struggle, over the course of the three novels that I study, reflect Faulkner's attitudes toward the relationship between the universal aspects of language and those inseparable from the particular social system of the South? These questions I attempt to answer in the following chapters.

---

<sup>33</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) ix.



“DARK VOICELESSNESS”: NATURE AND FEMALE PRESENCE IN *AS I LAY DYING*

*I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word.*

-Addie Bundren

Written at the end of 1929 and first published in 1930,<sup>34</sup> *As I Lay Dying* chronicles the arduous and often ridiculous story of the Bundren family as they carry their mother’s body to burial in another town. Their journey is fairly simple: Addie, the matriarch of the family, dies, and Anse and his children travel for several days with her rotting corpse to bury her in Jefferson. Along the way they encounter many hardships (frequently self-induced), and the story ends with Addie’s burial and Anse introducing a new Mrs. Bundren. Compared with other Yoknapatawpha fiction, the plot of this story is easy to understand. Its events do not require a detailed chronology, such as Faulkner provides for *Absalom, Absalom!* Unlike other families I will examine in this study (the Compsons, Sutpens, and McCaslins) we do not need a genealogy to help us keep the Bundrens straight. And, most importantly for my concerns, unlike later Yoknapatawpha tales, the Bundren’s story does not involve the particularly Southern social dilemmas that we so readily associate with Faulkner’s fiction. There are no black characters, slave or free, in *As I Lay Dying*. There is no discussion of the miscegenation that is so central to *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Go Down, Moses*. There is no mention, even, of the Civil War. Its exclusive topic is the journey of a poor white family and the relationships among its

---

<sup>34</sup> Minter, 119-20.

members, and the subjects of these relations are primarily philosophical and psychological.

By drawing attention to this, I do not intend to accuse Faulkner of not writing about slavery in this novel. To do so would be to reduce the merits of his literature to a certain social efficacy. I aim, rather, to explore Faulkner's mistrust of language in *As I Lay Dying*. Though he extends this philosophy to more specifically social questions in the later novels at which I look, here he focuses on the relationship between language and the "dark voicelessness" of nature "in which words are the deeds" and whose generative cycles constitute a silent, feminine presence (174).

Akin to its predecessor *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in its experiments with form, Faulkner often referred to *As I Lay Dying* as a "tour de force":<sup>35</sup> fifteen different characters, over the course of fifty-nine chapters, tell the Bundrens' story. This multiplicity of voices emphasizes the subjective aspects of the family's journey. Narrators like the introspective Darl, the mechanically minded Cash, and the religious Cora offer us perspectival glimpses of the family's story. As a result, we always receive events as they occur through a certain consciousness, rather than through an objective lens.

If Faulkner stirs up a kind of narrative frenzy with this technique, he offers Addie Bundren's decomposing corpse as the silent nexus of the novel. The title's personal pronoun is hers, and her death is the reason for the family's odyssey. Similarly, her philosophical ruminations, offered in her only chapter, serve as a framework for understanding the interactions among the Bundren family members as they make their way toward Jefferson with her body. In her narration, Addie describes from the coffin her

---

<sup>35</sup> See Blotner and Gwynn, 87, 113, 207.

relationships with her family and the land that surrounds their Mississippi farm. Her message is clear: “Words are no good,” she claims (171), because they can never adequately indicate her meaningful exchanges with her children and with nature, experiences which ultimately reject representation. To begin to understand this vision, we must turn to the impetus for the family’s journey—Addie’s dying wish that she be interred in Jefferson alongside her family members.

The family’s entire trip, and the novel itself, can be read not just as a fulfillment of this dying wish but as a ceremony that marks the return of blood to blood and body to earth. Once in the grave next to her deceased family members, Addie’s body will filter into the dirt and once again mingle with what Homer Pettey dubs her “pure umbilicus”: those members of her physical circle that extend back to her ancestors and forward to her descendants.<sup>36</sup>

Addie’s request is a response to her father’s aphorism that “the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (169). We learn this at the beginning of her chapter as she recounts those times when she, a young schoolteacher, would retreat to a spring after school to try to make sense of her father’s words. There she witnessed the cyclical processes of the natural world, the “quiet smelling of damp and rotting leaves and new earth” (169). She goes to the spring not necessarily to meditate on dying, however, but because there she finds a space where she can quietly despise her students. As she smells the wet leaves rotting into fertile soil, she hates the students for being outside of her own circle of birth and death and decay: “each with his or her secret and selfish thought, and blood strange to each other blood and strange to mine” (170). She

---

<sup>36</sup> Homer B. Pettey, “Perception and the Destruction of Being in *As I Lay Dying*.” *Faulkner Journal* 19.1 (Fall 2003): 36.

wonders how a life spent with those of strange blood and thoughts could ever prepare her for her own death, when her body will turn damp, rot, and become new earth. Unable to make sense of her father's words, she grows angry with him "for ever having planted her" (170).

Addie, at this point, has not yet married Anse, and she is without children of her own. Struggling to understand her father, she resorts to violence in a grotesque attempt to mingle her students' blood with hers:

When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever. (170)

Addie will eventually conceive a child of her own blood with Anse. Their firstborn is Cash, the carpenter who spends the first part of the novel carefully building his mother's coffin. In this son, Addie realizes, she has found the answer to her terrible life as a schoolteacher. Though her students were outside of her circle and "only through the blows of the switch could [her] blood and their blood flow as one stream" (172), Cash's blood is hers, and his thoughts are not strange to hers.

Cash's birth marks a shift in Addie's narration from a discussion of blood relations to one of language, a shift that expresses Addie's physical circle in terms of its place outside the limits of a representational system. She realizes that the words she uses to express her relationship with Cash could never capture the intimate experience of the love shared with those inside her circle: "When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children

didn't care whether there was a word for it or not" (171-2). Words, "like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching" (172), can never adequately express what they aim to convey. In structuralist terms, Addie recognizes that there exists no necessary connection between signifier and signified. "In language there are only differences *without positive terms*," Ferdinand de Saussure notes, and Addie would agree.<sup>37</sup> "Words are no good," she claims: "they dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" because they are tied to the endless chain of signification, forever seeking but never finding those things which they aim to represent (171).

Language, then, as well as blood, constitutes the boundaries of Addie's circle. Cash, part of her umbilicus and with whom she interacts without words, is inside. Anse, on the other hand, remains outside. He uses the word "love," which Cash does not need to say, and his name is but "a vessel" into which he flows "like cold molasses." He, and words, remain as strange to Addie as the secret thoughts of her schoolchildren: "Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle" (172-3).

Julia Kristeva offers us a framework in which to understand Addie's circle. In her post-structural and psychoanalytic approach she distinguishes between language's *symbolic* and *semiotic* operations. The symbolic function of language, she argues, enables signification and constitutes those phrases, sentences, etc. that predicate meaning. The semiotic, on the other hand, are those nonsensical aspects of language that are "*heterogeneousness* to meaning and signification." The semiotic realm, detected first in

---

<sup>37</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics," Trans. Wade Baskin. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Ed Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 70.

infancy as “rhythms and intonations,” comprises sounds and noises that resist predication and remain playfully indeterminate.<sup>38</sup>

Especially relevant to my project is Kristeva’s identification of the symbolic with the male and the semiotic with the female. Kristeva works from Lacan’s notion of the “mirror stage” in which an infant, upon seeing his own image, first identifies himself as a single *I*, distinct from its turbulent physical sensations and alien from the maternal body.<sup>39</sup> The act of signification, therefore, as it indicates the formulation of identity in the symbolic order, also indicates separation from the mother. The semiotic, on the other hand, reflects the “workings and drives” of the body and is maternal and instinctual.<sup>40</sup> Addie’s comment about her relationship with Anse reflects this: “I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word.” Anse, “using himself so with a word,” occupies the realm of the symbolic (174). Addie on the other hand, content to identify herself with those things that resist signification, occupies the semiotic.

This semiotic realm manifests itself in nature and her physical circle which, like the spring by her schoolhouse, communicates to her without words. Literally, at night, Addie hears the land “talking of God’s love and His beauty and His sin [...] the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds [...] the dark land talking the voiceless speech” (174-5). Nature speaks in silence; its voicelessness is a transcendent voice.

---

<sup>38</sup> Kristeva, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Lacan argues that the unity of identification “symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination in the fragmentation of the symbolic order.” In *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 2. See also Jonathan Culler’s observation: “What lies ‘beyond’ the mirror stage is a loss of totality, the fragmentation of the body and the self—what Lacan calls the symbolic order. The child is born into the symbolic order in that he has a name which stands for him in the order of language and because he already figures in an oedipal triangle that lies beyond the binary order of reflection.” In *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 165.

<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, 136.

Faulkner's constant references to the physical reality of Addie's corpse emphasize that her death marks her return to this "dark land." Buzzards follow the burial wagon throughout their journey and gather on the coffin at night. The stench from Addie's body follows the Bundrens into town, causing women to scatter with "handkerchiefs to their noses" (203). The child Vardaman, who cannot reconcile the report of his mother's death with the continued existence of her physical body, bores holes through the coffin into Addie's face in a desperate attempt to allow her to breathe. In these descriptions, Addie's body slowly returns to the world around it, and her death indicates her participation in the unspoken language of nature and her blood relatives. Earlier, she used the image of her father "planting" her to describe their biological connection (170); her decomposing corpse, therefore, can be seen as a plant decaying into the damp earth. Her request to be buried by her blood relatives, in this light, seems fitting: in death Addie returns, literally, to fertilize the soil next to those of her pure umbilicus.

An episode narrated by both Darl and Vardaman reveals that Addie's participation in "voiceless speech" of nature is not merely theoretical: in her slow return to the natural world, their mother actually communicates to them from the coffin. Just before he sets Gillespie's barn on fire in a futile attempt to cremate his mother, Darl takes Vardaman to Addie's coffin, which sits under an apple tree in Gillespie's yard. There, Darl claims, he can hear Addie speaking: "now and then she talks in little trickling bursts of secret and murmurous bubbling. I took Vardaman to listen. When we came up the cat leaped down from it" (212). By means of a purely physical explanation, we might assume that Darl refers to the "secret and murmurous bubbling" of decomposition, the subtle process in which the corpse shifts as its physical makeup deteriorates, any air in Addie's

lungs escaping through her mouth. But what does Faulkner suggest she says as she participates in the wordless language of nature? Can we even attempt to translate the “voiceless speech”? In the next chapter, Vardaman describes the scene in greater detail:

She was under the apple tree and Darl and I go across the moon and the cat jumps down and runs and we can hear her inside the wood.

