

"FATHER TO NO ONE":  
GENDER, GENEALOGY, AND STORYTELLING  
IN *GO DOWN, MOSES*

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"Was", the first story of *Go Down, Moses*, opens with the disclaimer that the protagonist Isaac McCaslin is "father to no one" and that the story to follow:

was not something participated in or even seen by himself, but by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, grandson of Isaac's father's sister and so descended by the distaff, yet notwithstanding the inheritor, and in his time the bequestor, of that which some had thought then and some still thought should have been Isaac's, since his was the name in which the title to the land had first been granted from the Indian patent and which some of the descendants of his father's slaves still bore in the land. But Isaac was not one of these... (3).

What is almost immediately clear is that the book opens with issues of gender, genealogy, and inheritance foregrounded, and that these issues concern not merely the transmission of land from generation to generation but the transmission of stories, a kind of "naming" of one's relationship to the past that echoes the assigning of family names in the above passage. "Some" believe that Ike McCaslin, being descended from the paternal line, ought to be the "inheritor" and the "bequestor" of the vaguely specified "that". But it is actually Cass

Edmonds, a descendant of the maternal line, who inherits both land and history and attempts to bequeath them to the young Ike. And it is precisely Cass's descent from the female line that, in problematizing him as a narrator of history in a patrilineal and repressive social order, enables him to revise the story — and provides Faulkner himself with a method of appropriating literary and historical tradition in ways that are profoundly revisionary.

In their recent book *Reading Faulkner*, Barbara and Wright Morris explore the relationship of Faulkner's typical young male protagonist to what they term his "First Ancestor": "a greatgrandfather, a legendary figure whose authority in family history rests on his role as founder, as originating force". The First Ancestor is the source of the family line, providing the name along with a sense of personal and cultural legitimacy to his heirs. The typical young protagonist is a great-grandson, like Isaac McCaslin, who never knows the First Ancestor except through the stories told to him. But, according to the Morrises, the greatgrandson "inherits those stories as well as the function of retelling them" (89). If we accept this assessment, then Ike McCaslin's repudiation of his patrimony would seem to constitute a failure that ought to damn those who follow him to a cultural chaos of illegitimacy and namelessness, aspects of alienation from both family and history. One might point to the tragedies that befall various descendants in "Delta Autumn" and "Go Down, Moses" as evidence that this is indeed one outcome of Ike's repudiation.

Yet Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* does not seem quite so apocalyptic in its import. The unnamed woman of "Delta Autumn", as well as Mollie Worsham Beauchamp and Miss Worsham of "Go Down, Moses" retain both a viable relationship to the past and a capacity to act despite (or perhaps because of) the abdication of the male heir. It may be that readers have focused too exclusively on Ike McCaslin, that we have too readily bought into the patrilineal paradigm in which he functions, that we — more so than Faulkner — have accepted the patrilineal paradigm as the only structure within which literary and cultural authority is distributed in *Go Down, Moses* and other of Faulkner's works — *The Sound and The Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are two. Certainly it has been part of the modernist ethos (which so many of us have internalized) to romanticize these troubled male figures as creative revolutionaries who are tragically defeated by the weight of a female-identified history, but *Go Down, Moses* (and the other major texts) suggests that

Faulkner's understanding of the relationship between creativity (originality) and tradition (history) was not so exclusively patrilineal.<sup>1</sup> In *Go Down, Moses*, the creative power to transform the past is conferred on the woman-descended McCaslin Edmonds, not on Ike McCaslin.

In the famous fourth section of "The Bear", the section that Faulkner claimed would turn a collection of stories into a novel, Cass and Ike — after a long re-creation of the history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction — turn to the issue of the hunt. "[Y]ou didn't shoot", Cass observes of Ike's encounter with the bear. And then he picks up a copy of Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and reads the final lines: "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss. / Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair" (283). It is apparent that Cass finds in these final lines an expression of Ike's own desires with respect to time and history. Even though Ike himself does not comprehend Cass's point — "He's talking about a girl", he responds naively (283) — Ike's affinity for the "eternal moment" as a representation of a timeless and unchanging "truth", that moment when all time and all space are compressed into one epiphanic instant, has already been elaborately developed in "The Old People" and in "The Bear" through the use of the imagery of the "frieze", of "statuary". Ike's desire for transcendence is apparent on the very first page of "The Old People", the first story in which he has a central role. "At first there was nothing", Faulkner writes, but then, in a gesture which mimics the "Let there be light" of the story of God's creation of the world, "... the buck was there. He did not come into sight; he was just there, looking not like a ghost but as if all of light were condensed in him and he were the source of it, not only moving in it but disseminating it" (157). The buck is commonly acknowledged in Indian lore as being, like the bear, a totemic figure, a representation of the ancestors Sam Fathers salutes with "Oleh, Chief... Grandfather" (177). For Ike McCaslin, who has to some extent appropriated the Indian tradition as his own, the "buck" is likewise a totemic figure. By shooting him "quick, and slow" (157) — stilling him — in that moment of spiritually charged mutuality, Ike initiates the gesture that will eventuate in his repudiation of the white father's patrimony. It is a gesture that attempts to unite repudiation and transfiguration of genealogy in transcendence. Later, when Sam and the young Ike see the "spirit Buck":