“Hear?” Darl says. “Put your ear close.”

I put my ear close and I can hear her. Only I cant tell what she is saying.

“What is she saying, Darl?” I say. “Who is she talking to?”

“She’s talking to God,” Darl says. “She is calling on Him to help her” [...]

“Listen,” Darl says. We hear her. We hear her turn over on her side.

“Listen,” Darl says.

“She’s turned over,” I say. “She’s looking at me through the wood.” (214-15)

Darl’s comment that Addie’s “secret and murmurous bubbling” communicates with God is as close as anyone in the Bundren family comes to religious sentiment, and it places their mother in stark contrast to the outwardly religious Cora, “to whom sin [and salvation are] just a matter of words” (176). Addie communicates to God by *not speaking*, by praying that God, as Darl says, “hide her away from the sight of man” in the natural language of death (215).

Numerous instances throughout the novel indicate that this achievement of presence through non-speech does not die with the Bundren matriarch. Her children often transmit ideas to one another without words, knowing and communicating without speaking. Addie’s legacy, then, is not merely her children’s task of carrying her coffin to



Jefferson, but the wordless communication that is carried on in her children's interactions.

Among the siblings, Darl is the primary heir of his mother's non-speech. Because of this, he appears unusual to the other characters. Cora calls him "the one that folks say is queer" (24); Samson similarly claims that Darl is "the one folks talks about" (113). Why is he strange? For one, though he narrates more chapters than anyone else, he rarely speaks aloud, and when he does, tersely. Michel Delville calls him a "silent and contemplative character, mirror-eyed onlooker and indefatigable narrator."<sup>41</sup> Bundren friend Vernon Tull claims, "That's ever living thing the matter with Darl: he just thinks by himself too much" (71). Though an introvert, Darl possesses a preternatural awareness that borders on omniscience. Only through his narration do we learn of Addie's death, but Darl was not present for it—it occurs while he and Jewel are away with the wagon, not at the Bundren house. Darl, however, describes the events surrounding her death with the detail of one who is present: "The lantern sits on a stump. Rusted, grease-fouled, its cracked chimney smeared on one side with a soaring smudge of soot" (75). But Darl is not there, as he ends the chapter lying "beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home" (81). Somehow, while in the wagon with Jewel, he divines that his mother has passed, convinced of it as if he was physically present at the moment of her death, and turns to his younger brother—"Jewel, I say, she is dead, Jewel. Addie Bundren is dead" (52).

How is Darl able to do this? An explanation lies in Anse and Dewey Dell's claims that Darl's vision encompasses the land, that his gaze somehow contains nature within it. His father says that "he's got his eyes full of the land all the time" (36). Dewey Dell

---

<sup>41</sup> Michel Delville, "Alienating Language and Darl's Narrative Consciousness in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." *Southern Literary Journal* 27.1 (Fall 1994): 69.

equates this with her brother's ability to know without necessarily seeing, or knowing as if he is somehow aware of that which he physically cannot see: "The land runs out of Darl's eyes; they swim to pin points. They begin at my feet and rise along my body to my face, and then my dress is gone. I sit naked on the seat above the unhurrying mules, above the travail" (121). In this example, Faulkner associates Darl's almost-supernatural connection with his siblings with the language of the "pure umbilicus." As his mother hears the dark land "talking of God's love and His beauty and His sin" (174), so does Darl participate in the "dark voicelessness," keenly aware of the unseen. He proclaims his mother's death without hearing of or seeing it; he is able to figuratively strip his sister because he does not need words to communicate with her, just like his mother most accurately showed her love for Jewel by holding him on a pillow, "no sound from them" (144).

Another method of representing non-speech is Faulkner's blurring of the boundaries of speech and non-speech through different characters' accounts of the same event. In them, we often find conflicting versions of what was spoken and what remained unsaid. For instance, early on in the novel, Dewey Dell describes her sexual encounter in the field (the reason she becomes pregnant and wants an abortion). She asks Darl if he, too, knows about it: "He said he did know and I said 'Are you going to tell pa are you going to kill him?' without the words I said it and he said 'Why?' without the words" (27).

Darl's later account of the same exchange appears to contradict his sister's. He recalls trying to get Dewey Dell to admit that she wants Addie to die (so she has an excuse to go to town and get an abortion): "She will not say it. She just keeps on saying

Are you going to tell pa? Are you going to kill him?" (40). Darl does not place his sister's words in quotes, yet declares that his she "keeps on saying" the very same phrase that Dewey Dell insists that she does not use words to communicate. Is Faulkner suggesting that *saying* does not necessarily entail speech? Perhaps, to the extent that Dewey Dell could *say* "are you going to tell pa?" with a gaze or sharp look. But other discrepancies in the text show that the ambiguity surrounding this incident of non-speech is not an aberration.

Another incident occurs just before Addie dies. Cora sees Darl coming to the door and gazing upon his mother:

...it was between her and Darl that the understanding and the true love was. He just looked at her, not even coming in where she could see him and get upset, knowing that Anse was driving him away and he would never see her again. He said nothing, just looking at her.

"What do you want, Darl?" Dewey Dell said, not stopping the fan, speaking up quick, keeping even him from her. *He didn't answer.* He just stood and looked at his dying mother, his heart too full for words [italics mine]. (24-25)

Compare this, however, to Dewey Dell's account of this meeting between Darl and his mother:

He stands in the door, looking at her.

"What you want, Darl?" I say.

"She is going to die," he says. (27-28)

Dewey Dell does not mention whether Darl speaks to Addie in this moment, something Cora has denied. However, Cora clearly states that he did not respond to his sister's "What do you want, Darl?" as Dewey Dell's account claims (25).

Faulkner does not only present conflicting reports of the same scene through different characters' retellings; he does it even within the same character's accounts. If we look a just a few lines earlier in Dewey Dell's chapter, she contradicts the previously mentioned account of her bedside conversation with Darl. In the earlier lines, she claims that Darl did not use words when he looked at his mother, that Darl "told me that ma is going to die without words" (27). What do we make of this when, on the next page, Dewey Dell places Darl's words "She is going to die" in quotations, as if spoken? These contradictory accounts of non-speech render the reader uncertain of what really occurred: Did he say that with words or not? Did she really communicate without speaking? The ambiguity these conflicting reports creates approximates the ineffability of non-speech itself—non-speech could never possibly be placed into the "this or that" of words because it exists outside of them.

Faulkner also attempts to represent non-speech by slipping it unassumingly into the novel's spoken dialogue. In several instances, the author's curious use of quotation marks consistently blurs the boundaries of speech and non-speech, creating a community in which thoughts are exchanged as easily as spoken communication. While at Gillespie's house, just before Darl burns down the barn, Vardaman and Dewey Dell lie on the back porch, talking before they fall asleep. They are one day's ride away from Jefferson, and Dewey Dell has promised Vardaman that the train set that sits in a store window in the town will be there. She has also told him that Santa Claus won't let any of the town boys

buy it before he can. Vardaman asks his older sister about it as they lie together on the pallet (Vardaman narrates the chapter):

“Dewey Dell.”

“What.”

“If it’s not Christmas now, how will it be there?”

It goes round and round on the shining track. Then the track goes shining round and round.

“What will be there?”

“That train. In the window.”

“You go to sleep. You can see tomorrow if it’s there.”

Maybe Santa Claus wont know they are town boys.

“Dewey Dell.”

“You go to sleep. He ain’t going to let none of them town boys have it.”

(216)

It is important to pay close attention to the phrases Faulkner chooses to place in quotations. There are two lines which Vardaman thinks but Faulkner indicates that he does not say aloud: “It goes round and round [...]” and “Santa Claus wont know they are town boys.” Dewey Dell responds to Vardaman’s unspoken reference to Santa Claus in her reassurance that “He ain’t going to let none of them town boys have it.” Mere coincidence of thoughts—that Dewey Dell and Vardaman just happen to be thinking the same thing at that moment—seems unlikely, since Dewey Dell refers to Santa as “he,” directly responding to her brother’s unvoiced thought. Save an editing aberration, we

can't explain this except by acknowledging that Vardaman communicates to Dewey Dell despite Faulkner's indication that he does not speak aloud.

A similar example occurs during Darl's narration of the river crossing. Before they attempt to ford the river, he and Cash converse on the wagon about Jewel, who is just starting to ride his horse into the water.

"He can swim," I say. "If he'll just give the horse time, anyhow....." When he was born, he had a bad time of it. Ma would sit in the lamp-light, holding him on a pillow on her lap. We would wake and find her so. There would be no sound from them.

"That pillow was longer than him," Cash says. He is leaning a little forward. "I ought to come down last week and sighted. I ought to done it."

"That's right," I say. "Neither his feet nor his head would reach the end of it. You couldn't have known," I say. (144)

According to Faulkner's quotations, Darl shifts, mid-thought, from speech to non-speech, yet Cash responds to the thoughts that Darl has *not* spoken. Like the speechless gaze between Addie and the baby Jewel, Darl and Cash have their own wordless interaction.

Theresa M. Towner claims that Faulkner refuses "to accept as 'natural' anything that is not literally of the flesh. Everything else but that is somehow humanly constructed and hence infinitely constructible."<sup>42</sup> Though this is a large claim, Towner is right in many respects. In this novel, Faulkner privileges the natural. Addie's body (both pre- and post-death) is its center; everything else revolves around it and, in doing so, appears inadequate to it. Nothing will stop Anse from delivering and interring his wife's corpse in

---

<sup>42</sup> Theresa M. Towner, "Unsurprised Flesh: Color, Race, and Identity in Faulkner's Fiction." In *Faulkner and the Natural World*, 46.

Jefferson, and the family's darkly comedic blunders during the journey (the holes bored in the coffin, the wagon capsizing in the river, Cash's broken leg, the awful stench) indicate just how important their mother's body is (while of course suggesting how inept their efforts are). Anse's words are no good when compared with the language of Addie's body and the land, and his wife's rejection of language amounts to a turning to what Kristeva would call her "semiotic body" in search of transcendence.<sup>43</sup> The female body is thus the silent presence of the novel, and the family's surrounding actions are marked by their absent relation to it. In *Go Down, Moses*, Ike McCaslin proves a character similarly resistant to the sway of language, instead preferring the silence and solitude of the wilderness. Language, and as I will show in the next two chapters, Southern culture, are human constructions, and Faulkner depicts them as therefore defined by absences.

The impossibility remains of ever representing the Bundren's non-speech without compromising its wordlessness. Faulkner can only represent the moments of non-speech with signs confined to the text: with a *phrase* that describes Addie's wordless gaze, with a *blank space* signifying her virginity. Not a word exactly, the blank space still marks an attempt to represent through signs that which can never be represented without avoiding the play of differance. It is an attempt to indicate within the text that thing (non-speech) whose privileged position in the story renders ineffective any attempt to represent it with linguistic signs, which "dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (171).

This problem of representing non-speech in words is one that appears to apply only to the form of *As I Lay Dying*, not its content. In other words, Faulkner's very act of writing *As I Lay Dying* constitutes the *naming* of Addie's communication inside of her circle, and the novel, insofar as it *names* it, does not achieve it. We can never escape this

---

<sup>43</sup> Kristeva, 136.

vicious circle of signifying (in this study I *name* what Faulkner *names* what Addie *names* that she refuses to *name*), but within the events of novel, the characters do escape the swings and twists of language. Faulkner's account of the Bundrens' carrying their matriarch's corpse to Jefferson, the non-speech of Addie's "pure umbilicus" does achieve presence because its medium is something other than "no good" words (171). Its vocabulary is that of "the dark land talking of God's love and His beauty and His sins" (174), the silent gaze between Addie and Jewel on the pillow (144), the "secret and murmurous bubbling" (212) that whispers from Addie's coffin.

A deconstructionist approach would render such achievement of presence an illusion, because we always fail in our search for "the unique name (of Being, of presence)" even if we "look for it in another language, outside the finite system of our language [...] there is no *name* for this [...] which is not [itself] a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and continually breaks up in a chain of different substitutions."<sup>44</sup> We can approach nothing, Derrida suggests, without thereby making it subject to the play of signification.

This notion Faulkner will take up more directly in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. In those two novels a transcendence such as that which Addie Bundren achieves is closed off to Quentin Compson and Ike McCaslin because of the always-occurring problem of representation. As they approach the objects of their desire (the past for Quentin, nature and the past for Ike) they find something that is already a text—already words that "dont ever fit." In *As I Lay Dying*, however, Faulkner plumbs the depth of what becomes, in these later novels, an unachievable presence. He is content to

---

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Différance." Trans. David B. Allison. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology* 297.



allow the Bundrens to exist as if they carried Addie Bundren's body across a Grecian urn, impervious to time and the limits of a differential language.

SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE AND THE PLANTATION SOUTH IN *ABSALOM,*  
*ABSALOM!*

*I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—and incidentally of course, a wife.*

-Thomas Sutpen

If *As I Lay Dying* explores those aspects of language that defy signification, *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on language's function as symbol. The stories of the past that Quentin Compson and the other narrators tell never quite grasp the people or events they aim to represent. Quentin tries to give meaning to the ghost of the plantation-owner Thomas Sutpen, yet in the end his attempts fail: no matter how desperately he tries, Sutpen disappears behind his tales, refusing every attempt to be understood. More so than in any of Faulkner's novels, in *Absalom, Absalom!* language emerges as inadequate vehicle for signification, a "meager and fragile thread [...] by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness" (AA 202). While Addie Bundren explores how we might approach this darkness, Quentin tries to bring the light of order, meaning, and symbol to his obscured past.

This past is specifically Southern, and is inseparable from the very questions of language that Quentin's narration raises. His attempt at reconstructing Sutpen over the course of the novel is an attempt to understand his own connection to "the stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering" from the collapse of their Southern ways of life (7).

Quentin cannot capture his relationship to his culture in words: the last lines of the novel, his frantic “*I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*” indicate that the ghosts of the antebellum South still haunt him despite his efforts to make sense of them. At the end of the novel, just as at the beginning, Quentin is a “commonwealth” of voices, “an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names” (7). Like Addie Bundren, the inability of words to transcend troubles him. Rather than seek meaning in things that do not signify through symbols, as Addie does, Quentin plunges full-tilt into language, narrating desperately in hopes that the words will reveal to him the ghosts of the past. Yet nothing changes: whether he uses words or not, it “would be the same forever as long as he lived” (298).<sup>45</sup>

I would like to show how firmly these questions of language are entrenched in the South not merely by noting that Quentin aims to narrate a regional history but also by exploring Faulkner’s depiction of the South’s social structure in the novel. Sutpen’s daughter Judith offers the apt metaphor of a loom:

...you are born [...] trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs [...] like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug; and it cant matter, you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter (101).

As Philip Weinstein argues, such a disorderly loom “is inseparable from the Old South’s patriarchal privileging of white male planters.” Unable to adequately explain the lives of blacks, whites, fathers, sons, mothers, and daughters alike, “Faulkner must trash this

---

<sup>45</sup> Or, as Margaret Reid puts it, “History will be his grave, and language will be his winding sheet.” In *Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form: Storytelling in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 183.

story.”<sup>46</sup> In the story of Thomas Sutpen the South emerges as a system that, like a language, derives meaning from arbitrary differences, creating a dysfunctional social milieu. In Sutpen’s drive to establish a plantation and father a line of sons to inherit it, and in Quentin’s attempt to narrate this past, Faulkner shows the insufficiencies of language’s symbolic function. Rather than merely alienate a woman from those around her, (as it does in *As I Lay Dying*), language in *Absalom, Absalom!* alienates individuals from a Southern culture that seeks to define them.

Like Quentin’s narration, Sutpen’s project to become a plantation patriarch is a response to a past event—an affront he received as a young boy at the door of a plantation owner. As I will show, both, though in different ways, attempt to recover the past through symbolic representation. Both projects fail: Sutpen is murdered before he can successfully father the male heir essential to his plan to establish a dynasty, and Quentin’s incessant retelling of Sutpen’s past brings no closure. The past escapes, leaving in its wake merely “the desire of memory or speech for its object.”<sup>47</sup>

John T. Irwin notes that Sutpen’s design and Quentin’s narration share a common theme: revenge. Sutpen arrives in Jefferson in 1833 armed with West Indian slaves, an architect, and his “design.” Offended by this affront at the door (which I will examine at length), the young boy vows one day to acquire a plantation and slaves of his own and

---

<sup>46</sup> Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*. (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2005), 231-32. In this recent study, Weinstein focuses on the Modernist novel’s destruction of identities that have been fashioned by Enlightenment modes of knowledge. Though he mainly focuses on conceptions of the self, he rightfully connects the social norms of the plantation South with dominant trends in Western thought. See also John T. Matthews’s discussion of the Frankfurt School in relationship to *Go Down, Moses* in his “Touching Race.,” which I address in my third chapter.

<sup>47</sup> John T. Matthews, *The Play of Faulkner’s Language*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 128.

father sons who would inherit his land. By founding a dynasty of privilege, Sutpen plans to enact revenge upon the plantation owner.<sup>48</sup>

Irwin rightfully claims that Quentin's struggle to recover the events of Sutpen's life through the medium of language amounts to a revenge upon time. Quentin's narration aims to understand his own heritage both as a resident of Sutpen's town (Jefferson) and as a Southerner in general. He has spent his life "breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man [Sutpen] (7)" and is haunted by antebellum ghosts. By ceaselessly trying to capture Sutpen's story by retelling it, Quentin constantly repeats the past:

*I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again  
I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but  
this again forever. (222)*

Because his narration can never recover and explain Sutpen's life, Quentin is bound to the Sisyphean task of endlessly hearing and telling his story. Irwin argues that this is a feature of all narration: "to take revenge against time, to get even with the very mode of narration's existence in a daemonic attempt to prove that through the process of substitution and repetition, time is not really irreversible."<sup>49</sup> In other words, the choice to tell the story of something that once occurred reveals our unwillingness to accept that the event, as part of the past, is irretrievable. In a similar vein, Gail Mortimer notes that we first become aware of the passage of time (and hence, its irreversibility) when as infants we first experience a loss or absence, which is "the occasion for our becoming

---

<sup>48</sup> Note Faulkner's statement that Sutpen's design was a "trying to get even with that man who in his youth had said, Go to the back door." In Blotner and Gwynn, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Irwin, 4.

symbolizing beings” in order to recover this loss.<sup>50</sup> Though Mortimer refers to a pre-linguistic state of development, her connection with Irwin’s argument is clear: both suggest that the metaphorical function of symbols indicates an attempt to recover a lost past.<sup>51</sup>

Sutpen’s grand design, as I mentioned, begins with the experience of rejection at the mansion door as a young child. According to the story he tells General Compson (Quentin’s Grandfather), Sutpen was born into poverty in Appalachia. He recalls almost nothing of this time or place, but those memories he has depict a youth devoid of socio-economic classifications. “[T]he land belonged to anybody and everybody,” so there was no need for fences and property claims. Material wealth also did not provide a basis for defining classes, because one had (or wanted) nothing except what “he could eat or swap for powder or whiskey” (179). In stark contrast to the rigid class structure of the plantation system, the social climate of Sutpen’s backwater youth was marked by a lack of differences.

As a young boy Sutpen had little contact with the world of plantations and class distinctions: he had heard “vague and cloudy tales of Tidewater splendor,” yet did not understand them. The tales described something completely alien to his own climate, and he could hardly conceive of a place where the “land [was] divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them” (179). This inconceivable

---

<sup>50</sup> Gail L. Mortimer, *Faulkner’s Rhetoric of Loss: A Study in Perception and Meaning*. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1983), 8.