It was coming down the ridge, as if it were walking out of the very sound of the horn which related its

death. It was not running, it was walking, tremendous, unhurried, slanting and tilting its head to pass the antlers through the undergrowth... Then it saw them. And still it did not begin to run. It just stopped for an instant, taller than any man, looking at them; then its muscles suppld, gathered. It did not even alter its course, not fleeing, not even running, just moving with that winged and effortless ease with which deer move, passing within twenty feet of them, its head high and the eye not proud and not haughty but just full and wild and unafraid... (177)

Again, when Old Ben is killed, “[f]or an instant they almost resembled a piece of statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man stride its back, working and probing the buried blade” (231). Ike’s innocence of the literariness of his own desire notwithstanding, the picture that he constructs in each instance is one that emerges not from the natural but from the aesthetic world. The stillness mimics art, not life. And these renderings of frozen time, of epiphanic moments, recur whenever Ike confronts the wilderness. It is within this “timelessness” that he locates in wilderness that Ike imagines the possibility of transcendence of the burdens of his and his family’s history. Within this context, this first shot becomes, in a sense, Ike’s final shot. Ike would never remember it, any more than Ike remembers, or retells, the history he repudiates at the age of 19 when he returns his family’s ledger books to their shelves. What he would remember, however, and seek out again and again is the vision, the sight of the buck, or the bear, in its frieze-like appearance from nowhere, originary, totemic, but free of the corruptions of time and history.<sup>2</sup>

One might observe that Faulkner himself identified to some extent with this aspect of the aesthetic impulse, that his early work, especially the poetry of *The Marble Faun*, can be read as an attempt to transcend time and change that is comparable to Ike’s mystical visions.<sup>3</sup> But Faulkner’s growth as an artist took him beyond that point. As early as a 1922 review of a novel by Joseph Hergesheimer, Faulkner wrote, disapprovingly, that the novel:

is more like a Byzantine frieze: a few unforgettable figures in silent arrested motion, forever beyond the reach of time and troubling the heart like music. His people are never actuated from within; they do not

create life about them. (*Early Prose and Poetry* 101-2).

As André Bleikasten notes, the Hergesheimer review was written as Faulkner was becoming the artist who could create *Sartoris* and *The Sound and The Fury* (10-11). He had published his sketches in the *New Orleans Picayune* and in the *Double Dealer*, sketches which began as somewhat static "prose poems", but which soon began to develop characters and movement. At about this time, Faulkner said later in what has become one of his most well-known statements on his art:

I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and by sublimating the actual to the apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top... so I created a cosmos of my own. I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was* — only *is*. If *was* existed there would be no grief or sorrow. (*Lion in the Garden* 255)

Whereas Faulkner envisioned his "native soil" as a "postage stamp", or the means *into* human life and time, as source of the riches of time and history, as both originary *and* temporal, Ike McCaslin envisions a retreat from both, through the metaphor of a timeless wilderness powerful enough to transcend the human tragedies of death and injustice: "the names, the faces of the old men he had known and loved and for a little while outlived, moving again among the shades of tall unaxed trees and sightless brakes where the wild strong immortal game ran forever before the tireless belling immortal hounds, falling and rising phoenix-like to the soundless guns" (357-58). Whereas Faulkner would subvert the "originary" in a transformation of the "actual into the apocryphal", Ike would forever resurrect the First Ancestor through the totemic animal and forever aim to shoot — and forever fail to pull the trigger. In Ike's vision, individual people are not "momentary avatars" of time; rather the totemic animal, eternal, is the avatar of time transcended.<sup>4</sup>

A character must, as Faulkner said in that early review, “create life”, and this is something that Ike McCaslin never accomplishes. In a 1955 interview at the University of Virginia, the questioner indicated that she admired Ike McCaslin “[b]ecause he underwent the baptism in the forest, because he rejected his inheritance”. “And do you think it is a good thing for a man to reject an inheritance?” Faulkner asked. When the interviewer responded that one was justified, even admirable, in rejecting a “tainted inheritance” like Isaac’s, Faulkner replied that “a man ought to do more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people” (*Faulkner in the University* 246).