<sup>51</sup> Compare with Derrida’s cataloguing of the temporal aspect of *differance*: “the action of postponing until later, of taking into account, the taking-account of time and forces in an operation that implies an economic reckoning, a detour, a respite, a delay, a reserve, a representation—all the concepts that I will sum up here in a word I have never used but which could be added to this series: *temporalizing*.” “Différance,” 283.

society becomes more familiar to the young Sutpen when his family decides to leave their mountain home and find work in Virginia. Soon the boy finds himself surrounded by

a country all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices. (179-80)

The arbitrary nature of plantation hegemony is particularly difficult for the young Sutpen to understand. While he was aware that some people were simply born more fortunate than others, “it had never once occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others” (180).

After his family sets out for Tidewater, they move into a broken-down cabin on a plantation. One day his father sends him to the plantation house with a message for the owner, but Sutpen is turned away by the owner’s black servant before he can even relay the message:

And now he stood there before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes [...]—who had never thought about his own hair or clothes or anybody else’s hair or clothes until he saw that monkey nigger, who through no doing of his own happened to have had the felicity of being housebred in Richmond, maybe, looking [...] at them and he never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back. (188)

This moment at the mansion door makes Sutpen fully aware of this sharply defined society. The boy Sutpen is poor, improperly dressed, and barred from entering the mansion of privilege: he is identified by his inferiority to others. As Peter Brooks notes, “Sutpen discovers the existence of difference: difference as an abstract and formal property which takes precedence over all else.”<sup>52</sup> In this one instance, the young Sutpen experiences not only the reality of different social classes but that he falls into inferior ones. It is a realization that turns the remainder of Sutpen’s life into a getting-even with the plantation system.

It is important to highlight the connections that Faulkner establishes here among Sutpen’s boyhood, his design, and the structure of Southern society. First, the rejection indicates Sutpen’s separation from the innocent social understanding of his boyhood. He can no longer conceive of himself without also conceiving of his differences from others—as poorer, as having a different skin color, etc. The servant’s rejection itself ushers into Sutpen’s experience the structural divisions by which he now must define himself, and he is at a loss for what to do.

Unable to access his former identity, he reconstructs it (describing it as if it was a pillar of cloud) so that it may guide his design: “a limitless flat plain with the severe shape of his intact innocence rising from it like a monument; that innocence instructing him as calm as the others had ever spoken” (192). This image of his innocence is a reification of an existence when he perceived no distinction between fortunate and unfortunate and superior or inferior. Yet as a symbol that points to his past, the image of his innocence indicates that Sutpen no longer *is* innocent. He has lost this stable center to

---

<sup>52</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 300.



his identity, and now it must instruct him through the discourse of social differences. Any transcendence that his innocent boyhood provided him with is now gone, and he is left to grapple with the multiple voices talking in his head:

...arguing with himself quietly and calmly while both debaters agreed that if there were only someone else, some older and smarter person to ask. But there was not, there was only himself, the two of them inside that one body which was maybe thirteen or maybe fourteen or maybe was already fifteen but would never know it for certain forever more. (189)

Though he is determined to revenge the affront, he realizes that his inferior class renders him impotent to approach the plantation owner—“*there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him*” (192). He decides that to get even, he must acquire “land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (192): a revenge that adopts the very structure of distinctions and privilege that caused his rejection. This design will guide the rest of his life.

Before he arrives in Yoknapatawpha, Sutpen travels to Haiti, where he marries a woman whom he takes to be of Spanish descent. He fathers a son, but shortly later learns that his wife is part black. As he tells General Compson, “[T]hey deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter” (212). His design, of course, rests upon the very subordination of the black race, and, as he says, “this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design” (212). Sutpen flees and arrives some time later in Jefferson. Years later, his son Henry returns from college with a new friend—Charles Bon, Sutpen’s disavowed son. Bon becomes engaged to Sutpen’s

daughter (and his half-sister Judith), and Sutpen orders Henry to murder Bon, which Henry does.

Sutpen's mad drive to rid Bon from his life reveals the need for differences to be readily apparent to maintain stable identities in the plantation South. Bon, as one who is both black and white, husband-to-be and half-brother, can have no place in it. Miscegenation, in blurring the distinctions between black and white, undermines the foundation of this social system, which divides and fixes people "because of what color their skins happened to be" (179). Because identity relies on such differences, "[m]aking the races indistinguishable," Eric Sundquist argues, amounts to "making them, therefore, *equal*." Racial mixing, the "nightmare in which black *and* white begin all too hauntingly to look alike," erases the arbitrary distinctions upon which slavery depends, and therefore marks the "curse and sin that brings Sutpen's design, like that of the South itself, to collapse."<sup>53</sup>

We must remember that Sutpen only speaks to us through *Absalom*'s narrators, and we receive his story filtered through many years and voices. Faulkner's four narrators, in the act of retelling his life and filling its many gaps, essentially create the man. They constantly condition their narration—Faulkner litters his novel with the word "perhaps." Most predominantly, Sutpen's biographers are Quentin and his roommate Shreve McCannon, who try to piece together Sutpen's story in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1910. Other storytellers include Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law and one-time betrothed, Quentin's father, and his grandfather, General Compson, to whom Sutpen tells the story of his design.

---

<sup>53</sup> Sundquist, 99, 110, 114.

Quentin—and the reader—looks toward the past for some tangible evidence, some actual event from which to construct his story, yet all he finds are words. As he peels back the stories of Sutpen’s design to get to the actual moment at the mansion door, we discover that each layer reveals not the event but yet another report of it. Quentin heard the story from his father, who heard it from *his* father, who heard it from Sutpen, years after the actual event occurred. And Sutpen himself doesn’t recall exactly what occurred at the door. He doesn’t remember what the servant said or “how it was that [he] told him [...] never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (188). Countless crucial moments in the novel only appear as rifts or gaps, talked about yet never encountered face-to-face. For example, Rosa reneges on her betrothal when Sutpen makes an indecent proposal to her: “the bald outrageous words” (136). What were his words? We don’t exactly know, but Quentin thinks that he suggested that they try to have a child before wedlock, and get married only if it was a son (228). Sutpen’s questionable money deal with Mr. Coldfield also remains a mystery: “Nobody ever did know for certain. It was something about a bill of lading, some way he persuaded Mr Coldfield to use his credit” (208).

At the heart of every investigation into the past lies another text, another story to decipher, another meaning to posit. The past comes to us in the form of runic markings: “old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames” (80). The stale air and “coffin-smelling gloom” of Rosa’s house seemingly pervades each piece of the past that Quentin unearths, and Sutpen comes to life only in his stories (4). There are few tangible links with this history. Quentin and his father visit the Sutpens’ graves, but

while walking among them they can only imagine the lives of those buried there. Quentin has a letter written from Charles Bon to Judith, yet Sutpen himself remains absent and voiceless. The closest link to Sutpen occurs when Quentin discovers his son Henry in the attic of Sutpen's Hundred. Even then, the encounter is reduced to a text: a series of words that reads like a palindrome, folding in upon itself:

*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 (298).*

Henry appears to Quentin as “already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived” (298). Though he has finally broken through language to encounter a living person from Sutpen's story, Quentin finds that the past is not re-presentable, and again encounters mere words. Reduced to a text, Henry is already an absence; like his father, he hides behind the symbols that frustrate Quentin's desperate narration.

The notion of storytelling fathers and sons is a predominant one in *Absalom* criticism. Susan V. Donaldson associates Quentin's obsessive narration with the masculine drive to "impose order and sequence" on Sutpen's story despite its gaps.<sup>54</sup> Irwin gives patriarchy an important role in his theory of narrative revenge. Noting that a father's power relies on "luck of birth," he claims that the "son's will is impotent, for the will cannot move backwards in time, it cannot alter the past."<sup>55</sup> By simply preceding his children in time, the father is always presented to his children as object of revenge.

As Quentin and Shreve try to narrate Sutpen's story from their Harvard dorm room, Quentin thinks:

Yes. Maybe we are both Father. Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. [...] Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us. (210)

Quentin and Shreve are "both father" because they are forever bound to repeating and reworking the story that has passed to them through Quentin's father: "I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever," Quentin thinks, "so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do" (222).

They are also "father" because Quentin's father was likewise bound to Sutpen's story, passed to him through Quentin's grandfather. And Sutpen "make[s] all of us" because he is the father of all of them: his life is the story that Quentin's Grandfather, then Mr.

Compson, Rosa, Shreve, and Quentin hear and tell.

---

<sup>54</sup> Donaldson, 22. We need not look far to note the connection to Kristeva's masculine symbolic that is defined by "thetic operation—predication of judgment." In Kristeva, 130.

<sup>55</sup> Irwin, 98, 103.

To be a father or son in *Absalom* is to be bound to the symbolic operation of language, seeking transcendence but always maintaining a metaphorical distance from the object of representation. Rosa's injunction for Quentin to one day "remember this and write about it" (5) becomes an injunction for him to enter this discourse and pass it on to others like Shreve and the reader. As Donaldson notes, "[s]uccessors to Thomas Sutpen, [Quentin and Shreve] are themselves fathers of their own tales to be passed on to storytelling sons."<sup>56</sup> Faulkner clearly intended his Yoknapatawpha stories to be continuous, and he encourages his readers to connect Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom* to their appearance in *The Sound and the Fury* (written earlier than yet occurring after *Absalom* in the Yoknapatawpha chronology).<sup>57</sup> The concluding lines of *Absalom*, Quentin's "*I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (303) suggest a flow into his stream-of-consciousness narration in *The Sound and the Fury*, which takes place immediately before his suicide. The narrative cycle is endless, Faulkner suggests; Quentin's revenge on Sutpen, his storytelling father, ends only with his jump with two six-pound flat-irons into the Charles River.<sup>58</sup>

Where and how do *Absalom*'s women emerge amid this patriarchal storytelling? They occupy, Donaldson argues, the "breaks and empty spaces" of the text.<sup>59</sup> Sutpen's wife Ellen, his daughter Judith, and his half-black daughter Clytie are all silent characters in the incessantly narrated story. As Rosa Coldfield claims, that is the "doom" of "female victory": "endure and then endure, without rhyme or reason or hope of reward—and then

---

<sup>56</sup> Donaldson, 23.