“Was”, told to Ike by his cousin Cass Edmonds, is as startling in its power to suggest arrested motion and to affirm the life of specific characters as “The Old People” and “The Bear” are startling in their evocations of eternity. From beginning to end, language is turned to the construction of movement:

When he and Uncle Buck ran back to the house from discovering that Tomey’s Turl had run again, they heard Uncle Buddy cursing and bellowing in the kitchen, then the fox and the dogs came out of the kitchen and crossed the hall into the dogs’ room and they heard them run through the dogs’ room into his and Uncle Buck’s room then they saw them cross the hall again into Uncle Buddy’s room and heard them run through Uncle Buddy’s room into the kitchen again and this time it sounded like the whole kitchen chimney had come down and Uncle Buddy bellowing like a steamboat blowing and this time the fox and the dogs and five or six sticks of firewood all came out of the kitchen together with Uncle Buddy in the middle of them hitting at everything in sight with another stick. It was a good race. (45)

From this beginning, the motion never stops. A perspective on “art” more different than Ike’s can hardly be imagined. This art is more verbal than visual, more a product of transformation and motion than of stasis, more rhetorical than poetic. It is *Cass’s* art at work here, the Cass Edmonds who is both a woman-bred McCaslin and old enough to have lived through the “old days” prior to Ike’s birth. We assume that Cass tells this story to Ike a number of times, that it is repeated as oral narrative and for similar purposes — to transmit some knowledge of the old times into present times, to render the old times

useful to the present generation, to make it clear to the descendant that "was" is "is". (Of course the connection of "Was" to oral tradition is an illusion of a written tradition as practiced by Faulkner the writer, but it is a significant illusion.) What *Cass* wants to accomplish is the reclamation of the old days in a way that will render them useful in his (and Ike's) present. And in this, Cass's ultimate purpose is entirely consistent with Faulkner's statement that the artist arrests motion so that it can come to life again, "because it is life". Whereas Ike would "relinquish" or "repudiate" time and history, Cass will "reclaim" and "revise" history for the use of the present.

The playfulness of Cass's storytelling might obscure its profoundly revisionary comment on certain manifestations of the southern tradition, particularly on the southern literary tradition, on the plantation romance and on the somewhat subliterary genre of southwestern humor. "Was" is set in 1859, eight years before the birth of Ike McCaslin in 1867 to Sophonsiba Beauchamp McCaslin and Buck McCaslin, two of the most important characters in the story. The tale of the apocryphal days "befo' de wah" as related to Ike by his Uncle Cass Edmonds, the "boy" of "Was", is striking for the ways it diverges from, and reconstitutes, the conventions associated with two of the most popular "genres" of southern fiction: the plantation romance with its distancing frame and nostalgic presentation of a heroic lost world and the humorous, coarser, and more open-ended sketch of braggadocio and confidence games on the southwestern frontier. "Was" signifies on both of these traditions and enables Faulkner, through Cass, to reconstruct the South in more complex, and more fundamentally realistic, terms than prior traditions permitted.

"Marse Chan", by Thomas Nelson Page, may be the most representative example of the plantation romance so popular in the United States between the 1880s and the beginning of the twentieth century. (Its antecedents go back to antebellum days.) In this story, a young man, a northerner, is passing through Virginia on his way to visit friends. As he rides along an abandoned road, he meets an elderly black man, identified only as "Sam", who begins to tell him the story of the glorious days "befo' de wah" when Marse Chan (Channing) and his family lived and ruled over the plantation where Sam was born and raised a slave. "Dem wuz good ole times, marster — de bes' Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac'! ... Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin" (10). As Sam goes on a picture begins to emerge of these old days as a time of peace, order, and contentment. At the center of the moral universe

dwelt the cavalier planter and his wife who lived in a fine house from which they dispensed gifts and guidance. Around them were arranged various retainers — white employees, neighbors who were in some sense dependent upon the largesse of the wealthy and authoritative planter, and contented black slaves. The drama concerned the progress of a romance between the son of one planter and the daughter of another, shadowed by a parallel romance between Sam, the faithful black slave, and a slave girl from the neighboring plantation. A more pastoral paradise could hardly have been imagined. The coming of the Civil War brought trouble into this paradise, not so much by freeing the slaves and altering the economic (and social) relationship between the white planter and his employees, but by taking the young cavalier away from his beloved belle. The story ends with the deaths of both. Only Sam and Marse Chan's dog, so old he can hardly walk, are left from the old days.