<sup>57</sup> John T. Matthews notes that an early version of Chapter 2 of *Absalom* began with "That was the summer before Quentin died: that summer with the wistaria everywhere..." In *Play*, (117). And Faulkner's genealogy at the end of *Absalom* mentions Quentin's death, which occurs in *The Sound in the Fury*.

<sup>58</sup> See also Faulkner's comment concerning an early draft of the novel (which he then called *Dark House*): "Quentin Compson, out of the Sound & Fury, tells it [...] because it is just before he is to commit suicide." In *Selected Letters*, 78-9. Quoted in Minter, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Donaldson, 21.

endure” (116). Rosa, however, is a woman who defies this conception. The only female among the novel’s four narrators, Quentin describes her as if describing Sutpen himself, “a character cold, implacable, and even ruthless” (6). Rosa is also a poet, and she writes, Quentin claims, “out of some bitter and implacable reserve of un-defeat” (6). Like Quentin’s narration, Rosa’s words attempt to enact a kind of revenge, “*so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear [...] will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War*” (6). Rosa, then, operates in many ways as a masculine figure in the novel, resistant to feminine silence. Though once betrothed to Sutpen, she breaks off the engagement, and never marries or conceives. Though she claims the “root and urge” of the female sexual drive, she suggests that she “perhaps should have been” a man (115-6). She grows to desire Charles Bon (to whom her sister Judith was betrothed), but not in a specifically romantic fashion. She never meets him and becomes infatuated instead with hints and suggestions of him. Possessing nothing of him except his name, a photograph, and stories, Rosa becomes an “androgynous advocate” for a kind of love that is not male-female desire but that of storyteller and tale (117).

The silence of Ellen, Judith, and Clytie remains an obstacle to narrative fulfillment. Their lives offer questions instead of answers, “empty spaces that can never quite be filled by the endless words that weave Sutpen’s tale.”<sup>60</sup> The best example of this is Clytie’s setting fire to Sutpen’s Hundred at the end of the novel, which destroys that hollow shell that tried, desperately, to suggest that Sutpen was one of a line of kings, effectively bringing an end to Sutpen’s symbolic revenge upon the plantation system. The burning mansion, and the interminable howl of Jim Bond (Sutpen’s great-grandson

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 26-7.

through Charles Bon) marks the end of the novel's obsessive talking and enacts, in many ways, its most effective revenge.

Philip Weinstein, working with Kristeva's terminology, calls Clytie the "semiotic center of the novel" because she "incarnates the otherwise invisible racial transgression of Thomas Sutpen."<sup>61</sup> The illegitimate daughter of Sutpen and a slave, Clytie has lived her entire life in silence in her father's deteriorating mansion. In her father's design, she doubly has no part—as a woman and as a product of miscegenation.

Quentin encounters her when he and Rosa go to Sutpen's Hundred and discover Henry in the attic. Henry offers Quentin a few repetitive phrases that tell him little that he doesn't already know. Yet Quentin's encounter with Clytie is at once arresting and revealing. She has been hiding Henry in the attic for four years in a gesture of decency for her "family which no longer existed," and Quentin sees in her eyes the "terror and fear" of "forty-five or fifty years of despair and waiting" (279-80). Shreve's retelling of the scene emphasizes Clytie's silent presence:

she looked at you and you saw it was not rage but terror [...] about whatever it was up stairs, that she had kept hidden up there for almost four years; and she didn't tell you in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret: nevertheless she told you, or at least all of a sudden you knew (280).

Later, in Quentin's account of the meeting, Clytie offers a few words to him, but they amount to little more than an admonishment for his unwelcome visit. Her penetrating presence rests in "her eyes wide open and calm; he stood above her, thinking, 'Yes. She is the one who owns the terror'" (295). Though he describes her as a bundle of sticks and rags, in her unspoken "terror and fear" Clytie is better able to transmit to Quentin the

---

<sup>61</sup> Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject*, 57.



reality of Thomas Sutpen than any story he, Shreve, Mr. Compson, or Rosa can piece together. Like the Bundren children, Clytie does not need words to communicate.

Years earlier, when Rosa runs into Sutpen's Hundred frantic and intent on finding out about Henry's murder of Bon, she encounters Clytie, who (like she will years later) tries to prevent Rosa from going upstairs to see Henry. Rosa describes Clytie's shocking resemblance to Sutpen and, like Quentin will, confronts the presence of her body: "the inscrutable coffee-colored face"; "that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh"; "neither of our voices raised, as though we spoke to one another free of the limitations and restrictions of speech and hearing" (110-11). Clytie's body—which reveals Sutpen's miscegenation—defies words.

We might easily draw comparisons between Clytie's "semiotic body" and that of Addie. Both defy and transcend representation, and in many ways they reside at the centers of their respective stories: from Addie's body emerges the Bundren's journey; and Clytie serves as the living link to Thomas Sutpen's terror. Yet while Addie's body constitutes a communicating presence, Clytie, as Rosa describes it, is created by her father "to preside upon his absence" (110). Though she offers a meaningful connection to Sutpen for Quentin and Rosa, she is not the man himself. Her burning of Sutpen's Hundred does not bring closure to Quentin's narration—her father remains absent, a possible story, a "perhaps."

Faulkner is content to depict Clytie only as an absent presence, and he does not attempt to reveal the stories that belong to the novel's other female characters. His interest lies instead, as he says, in telling a story of his region: the "general racial system

in the South.”<sup>62</sup> Women fall into the elisions of the symbolic discourse of such a system. No longer depicted as the transcendent natural mother of *As I Lay Dying*, the feminine in *Absalom, Absalom!* becomes incidental: a space for Sutpen to father a son to inherit his dynasty and continue the vicious circle of symbols that are constantly “swinging and twisting and never touching” (*ALD* 172). At the novel’s end, Faulkner leaves us with the “unknown whereabouts” of Jim Bond, the only remaining link to Sutpen. His offspring, the product of miscegenation, Shreve proposes, will “conquer the western hemisphere” (309, 302). The “invisible racial transgression” of the South will be made known, and Sutpen’s mistakes, the ugly head of the slave-owning South, we will no longer be able to ignore.

---

<sup>62</sup> Blotner and Gwynn, 94.

“WHAT DISTANCE BACK TO TRUTH”: THE INEVITABLE REPRESENTATION  
OF *GO DOWN, MOSES*

*That silence which was never silence but was myriad.*

-Ike McCaslin

At the outset of *Go Down, Moses* we are introduced to Isaac McCaslin, whose repudiation of his inherited tract of land centers the novel’s seven stories. Its first words immediately place us in the context of Thomas Sutpen and the values of the plantation system:

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. (3)

Like Sutpen, Ike is described in terms of his lineage. Yet unlike the patriarch of *Absalom, Absalom!* Ike’s character is not bent on obtaining a piece of land and fathering children to inherit it. Rather, he is focused on denouncing his ownership of land and place in the line of slave- and property-owning McCaslins. Ike is the son of Uncle Buck and Sophonsiba, a couple whose comic encounters Faulkner describes in “Was,” the novel’s opening story. Buck dies when Ike is still young, and he is raised, primarily, by two men: his cousin Cass (or just “McCaslin”) and Sam Fathers, the part-black, part-Chickasaw hunter who remains single and fatherless his entire life. Though his cousin acts in many ways as a father figure, Sam Fathers trains Ike in the ways of the wilderness, filling him with knowledge and experience of its “wild immortal spirit” (192). It is Sam’s life and his

guidance to which Ike appeals in his eventual decision to renounce his family's legacy. Ike's renunciation indicates a reversal of Thomas Sutpen's design. Presented with an awareness of the oppressive hegemony of the Southern social order, Ike flees from the kinds of ownership (land, slaves) that Sutpen readily embraces.

More so than in *Absalom, Absalom!*, present moments in *Go Down, Moses* are defined in terms of an absent past. The histories to which its characters look to define themselves—of the wilderness and of the McCaslin family—are only found in ledgers and legends. The novel's seven stories are told in (varying degrees of) retrospect, and all aim to call upon the way things once were to help them make sense of their lives now that these ways have disappeared. As David Minter notes, while *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses Quentin's retelling of history and the role of the storyteller, *Go Down, Moses* concerns the realm of readers and interpreters of texts.<sup>63</sup> Ike, though he glimpsed as a young boy the traces of the "timeless woods," must live out his adult life in the face of the rapidly dwindling wilderness (200). As such, *Go Down, Moses* depicts the transcendent presence of the natural world for which Addie Bundren longs *as* the irretrievable past that Quentin tries desperately to narrate. The untainted wilderness of the South is simply gone, forever. In "The Old People" and "The Bear" we, along with Ike, witness the vestiges of "the old time, the old days" that, like Sam's Chickasaw ancestors, are "vanished and forgotten" (4, 182). The Yoknapatawpha past is "not something he had participated in or even remembered except from the hearing, the listening" (4). It comes to him, like the scene on

---

<sup>63</sup> We receive *Go Down, Moses*, he argues, as "text of a text." It "defines every text as pre-text, making the act of reading a continuation of the act of narration. If *Absalom, Absalom!* may be said to be Faulkner's paradigm of a teller's relation to his tale, *Go Down, Moses* may be said to be his "paradigm of a reader's relation to his text." 187-88.

Keats' urn, as a kind of text, a lifeless representation that he must animate by interpreting it.

“Protector of blacks, cherisher of wild things, articulator of God’s plan for the post-Civil War South,” Philip Weinstein argues, Ike “embodies the most authoritative stay against confusion—of the cultural coming to terms with the natural and the divine—in all of Faulkner’s work.”<sup>64</sup> In this large claim, Weinstein seems tempted to read Ike as the Christ-figure that Ike himself wants to be, but his character is much more complex. To see Ike as Faulkner’s mouthpiece or the ethical exemplar of the novel is a misinterpretation, and a well-noted one at that.<sup>65</sup> Ike’s fierce moralism leads to his repudiation as a young man, yet even he wonders whether his decision is tantamount to escapism and even heresy (294). In “Delta Autumn,” which occurs when Ike is nearing eighty, he appears thoroughly pessimistic and is accused of giving up on life and not “remember[ing] anything [he] ever knew or even felt or heard about love” (363). Ike marries, but his wife refuses to bear his child because of Ike’s unwillingness to accept his inheritance (and, in doing so, provide a better living situation for them). Yet Ike’s very renunciation, as he conceived it, relies upon a son to whom he could bequeath it: “at least he could repudiate the wrong and the shame, at least in principle, and at least the land itself in fact, for his son at least: and did, thought he had” (351). His decision then, to free his would-be son from “regret and grief” prevents him from ever having that son.