The old days of "Was", as recreated by Cass are very different. The plantation in this story is hardly the haven it appears in "Marse Chan". The house itself was left unfinished by the First Ancestor and the two heirs prefer to allow the slaves to live there. The simpler "I — House" in which they live is inhabited by animals both domestic and wild.<sup>5</sup> And in this antebellum paradise "ladies were so damn seldom thank God that a man could ride for days in a straight line without having to dodge a single one" (7). Gone is the beautiful young belle. Sophonsiba is represented as a foolish, pretentious woman, an aging belle whose chief "charm" seems to be the flashing "roan tooth" (10) that mesmerizes the young Cass. Her dream of graciousness and aristocratic entitlements is no more than a pathetic dream.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the familial order represented by a stately white planter and gracious wife, two aging bachelor brothers are at the center of events, Theophilus "Buck" McCaslin and Amodeus "Uncle Buddy" McCaslin. The slaves aren't so loyal, or so black. Tomey's Turl is a "damn white half-McCaslin" who runs off every chance he gets, not for freedom in the north but to see his girl Tennie who lives on a neighboring plantation. And Uncle Buck is not so much upset at Tomey's Turl for running away (which no decent slave ever did in the plantation romance) as for placing Buck in the romantic line of fire coming from Miss Sophonsiba Beauchamp. Even the loyal canine of "Marse Chan" has been replaced by a pack of wild hunting dogs and a furious, untamed fox.

In Cass's (and Faulkner's) version of southern history, all of the terms of the plantation romance are inverted: the grand mansion has become slave quarters, the planters live in a kennel, the expected

social order is completely overturned — there are no wives, no children, and no desire for them except on the part of the mulatto slave Terrell whose rights to the prerogatives of his patriarch father (and grandfather in one) are contravened by the social reality of slavery. The fine manners and noble sentiments of the cavaliers are replaced by the coarser manners and unsophisticated mutterings of the woman-shy McCaslin brothers. Uncle Buck responds to Hubert Beauchamp's offers of hospitality by repeating "I just come to get my nigger. Then we got to get on back home" (11). Uncle Buddy's characteristic comment on all the doings over at the Beauchamp place is "Hah" (23, 24). Although the story is set in 1859, just before the Civil War and at about the same time that Page set the story of "Marse Chan", there is no direct mention of sectional conflict in "Was", as there usually is in the plantation tale which depends for its appeal on its capacity to evoke not only the past but the deadness of the past.

Cass's method of revising the plantation romance is through the mediation of another popular nineteenth century genre of southern fiction, that of frontier humor. Faulkner's library contained two editions of George Washington Harris's collection of frontier sketches, *Sut Lovingood; Yarns Spun By a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool Warped and Wove for Public Wear"*, the original 1867 edition signed by Faulkner's father and a 1954 edition. Faulkner admired the title character because "he had no illusions about himself, did the best he could; at certain times he was a coward and knew it and wasn't ashamed; he never blamed his misfortunes on anyone and never cursed God for them" (*Lion in Garden* 251). Here, Faulkner might be thinking about Cass, but he is certainly not talking about Ike, who envisions himself as a kind of Christ selected by history for sacrifice and resurrection. Sut's "yarns" are wonderful dialect accounts of his adventures with sheriffs, preachers, and horsetraders. Usually the rustic Sut manages to outwit these more "spectabil" folks in one way or another, and he tells the tales with a self-deprecating tone that renders his victory over various representatives of respectability even funnier. Initially, in the earliest sketches from the 1840s, the rustic storyteller represented no particular moral standard, but as the genre developed, he began to be used as an index to certain moral virtues (simplicity, authenticity, and so on) and his appeal grew as did his capacity to satirize eastern culture. His growing literary authority is represented by his ability to fool the frame narrator and render the reading audience complicitous with him in this trick on the status quo. By the time Harris began to publish the *Sut Lovingood* tales in the 1850s, the dialect speaker had attained an authority over the educated

frame narrator which Mark Twain would make so much of in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog" and in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