---

<sup>64</sup> Weinstein, *Faulkner’s Subject*, 106.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Brooks, *Yoknapatawpha*, 271-75. The New Critical focus on irony, as Weinstein notes, inherently questions the alliance between Faulkner and his character. Weinstein claims that “[i]t is not primarily a question of ironic or unironic stances toward Ike. The issue is, rather, the extent and quality of attention he receives” (105). Too easily, though, Weinstein slips into equating Faulkner’s attention on Ike with glorification.

Rendering Ike impotent by his own idealism, Faulkner presents both the appeal and pitfalls of his repudiation.<sup>66</sup>

My goal is to explore how systems of representing the wilderness both enable and hinder Ike's decision. He finds himself caught between his desire for the forever-lost presence of the wilderness and the absences that define the post-bellum South of *Go Down, Moses*. On the one hand, he chooses to live the remainder of his life as a hermit in the woods because of the inadequacies of the symbolic register of ownership. Troubled by the death of the wilderness and the incest and miscegenation that pervades his family's slave-owning past, Ike turns his back on representations of power. At the same time, representations are all Ike has: there is no longer the "wild and immortal spirit" of the wilderness but only legends and traces of it. The stillness and solitude of the wilderness that Sam Fathers revealed to him defies representation and therefore "would be always incomprehensible to him" (310). In a world in which everything appears as a text, how can Ike manifest the influence of the incomprehensible transcendence that guides him?

Faulkner describes the wilderness, especially in "The Old People" and "The Bear," as something whose presence—"profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding" (175)—is rendered inaccessible not because of the simple passage of time but because of human activity. Its "tall and secret wall" is held back by "a house, barns, fences, where the hand of man had clawed for an instant" (177). At the end of "The Bear" the "puny marks of man" (342) are described in the form of the train that takes Ike back to the once-virgin wilderness where he, as a young boy, took part in killing the Old Ben, the legendary bear. Major de Spain, one of the leaders on that hunt, sold the land's timber-

---

<sup>66</sup> See Minter, 189-90.

rights to a lumber company, which then built the rail line. Ike remembers seeing the train, when he was a boy, as an innocuous encroachment on the woods:

...dragging its length of train behind it so that it resembled a small dingy harmless snake vanishing into weeds, drawing him with it too until soon it ran once more at its maximum clattering speed between the twin walls of unaxed wilderness as of old. It had been harmless then. (318-19)

After the mythical bear has been killed and the timber company has grown, however, Ike sees the rail line more ominously.

[T]his time it was as though the train [...] had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid (321).

The imminent destruction of the South's big-bottom wilderness is becoming more and more apparent to Ike. The yearly hunting of Old Ben is a "pageant rite of the old bear's furious immortality" (194), already a simulacrum of the "old time" which Ike never knew. The bear's death, and the subsequent passing of Sam Fathers, marks the closing of the wilderness.

In "Delta Autumn," which is set roughly in 1940 (at the time of its original printing as a short story),<sup>67</sup> we witness the utter disappearance of the wilderness. Automobiles have taken over, and to go hunting the elderly Ike and his younger companions must drive faster and farther each year, "the territory in which game still existed drawing yearly inward" (335). Ike grew up surrounded by legends of Sam Fathers and his Chickasaw ancestors, but even these stories begin to disappear: "all that remained of the old time were the Indian names on the little towns" (341). The remnants of the

---

<sup>67</sup> Minter, 185.

wilderness, Ike muses, have seemingly been washed to the delta, “arrested in one tremendous destiny of brooding and inscrutable impenetrability at the ultimate funneling tip” (343). Its time—and his—“is an outmoded time” (343): the “wild immortal spirit,” once reality, later kept alive by stories, is now on the cusp of total disappearance.

Faulkner juxtaposes civilization with wilderness in the same manner in which he distinguishes plantation society from Thomas Sutpen’s idyllic boyhood in *Absalom, Absalom!* The woods and cabins of Sutpen’s Appalachian youth are contrasted with the divided and parceled land of the Tidewater plantations to which he moves. Likewise, the untrammelled hunting grounds of the old South have now been squared off and divided in “ruthless mile-wide parallelograms” (342). Both novels equate the shift from a time of formlessness to one of differentiated identity as a translation into a reductive system of representation. Ike wants to live in a world in which land is held “mutual and intact,” but is faced with one divided into claims: “the oblongs and squares of the earth” (257). Both Sutpen and Ike have to encounter a language in which “there are only differences,” a reality that seems inadequate in comparison to the plenitude of their pasts.<sup>68</sup>

Sutpen chooses to revenge this loss by plunging headlong into the language of plantations. Ike, on the other hand, chooses a revenge of withdrawal. In “The Bear,” the twenty-one-year-old Ike and his cousin McCaslin examine the ledgers that recount their family’s troubling history of slavery, incest, and miscegenation. This discovery spurs Ike’s repudiation, and McCaslin accuses him of abandoning his heritage:

Relinquish. You, the direct male descendant of him who saw the opportunity and took it, bought the land, took the land, got the land no matter how, held it to bequeath, no matter how, out of the old grant, the first patent, when it was a

---

<sup>68</sup> Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics,” 70.



wilderness of wild beasts and wilder men, and cleared it, translated it into something to bequeath to his children, worth of bequeathment for his descendants' ease and security and pride and to perpetuate his name and accomplishments [...] what that man accomplished whose legacy and pride you think you can repudiate. (256)

Ike is an unwilling inheritor to a dynasty very much like that Thomas Sutpen hoped for. Something established by and passed down among males, this heritage operates in the medium of symbols that represent the “name and accomplishments” of its patriarchs. The language of the plantation system—property deeds, slave-holding titles, mansions, acres, plots—is the currency of this patriarchy, and Ike wants no part of it. No matter how far back the wilderness is pushed, Ike interprets the divided land of civilization as humanity's “puny gnawing” at the “brooding, secret, tremendous” wall of wilderness that dwarfs it (195, 177).

By focusing on Ike's repudiation, “*Go Down, Moses* searches out the contemporary consequences of what *Absalom, Absalom!* had already identified as the South's doom,” John T. Matthews argues.<sup>69</sup> Ike becomes the anti-Sutpen, his the ultimate response to a system that has “erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage” (AA 209). Questions concerning Faulkner's region lie squarely at the heart of *Go Down, Moses*, and in its last stories, especially “Delta Autumn” and “Go Down, Moses,” we see the author dealing with the issues of racism and desegregation more transparently than in either of

---

<sup>69</sup> John T. Matthews, “Touching Race in *Go Down, Moses*.” In *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*. ed. Linda Wagner-Martin, 21-47. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21.

the other two novels I have discussed.<sup>70</sup> The question of Ike's response remains. If the South is indeed doomed, can a complete turning-away from society be effective? "Where have you been all the time you were dead?" Roth Edmonds asks the old Ike in "Delta Autumn" (345). Is Ike's repudiation but another absence in a South defined by absences?

To better understand how these absences operate, we must note the several accounts of lost innocence in the novel that mark the closing off of former identities. Like Sutpen's moment at the mansion door, these experiences are rites of initiation into a world where identities are produced by differences and distinctions. One such moment occurs in the childhood relationship between Roth Edmonds and his cousin Henry Beauchamp. Both children are descendants of the patriarch "Old Carothers" McCaslin (Ike's grandfather). Roth, the grandson of Ike's cousin "McCaslin," descends from Old Carothers' daughter and is white. Henry, son of Lucas Beauchamp, has descended from incest and miscegenation: Old Carothers fathered a child with his illegitimate half-slave daughter, Henry's great-grandmother. Though cousins, the children's families occupy different social positions. Roth's family owns the plantation on which the Beauchamps are tenant farmers.

As young boys, Roth and Henry are entirely oblivious to their social differences. Roth, whose mother died while giving birth to him, is like a foster-child to Henry's

---

<sup>70</sup>In these last stories, especially "Delta Autumn," we see characters voicing fear about the racial mixing in the civil-rights-era South, and much ado has been made about Faulkner's own misgivings about an integration that he believed "would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate [the race problem] overnight." In *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner*. ed. James B. Meriwether. (New York: Random House, 1965), 86. Matthews, in "Touching Race," reads Faulkner's stance as progressive in relation to a Southern ideology that largely ignored the vicious circle of racism and economic inequality. See pages 25-29.

parents. Molly, Henry's mother, is "the only mother he would remember."<sup>71</sup> The two children, identical in age, "become interchangeable [...] sleeping on the same pallet in the white man's house or in the same bed in the negro's and eating of the same food at the same table in either" (110). When the boys are seven years old, a rift suddenly appears between them. They return from dinner at Henry's house to sleep at Roth's, but Roth refuses to let Henry share his pallet. Faulkner provides no specific incentive for Roth's action but instead describes it as a sudden awareness of his heritage:

Then one day the old curse of his fathers, the old haughty ancestral pride based not on any value but on an accident of geography, stemmed not from courage and honor but from wrong and shame, descended to him (111).

Roth cannot understand his own motivation for refusing Henry's company—"lying in a rigid fury of the grief he could not explain, the shame he would not admit" (112)—and realizes his mistake after the fact. Some time later he once again goes to the Beauchamps for dinner, but Henry will not eat with him. It is "forever and forever too late" for Roth and Henry to return to their innocence (113). Roth has "entered its heritage and ate its bitter fruit," becoming himself another McCaslin, another Sutpen, an inheritor of the slaveholders' curse (114).