But in Cass's story, the development takes a new — and important — turn. Beneath the illusion of complicity between the McCaslin brothers and the reading (or listening) audience is an alternative, and subversive, complicity between Cass, the source of the story and a "woman-descended McCaslin" and the slaves and women who are, with the interesting (and disturbing) exception of Tomey's Turl, excluded from the poker game. The only hint of what is going on behind the scenes comes from Tomey's Turl who, hiding out and talking to the young Cass, tells him "anytime you wants to git (sic) something done, from hoeing out a crop to getting married, just get the womenfolks to working at it. Then all you needs to do is set down and wait. You member that" (13).<sup>7</sup> This is the only suggestion Cass drops that the object of pursuit, who is himself an officially unacknowledged McCaslin, Tomey's Turl, is in cahoots with someone to turn the tables on the legitimate heirs of the First Ancestor, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. The "someone" turns out to be Miss Sophonsiba and probably Tennie as well, female characters who exist only on the fringe of a narrative that is ostensibly about the desires of the male McCaslins for their own "freedom". Yet these marginalized figures, however unacknowledged and however decentered by a patrilineal genealogy, are working — at the edges — to influence the game as it is played out. Of course we never see any direct evidence of Sophonsiba's and Tennie's plotting except through the voices of Tomey's Turl and Cass, but when Uncle Hubert turns the lampshade to scrutinize Tomey's Turl as he deals the cards, Hubert and the reader both understand that the "game" is much more complex than it appears to be, that the logic of the confidence game (upon which poker is based), which distinguishes between player and played for very clearly, is being subverted by the complicity of a "damn white half-McCaslin" (6) who is himself in cahoots with the women. In the woman-descended Cass's postbellum revision of a frontier sketch (an antebellum and very patrilineal genre),<sup>8</sup> the ethos that defined slave and woman as objects (Sophonsiba is likened by her brother to a "bear") is undercut. Now this development is new. In the frontier sketch, this role of quiet subversion, the trickster role, can be filled by a horse trader, perhaps, but not by a woman, nor by a slave. And what it provides *Go Down, Moses* is the means through which Ike's apocalyptic vision (focused on the transcendence of history in a culminating moment) can be displaced by Cass's historical, and considerably more affirmative, vision.

The historicizing Cass Edmonds is a man not unlike the typical frame narrator of the frontier sketch in that he is an educated member of the "respectable" classes. The difference, of course, is that the rustics of his tale are his own ancestors — their innocence and their brutality of some use to Cass in his attempt to come to terms with his own inheritance.<sup>9</sup> And in Cass's hands, the antics of these ancestors from the old days possess a portentousness that they could not have had for a southwestern humorist writing before the Civil War. Human freedom and slavery are at issue here in ways they are not at issue in the typical frontier sketches of the pre-Civil War years. Hubert Beauchamp and Uncle Buddy are gambling for people, not for money or horses as is so often the case in the frontier sketch. This difference, together with the signal strategy of the "uncalled hand" which renders the outcome of the game unsure, enables Cass to appropriate and reconstitute prior tradition in the service of a new, and more realistic, vision of southern history and southern literature. Uncle Buddy wins Uncle Buck's freedom, for the time being (eventually Buck and Sophonsiba do marry), but that he does so through the means of an "uncalled hand" which follows Uncle Hubert's scrutinizing of the mulatto who is dealing the cards suggests that Hubert Beauchamp (in Cass's version of events) becomes aware, at this moment, of the complicity of the mulatto in what was to be a conventional game of poker between two white men.

It is this complicity that Ike McCaslin, unlike Cass, never comes fully to terms with. When, after Emancipation and desperate to give her the money her grandfather left her, Ike finds Fonsiba, the daughter of Tomey's Turl and Tennie, huddled in a cold cabin with a husband who has no sense of either time nor necessity, he cannot comprehend the desires of Fonsiba and her husband for freedom, for the land, for the book and the spectacles with no glass. "Are you all right?" he asks Fonsiba. "I'm free", she answers (268). For Ike these desires on the part of former slaves are absurd, tragically so: "not now. Not yet", he cries (268) in answer to their claims upon freedom. But, as Cleanth Brooks notes, Ike himself is "not without some trace of the same delusion" (276). Ike's own peculiar limitation is that he cannot historicize his own life, that he himself cannot function in time, that he — like these newly emancipated slaves — cannot accept, nor even fully understand, the contingencies of history, the "was" that "is". He reacts to Fonsiba and her husband with a horror which precipitates his despairing flight back into the wilderness: "he returned home and that was all because in 1874 his father and his uncle were both dead" (268). Years later, when confronted by the unnamed black woman of "Delta

Autumn" who has borne Roth Edmonds's son, Ike repeats, in the same outraged and horrified voice, what is the same message he had for Fonsiba years before — "We will have to wait" (346). And once again, it is the voice of the black woman — as "black" and as "woman" a figure who is twice removed from the legitimating force of the First Ancestor — that can precipitate his flight back into the comforts of his apocalyptic vision: "Old man... have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont (sic) remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (346).