Ike has a similar coming-of-age when, as a boy of twelve, he kills his first buck with Sam Fathers. The old Chickasaw man marks his face with the fresh blood of the deer and, in doing so, links Ike forever with him. Sam, though barren, passes to Ike the heritage of his "grandfathers [who] had owned the land long before the white men ever saw it and who had vanished from it now with all their kind" (165). Now a man, Ike can

---

<sup>71</sup> Molly seems most clearly modeled on Caroline Bar, Faulkner's "Mammy Callie," to whom he devotes the book. She died in 1940, and shortly thereafter Faulkner wrote "The Fire and the Hearth." See Minter, 183-4 and Kinney, 23.

never return to boyhood. “In less than a second,” he thinks, “he had ceased forever to be the child he was yesterday” (181). Later that day their hunting party chases a large buck, and in the distance Sam and Ike hear the horn that signals that the deer has been killed. Moments later, however, Ike sees the enormous buck approaching them, “as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its death” (184). The deer sees them but does not display any fear:

its head high and the eye not proud and not haughty but just full and wild and unafraid, and Sam standing beside the boy now, 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 ridge Walter Ewell’s horn was still blowing them in to a dead buck.

“Oleh, Chief,” Sam said. “Grandfather” (184).

The other hunters, it turns out, have mistaken a smaller deer for the one the party was chasing, and thanks to this sacrifice, the impressive buck—“taller than any man” (184)—remains alive.

Importantly, Sam calls the buck “grandfather.” This title places his relationship to the deer in sharp contrast to the patriarchal succession of Ike’s lineage. Rather than a heritage that regards nature—and people—as something to be owned in a symbolic perpetuation of “name and accomplishments” (256), Sam’s ancestry acknowledges the place of the land in the lineage itself. The deer’s blood *is* Ike’s blood. *Theirs* is the “blood hot and strong for living, pleasuring, that has soaked back into” the earth (186). Sam’s ancestry understands no fundamental distinction between nature and human blood. When

he initiates Ike as a hunter, he marks “him forever one with the wilderness” in wiping the deer’s blood across his forehead (178).

To say that Faulkner idealizes Sam’s native ancestors as noble savages whose innocence renders them “one with nature” would be inaccurate, however. This becomes evident in his description of Ikkemotubbe, Sam’s father, the Chickasaw chief who owned much of what became Yoknapatawpha County.<sup>72</sup> As a youth, Ikkemotubbe runs away to New Orleans and returns with a French companion who calls the Chickasaw *Du Homme* (“the man”).<sup>73</sup> Ikkemotubbe goes by an anglicized version of this: Doom. Among the items he brings back from New Orleans is a potent “white powder resembling fine sugar.” In a demonstration of its power, he places this powder on the tongues of several puppies, which die almost instantly. When son of Mocketubbe, the chief of the tribe, dies suddenly, Ikkemotubbe gives another demonstration with a puppy, and Mocketubbe relinquishes his power to him: “Doom became in fact The Man.” He fathers Sam with a quadroon slave and then arranges her to marry one of his slaves. Later he sells the couple and his son to old Carothers (165-66).

This depiction of Ikkemotubbe implicates him as a usurper, slave-owner, and murderer. His position of Chickasaw chief is not something handed down to him but that which he has gained by subordinating others. His visit to New Orleans marks his corruption by the world of the slave trade. He returns with the slave woman, the powder resembling sugar, and the name that at once identifies him as “The Man,” superior to those around him. Faulkner’s play with *Du Homme/Doom* clearly suggests the destructive seed of not only identification as “The Man” but as “a man,” as a member of a fateful

---

<sup>72</sup> Ikkemotubbe sold Thomas Sutpen the land for Sutpen’s Hundred. See *GDM* 255 and *AA* 25-6.

<sup>73</sup> “Which should properly have been *L’Homme*,” as Kinney notes, 64.

line, such as that of the Sutpens or McCaslins, whose “doomed and fatal blood [...] seemed to destroy all it touched” (293). Even in Sam’s Chickasaw ancestry we find the curse that Thomas Sutpen and Roth Edmonds inherit already planted and germinating.

In being marked with the blood of the deer, Ike becomes Sam’s foster-child and recipient of this heritage. Yet entering into this tradition does not indicate some idyllic union with nature. Instead, it entails accepting an identity that is defined by the mastery of certain creatures. Now a hunter, Ike must identify himself as one who can kill a deer or bear with whom he shares “blood hot and strong for living.” How can one ever “comprehend loving the life he spills” (179)? Sam’s peaceful exchange with the big buck suggests that he does revere the very animals that he, as a hunter, reserves the right to take. At once Ike is initiated into a heritage that respects the shared blood of all creatures *and* defines itself as superior to some. As Matthews notes, Sam’s reverential greeting for the buck is an

attempt to oppose genocidal history with blood ritual [that] exposes their similarity. The Chickasaws' rites of power leave them with hands no less bloody than those of the European settlers who eventually supplant them. Ike's learning to “spill the blood he loves” marks him with the achievement of mastery over nature; it distills the essential relationship of human to nature through domination.<sup>74</sup>

The seed of male destruction is not simply something planted in the white landowners in the South; rather, it is “the touch of instrumental reason on nature [that] begins the train of corruption.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Matthews, “Touching,” 35.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Matthews' reading equates hunting with domination, and the ritual of spilling blood indicates a separation between humans and nature, rather than human participation in nature. He incorporates the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno into his reading by drawing comparisons between Faulkner's presentation of identity defined by mastery and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this work, the Frankfurt School critics argue that Enlightenment culture, in abstracting and quantifying those symbols that indicate our mastery of nature, alienates us from the very natural world over which we exercise power. This framework, Matthews notes, "enable[s] us to see that the southern instance conforms to the general condition [...] [and is] a conceptual product of Western idealism."<sup>76</sup> In this view, if humans truly recognized the shared blood of all creatures, there would be no distinction between hunter and hunted. Yet such an Eden, Sam's gesture indicates, is unachievable, and Ike must be made "worthy" to spill the blood that he shares (165).

The curse of the South, Ike suggests, lies not merely in white landowners or their European ancestors or even in Sam's Chickasaw forefathers. "The land," Ike claims, was "already accursed [...], already tainted even before any white man owned it" (259). Faulkner draws heavily on the Judeo-Christian tradition by using images from Genesis (the serpent, forbidden fruit, the tree, the story of Isaac) throughout the novel, and this notion of an "accursed" land suggests an inevitable and necessary fall from paradise. In a sense, *Du Homme* has always been *Doom*. In his first successful hunt Ike experiences that becoming a man, even in Sam's tradition, requires killing other creatures. Even as the

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 38.

ritual of smearing the buck's blood recognizes the fraternity of hunter and hunted, it indicates the absence of a true reverence.<sup>77</sup>

In Ike's conversation with McCaslin over the family ledger in section four of "The Bear," the repudiator-to-be echoes Matthew's observation that this heritage of ownership extends to Sam's ancestors and beyond:

I can't repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never old Ikkemotubbe's to sell to Grandfather for bequeathment and repudiation. Because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realized, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing (256-7).

In this statement Ike admits the paradox of his renunciation. If he repudiates the inheritance, he acknowledges that it is his to repudiate in the first place. Unwilling to represent ownership by the passing-on of names and legacies and accomplishments, Ike would rather recognize his biblically-granted dominion over the earth in God's name, "not to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever, generation after generation" (257). True ownership, Ike thinks, entails participation in rather than mastery of.

---

<sup>77</sup> We must remember that this view (of Matthews, and even of Faulkner) takes a Western framework and applies it to Sam's Chickasaw culture. The notions of presence and absence, ownership and symbolic mastery, as described in *Go Down, Moses*, are Western notions. In a view that understands symbols to indicate a lack, subsistence hunting can *only* appear as a failed indication of domination of one species over another.



Ike's cousin McCaslin recognizes the appeal of Ike's ideals—Sam Fathers once showed him, too, the big “Grandfather” buck— yet refuses to abandon a more practical approach to ownership. While Ike sees “no hope for the land,” McCaslin suggests that even though humanity has been “dispossessed” of an idyllic Eden, he and his ancestors can claim ownership over the land because they have cared for it. “[N]otwithstanding old Carothers did own it. Bought it, got it, no matter; kept it, held it, no matter; bequeathed it: else why do you stand here relinquishing and repudiating?” (258-9).

McCaslin is much more comfortable than Ike with accepting the paradoxes of possession and signification. To explain, he reads from Keats' “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Its contradictions—the “unravish'd bride,” the unfading scene on the urn that is timeless because it is unchanging—seem to McCaslin the ultimate expression of truth. As he claims, “He was writing about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change” (297). McCaslin's quotation equates truth with a text, and, as such, an abstraction, a symbol, a paradox that is at once (like the scene on the urn) lifeless and eternal. Ike, however, doesn't want the problems of representation to interfere with his experience of the wilderness or of his heritage. He wants to grieve for the sins of his fathers, not reconcile himself to their wrongdoings. Truth, he believes, is “simpler than somebody talking in a book about a young man and a girl he would never need to grieve over because he could never approach any nearer and would never have to get any further away” (297). Such an approach, Ike thinks, renders presence inaccessible.

When Ike is young he experiences a few mystical encounters that seem to transcend representation. Sam grants him a vision of the big buck which is not killed. Also, the boy Ike tracks down Old Ben down but the bear only reveals himself,

“dimensionless,” when Ike abandons his human instruments—gun, compass, and watch—and gives himself over to the “markless wilderness” (208-9). After the kill of Old Ben, however, Ike’s life is one marked by human instruments that must re-present its “wild and immortal spirit.” Countless examples throughout the novel illustrate that the only medium its characters have to encounter reality is a series of symbols. Once Ike kills his first buck that marks his initiation as hunter, the wilderness ceases to be approachable: “never to be inimical again since the buck still and forever leaped [...] still out of his instant of immortality the buck sprang, forever immortal” (178). The symbolic ritual of killing the buck and smearing his forehead with blood reifies Ike’s relationship with the natural world. As an abstraction, it embodies the paradoxical truths of Keats’—and McCaslin’s—urn. Initiation into manhood, therefore, is an initiation into the world of symbols and the loss of a “markless” or “dimensionless” past. Like the marble faun of Faulkner’s early poetry, Ike is “time-bound” but yearns for “the world [that] breathes and calls.”<sup>78</sup>

In “Delta Autumn” the old Ike maintains allegiant to the wilderness, but his unmediated encounters with its solitude are gone. Instead, he interacts with it as if a reader with a text: “ a dimension free of both time and space [...] where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless belling immortal hounds, falling and rising phoenix-like to the soundless guns” (354). The wilderness has become for him yet another abstraction, yet another story. What he once took for its silence, he muses, “was never silence but was myriad” (353). Ike’s repudiation, an attempt to “arrest at least that much of what people call progress” (354) also enters into this representational schema, a

---

<sup>78</sup> Faulkner, *The Marble Faun and The Green Bough*, 12.

story to be read and recreated by others. Roth equates Ike's decision with death; his unnamed mistress questions whether it is an abandonment of love.

*Go Down, Moses* is Faulkner's deepest foray into the questions raised by signification. Nothing escapes its swing, he suggests, and like Derrida he acknowledges that in the search for presence the act of

substitution has always already begun; that imitation, principle of art, has always already interrupted natural plenitude; that, having to be a *discourse*, it has always already broached presence in differance; that in Nature it is always that which supplies Nature's lack, a voice that is substituted for the voice of Nature.<sup>79</sup>

Language becomes an unavoidable medium. Truth must "be expounded in the everyday terms which [we] were familiar with and could comprehend [...] only through the complexity of passion and lust and hate and fear which drives the heart." "What distance back to truth," Faulkner asks, "must they traverse whom truth could only reach by word-of-mouth?" (260-61) In this novel this question appears more and more a statement. Truth, rather than the plenitude of Addie's natural body, becomes something abstracted by the necessities of representation. Symbols, rituals, texts: though they point to a lost origin, Faulkner suggests, they are all that we have. Even Ike, in his attempted repudiation of them, must still live in a reality bounded by stories of the wilderness, not its "brooding, secret, tremendous" presence (177).

This symbolic reality largely ignores the novel's women. Its only female character of any substance is Molly Beauchamp. Fed up with her husband Lucas' antics—he madly devotes himself to finding old coins in a native burial ground—her voice in the story

---

<sup>79</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 215.

becomes her desire for what Lucas aptly terms a “voce”: a divorce (119). In the end, she does not get her divorce, but Lucas—who has plenty of money in the bank—decides to give up his hunt. Yet *Go Down, Moses* does not dwell on silent female presences *As I Lay Dying* and even *Absalom, Absalom!* do. This novel concerns the world of men, whose “doomed and fatal [...] derivation” of blood “seemed to destroy all it touched” (293). The novel’s women are barely encountered. As Ike says of his wife, “*She is lost. She was born lost. We were all born lost*” (314). While men are initiated into the realm of symbols, females remain hopelessly closed presences, and they emerge in *Go Down, Moses*, if at all, as things impossible to understand.

*Go Down, Moses* is not simply a treatise on the problems facing the post-bellum South. What is generally considered Faulkner’s most regional novel at its heart establishes the connections, as Ikemotubbe’s nickname suggests, between doom and *du homme*, not merely doom and the Confederacy. In his investigation into the issues surrounding the South’s culture, Faulkner arrives at the question of the self’s need to encounter the world through representation. At the core of even the most regional of issues—slavery and the destruction of the wilderness—lies the most universal of dilemmas: the need to construct symbols in order to understand our relationship to the world around us. The labor of slaves that “return[s] each fall as cotton,” the wilderness that is “translated [...] into something to bequeath” (293, 256)—these are the results of a human, not specifically Southern, condition. The McCaslin family history as recorded in the ledgers, “a whole land in miniature, which multiplied and compounded [...] the entire South,” is also a microcosm of our interaction with the world (293). The South’s curse, Faulkner suggests, is potent because it is also humanity’s. Timeless and temporal,

universal and particular cease to be binaries in a novel in which everything is, as Derrida might say, always-already a text.

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of this study, I have attempted to chart Faulkner's depiction of systems of representation in the novels *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. In the first, the "dark voicelessness" of nature emerges as a presence in which Addie Bundren and her children participate by communicating intuitively, without speaking. Language, the deceased matriarch muses, attempts to represent those things most meaningful in life, but does a terrible injustice to them, because words don't fit what they're trying to say. In this novel Faulkner privileges silence over speech, darkness over light, the inexplicable femininity of nature over the masculine drive to impose meaning through symbols.

This approach to representation—that symbols indicate a lack—becomes Faulkner's means of critiquing the plantation system of his region in *Absalom, Absalom!* Its social structure, as it emerges in the story of Thomas Sutpen, is a rigid caste system upheld by symbols that reinforce its notions of social difference: mansions and slave shacks, fine suits and ragged clothing, black and white skin. When still a young boy Sutpen is initiated into an identity produced by these representations. Determined to secure a superior position for himself and his children in this system, Sutpen attempts to reify his social status by founding a plantation and a line of male successors to inherit it.

The symbolic nature of Sutpen's project comes at a price. It prevents the recognition of those presences that resist signification, and ignores the profound feminine silence that *As I Lay Dying* explores. Things that transcend representation, such as Clytie, Sutpen's half-black daughter, have no place in the plantation system. Her burning of

Sutpen's mansion at the novel's end suggests that the South must confront those transgressions that support its social edifice. Therefore, Faulkner's critique of signification in *Absalom, Absalom!* transcends the philosophical speculation of his earlier novel and becomes an indictment of the "moral brigandage" (AA 209) for which his region must be held accountable.

In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner presents the problems posed by representation as nearly inescapable. It is not just plantation-owners who need to reify their existence in the form of a symbols to pass down to subsequent generations; instead, in the story of Ike McCaslin we see that symbols uphold the very fabric of human interaction with the natural world. The transcendence of the natural world, so readily accessible to Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, becomes a presence forever lost in the South's history. The land's "wild immortal spirit" (GDM 192) is something that Ike can encounter only as a story, not firsthand. Though the novel's hunting stories elegize a wilderness destroyed by human encroachment, Faulkner plants the seeds of ruin deeper, in the human need to represent reality. Nothing, he suggests, escapes the signifying swing of symbols. In his initiation into Sam Fathers' Chickasaw heritage, Ike must symbolize his identity. In marking his forehead with the blood of the deer he killed, Ike must represent his superiority to—and metaphorical distance from—his fellow creature.

These three novels depict a relationship between Faulkner's art and the social issues of the post-bellum South that complicates any dichotomy between universal and particular. Faulkner himself many times suggested that the Southern character of his fiction was merely a medium for accessing some greater human truth, but I have argued that a close reading of these three novels challenges this hierarchy. The seemingly

universal questions about language Faulkner raises in *As I Lay Dying* emerge in the later novels as questions that concern the social and environmental transgressions of the South's unique history.

Faulkner remains, however, an artist, not a social critic. His medium is the novel, not cultural commentary or *roman à clef*. After all, he did not write about his native Oxford and Lafayette County but instead created Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha. Each novel that I have discussed, no matter how isolated from or relevant to the pressing issues of the South, constitutes something, Faulkner believed, more permanent than his region's real life. That, he advised students at the University of Virginia, should be the goal of a fiction writer—to create “one single urn or shape.”<sup>80</sup> The extent to which Faulkner allows the urns of *As I Lay Dying*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses* to speak to particularities of the post-bellum South I have attempted to address here.

---

<sup>80</sup> Blotner and Gwynn, 65.



## WORKS CITED

- Blotner, Joseph L., ed. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*. New York, Random House, 1977.
- and Frederick L. Gwynn, eds. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
- and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry*. 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1960.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Delville, Michel. "Alienating Language and Darl's Narrative Consciousness in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*." *Southern Literary Journal* 27.1 (Fall 1994): 61-72.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." Trans. Allison, David B. in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Ed. Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 278-99.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Donaldson, Susan. "Subverting History: Women, Narrative, and Patriarchy in *Absalom*,

- Absalom!*" *Southern Quarterly* 26.4 (Summer 1988): 19-32.
- Faulkner, William. *The Marble Faun and The Green Bough*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- . *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage, 1990
- . *Go Down, Moses*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon, 1974.
- The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*. New York: Pantheon, 1969.
- Irwin, John. *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.
- Keats, John. *Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan, 1884. Bartleby.com, 1999. 29 Feb 2008 <[www.bartleby.com/126/](http://www.bartleby.com/126/)>.
- Kinney, Arthur F. *Go Down Moses: The Miscegenation of Time*. New York: Twayne, 1996.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.
- Marshall III, Alexander. "William Faulkner: The Symbolist Connection." *American*

- Literature* 59.3 (Oct., 1987): 389-401.
- Matthews, John T. *The Play of Faulkner's Language*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- . "Touching Race in *Go Down, Moses*." In *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*. Ed. Linda Wagner-Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 21-47. *Literature Online*. 25 Mar. 2008 <<http://lion.chadwyck.com>>.
- Meriwether, James B, ed. *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- and Michael Millgate, eds. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962*. New York: Random House, 1968,
- Minter, David. *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.
- Mortimer, Gail. *Faulkner's Rhetoric of Loss: A Study in Perception and Meaning*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983.
- Petty, Homer B. "Perception and the Destruction of Being in *As I Lay Dying*." *Faulkner Journal* 19.1 (Fall 2003): 27-46.
- Reid, Margaret. *Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form: Storytelling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004.
- Roberts, Diane. "Eula, Linda, and the Death of Nature." In *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1996*. Ed. Kartiganer, Donald M., and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. 159-78.
- Sensibar, Judith L. *The Origins of Faulkner's Art*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984.

- Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Course in General Linguistics." Trans. Baskin, Wade. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2nd ed. Ed. Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 59-71.
- Sundquist, Eric J. *Faulkner: The House Divided*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
- Symons, Arthur. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1919.
- Towner, Theresa M. "Unsurprised Flesh: Color, Race, and Identity in Faulkner's Fiction." In *Faulkner and the Natural World: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1996*. Ed. Kartiganer, Donald M., and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. 45-65.
- Warren, Robert Penn, ed. *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966.
- Weinstein, Philip. *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- . *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Zender, Karl. *Faulkner and the Politics of Reading*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.