But Cass Edmonds reacts with considerably more acceptance, more of what one might call humility, when confronted with change. When Fonsiba's suitor shows up to announce his intentions to marry Fonsiba, the young Ike cries "But how did she ever know him? ... I never even heard of him before". It is Cass who answers philosophically that "Even their parents dont know until too late how seventeenyearold girls ever met the men who marry them too, if they are lucky" (264). It is Cass who has the capacity to accept the fact of love, of the right of even a former slave to will and to desire. It is the wilderness of the human spirit that he knows, and it is this knowledge that makes of him an artist who succeeds where Ike fails to frame a story that can be passed on into the present, for the uses of the present. Had Ike been able to comprehend Cass's story "Was" — the "uncalled hand", the humanity of slaves and women, the contingencies of desire as played out in a wilderness of social relationships — he might have had more to bequeath at the end of "Delta Autumn" than a horn left to Roth Edmonds by General Compson, something of his own history perhaps. This is, after all, what the woman wants for her child — a name and a place.

But storytelling in "Was" is more than the means through which Cass appropriates and revises tradition; it is as much a metaphor for Faulkner's own struggles with traditions both literary and familial. Faulkner's tendency to deny influence is well known. He denied having read James Joyce, for example, although he admitted to having "heard of Joyce, of course. Someone told me about what he was doing, and it is possible that I was influenced by what I heard" (Millgate 14). One gets the impression that Faulkner was or wanted to be perceived, in Joseph Blotner's words, as "another untutored genius warbling his native wood-notes wild" (*William Faulkner's Library. A Catalogue* 3). It's an appealing idea — and certainly reminds us of Ike's repudiation of history — although it is altogether wrong as a statement about William Faulkner's actual relationship to traditions. Blotner's catalog of Faulkner's library shows evidence of wide reading,

particularly in American, British, and French literatures, as well as in United States and Civil War history. Other biographical evidence points not only to his extensive childhood reading but to a more systematic course of study during his young adult years under the guidance of his friend Phil Stone. And later Faulkner would begin to practice his craft through deliberate imitation of predecessors from Shakespeare to and beyond Swinburne. In his early poems, Faulkner's own voice is "a bare whisper" among echoes from his literary forebears (Bleikasten 2). Gradually he would move from imitation into revision as he gained confidence. One of his early efforts was a parody, in *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*, of his mentor Anderson's literary style, a somewhat cruel exercise which hurt Anderson but which seemed to mark a plateau in Faulkner's growing literary independence.

That independence, however, ought never to be understood as freedom from literary or historical influences but rather as the capacity for creative revision of, or what Henry Louis Gates Jr. might call "signifying" upon, one's predecessors.<sup>10</sup> William Faulkner inserted a "u" into "Falkner" in what has often been understood as an attempt to distinguish himself from his own First Ancestor, writer and great-grandfather William C. Falkner, author of the 1880 best seller *The White Rose of Memphis*. But what is perhaps less well known is that the grandfather had *removed* the "u" from "Faulkner" when he appeared in the Mississippi frontier (Morris and Morris 90). William Cuthbert Faulkner's insertion of the "u" was actually a *restoration*. It was less a means of dissociating himself from a particular literary and personal ancestor than of reestablishing his relationship to a history that preceded, and included, that ancestor. In this sense, the restoration of a traditional family name may function as a method of literary self-preservation through decentering oneself with respect to that particular paternal influence. Eric Sundquist observes of the act of redefinition through writing that:

Whether that act takes the form of idealization or criticism, calm veneration or violent attack, what is at issue is the authority generated by dependence upon, or independence of, a genealogy; and it is precisely in the very personal terms of such a question that authorship may find its own power ... Experiments in authorial desire must risk the possibility that they too will either become repetitive commemorations in the name of an overthrown authority, or else find

themselves at a loss before the very absence of that authority.... The two cannot be untangled. (xii)

Ike took this risk and failed. By the end of the novel Ike McCaslin's longed-for "independence of a genealogy" results only in his finding himself, while in the woods, subject to the "repetitive commemorations" that he constructs "in the name of an overthrown authority", which is his past; in the social wilderness, however, Ike finds himself "at a loss before the very absence of that authority". He is Faulkner's construction of the failed artist, an artist mesmerized by the power of the originating ancestor. Ike's central position within the genealogy, the fact that it is his pain that the text seems most to engage, is deceptive. I would venture that it is, however important in its own right, also a means through which Faulkner can construct another, and more successful, representation of the artist in a woman-descended and decentered speaker whose capacities for revision are not subverted by the repressive demands of a male-derived, and therefore officially recognized, genealogy. The mistake of so many of Faulkner's readers is to assume that the absence of the paternal authority denotes the absence of all authority. That this is not the case is proven by Faulkner's return, in his search for the voice of history within *Go Down, Moses*, to women and especially to black women, to the problematics of gender, in his efforts to trace the boundaries of power and authority in a white and patrilineal culture.

## Notes

- 1 Joseph Blotner points out that during the years when Faulkner was writing the stories that were to become *Go Down, Moses*, he was preoccupied with his own family responsibilities. He had been reading *Moby-Dick* to his daughter Jill; he was the chief financial support not only of his own immediate family but of several relatives; and he was training to serve in WWII. Blotner reads Faulkner's own growing commitment to his own family and community as an indirect comment upon the failure of Ike McCaslin. See Joseph Blotner, *William Faulkner. A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974) Vol II: 1068-1095. The debate over Ike's decision to repudiate his inheritance continues, with many, if not most, critics agreeing that Ike's abdication is more failure than success. Sheila Donnelly, in "Isaac McCaslin: Fugitive from Responsibility, Poet of Cloistered Virtue" (*MidHudson Language Studies* 7 [1984]: 65-74) argues that Ike is "a would-be hero, who, like a Hamlet, a Lord Jim, or a Santiago, is caught in a [tragic] context of place and time [and] destined to failure" (65). David Steward, in "The Purpose of Faulkner's Ike" (*Criticism* 3 [1961]) tells us that Ike fails to "achieve a vision of reality in any way more profound or satisfying" (341) than Quentin Compson's. Dorothy C. Whitley, in "The Rites of Initiation in Faulkner's 'The Bear'" (*Mount Olive Review* 1 [1987]: 1127) finds Ike's decision a reflection of his inability to "recognize the difference between

relinquishment of dependency, a virtue in the wilderness, and relinquishment of responsibility, a flaw of character in society" (21). Essentially, Ike's decision is "an immature response to history and his story" (21). One of Faulkner's most astute readers, Michael Millgate, points out that it is Roth's mistress who "speaks to Ike the terrible words which underline more clearly than anything else the ultimate failure of his life and his endeavour" (*The Achievement of William Faulkner*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966). And Cleanth Brooks, in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963) points out that "In divesting himself of his legacy — for the best of motives, let us say — he has thereby reduced his power to act" (273). On the other side of the question, one finds readers like William J. Sowder who, in his "Young Ike McCaslin: Travels in Terra Incognita", claims that "Young Ike McCaslin is Faulkner's creative embodiment of the belief [that man will not only endure but prevail] and [Karl] Jaspers's *beau ideal* of the existential hero" (33). But one of the more interesting observations is that of Donald Kartiganer who writes that the "moral evaluation of Ike... does not seem... quite relevant, even as moral questions in the later novels in general do not seem as relevant as many have thought... 'The Bear' and, to some extent, *Go Down, Moses* are about the debate between Ike and Cass, and the reader's task is not to arbitrate it but to understand its meaning as a whole, to learn to see as Ike sees: mystically, that is to say, 'doubly.' Cass and Ike, possession and relinquishment, town and woods, are each necessary steps of a single process. They are reflections of each other, a single melody in minor and major keys. The apparent conflict between Ike and Cass is a version of the conflict within Ike himself, between the wilderness rituals and the problems of actual human living" (134). My only reservation about Kartiganer's assessment is that it would seem to be more the case that it isn't so much that Ike sees "doubly", but that Faulkner does. In this sense, the conflict is not between Cass and Ike so much as between Faulkner and each of the characters. As André Bleikasten notes: "Faulkner's texts are not deposits of fixed and final meaning for us to decipher; they are discharges of mental energy, fields of turbulence, records of battles won and lost" (*The Ink of Melancholy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

- 2 For Brooks, Ike does not shoot Old Ben for the same reasons that "one does not want a great drama to end, and yet one is eager for the end; the great process must work itself out to its culmination" (260). Brooks dismisses this aspect of Ike's characterization too quickly. It is true that one doesn't want a drama to end, precisely because it must work itself out to its culmination — and it is this unfolding of the drama itself that Ike would stop.
- 3 See André Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from The Sound and The Fury to Light in August* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), especially pages 111 on *The Marble Faun* where Bleikasten argues that "everything began with postures and impostures" (1).
- 4 At this point a Freudian might suggest that Faulkner's commitment to "sublimating the actual to the apocryphal" is hardly more than the attempt of any ambitious son to displace the father and assume for himself the patriarchal prerogatives of origination and repression. But the Freudian model fails us here, I believe, precisely because of the way Faulkner places tradition and history in a matrilineal genealogy of descent which "authorizes" a male speaker, in this instance Cass Edmonds, whose relationship to the

- originary First Ancestor is not direct. Freud's schema renders women invisible except as objects of male desire; Faulkner's texts thematize this schema.
- 5 An "I House" is a simple construction found throughout many sections of the U.S. South. It consists of a long central hallway running from a front to a back door. The hallway is flanked on either side by one or two rooms, doors opening onto the hallway itself and between the rooms on the adjoining wall. In short, there is a long hallway with two adjoining rooms on either side, both of which also open onto the hallway. The result is that it is possible that "the fox and the dogs came out of the kitchen and crossed the hall into the dogs' room and they heard them run through the dogs' room into his and Uncle Buck's room then they saw them cross the hall again into Uncle Buddy's room and heard them run through Uncle Buddy's room into the kitchen again" (4).
  - 6 She is trying to force her simple relations and neighbors to call the plantation "Warwick", in honor of a supposed legacy from the originary British culture, but her efforts do not pay off until much later, after Reconstruction, when her brother Hubert is bankrupt. At that point, the plantation becomes, for him, "Warwick". In this way, Faulkner would seem to underscore the power of the plantation tradition (in its literary and social manifestations) to compensate for the more brutal conditions of life in the South after the Civil War.
  - 7 Lucas Beauchamp, the son of Turl and Tennie, will say the same thing to the young Chick Mallison in *Intruder in the Dust* in an attempt to explain why he chooses women and children as the agents through whom he will attempt to prove his innocence of the murder of Vinson Gowrie. "Young folks and womens, they aint cluttered. They can listen. But a middle-year man like your paw and your uncle, they cant listen. They aint got time. They're too busy with facks. In fact, you mought bear this in yo mind; someday you mought need it. If you ever needs to get anything done outside the common run, dont wast yo time on the menfolks; get the women and children to working at it" (71-72).
  - 8 By this I mean that the events of "Was" actually happened in 1859, but because Ike was not born until 1867 and he is Cass's intended audience, the story is actually being constructed in the postbellum years, probably in the 1870s during Ike's childhood.
  - 9 The impact of Cass's story upon Ike McCaslin is somewhat more complex. Ike never, within the pages of *Go Down, Moses* or elsewhere, retells Cass's story in any attempt to make sense of his own inheritance. This may be one of the most significant differences between Ike and his cousin, and one of the strongest indications of Ike's own commitment to innocence.
  - 10 Henry Louis Gates Jr., in "The Signifying Monkey" (in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York and London: Methuen, 1984), explores the strategy of signifying in AfricanAmerican literature, where it enables the author to clear out a space for his own narrative. One of the characteristics of African-American novels is the strategy of signifying upon literary precursors. Signifying is not the same thing as "responding to", or "misreading" in the Bloomian sense. The Signifying Monkey, or the Trickster, "dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language... a

trope for repetition and revision" (286). Gates points out that African-American authors practice, through "signifying", a sort of "tertiary formal revision... seem to revise at least two antecedent texts, often taken from different generations or periods within the tradition. Hurston's opening of *Their Eyes* is a revision of *Narrative of the Life, Frederick Douglass's* apostrophe to the ships at Chesapeake Bay; *Their Eyes* also revises the trope of the swamp in DuBois's *Quest*, as well as the relation of character to setting in *Cane*. The example of Ellison is even richer; *Invisible Man* revises Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), along with DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and Toomer's *Cane* (but it also revises Melville's *Confidence Man* and Joyce's *Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, among others)" (290).

The strategy is, I believe, as frequent in Anglo-American literature, especially among authors like Faulkner whose relationship to the official literary tradition is rendered problematic by virtue of their particular regional identifications.

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