

**“ODE ON A GRECIAN URN”
AND *GO DOWN, MOSES*:
AN INTERTEXTUAL
INQUIRY INTO JOHN
KEATS AND WILLIAM
FAULKNER¹**

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The existence of an artistic legacy with which the artist is bound to come to terms has preoccupied a number of individuals throughout the history of art, and whether such legacy is mainly a burden or a blessing — or both — remains a controversial issue. In literature, this discussion has centered mainly around the notion of intertextuality and the study of sources and influences.

Many critical theorists, disparate in time and point of view, have addressed the issue. Among others, Walter Jackson Bate, in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and in *Poetry and Repression* (1975), Jacques Derrida,

in “Structure, Sign and Play in The Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966) and in *Of Grammatology* (1967), and Julia Kristeva, in *Semiótica do Romance* (trans. 1977), have attempted to construct or deconstruct a theoretical apparatus regarding the problem of intertextuality.

In the Introduction to his interestingly titled *Books Speaking to Books*, William T. Stafford remarks that he has been “listening to books speak to books for many years” (5), and he argues that, in fact, all readers listen to texts speak to texts, some readers without quite being aware of it. William Faulkner, however, seems to have been totally aware of John Keats. He seems to have “listened” carefully to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), especially in terms of the plight of the “Fair Youth”, frozen in space, the “Bold Lover” who can never kiss the “maidens loth” as they run; the assumption seems valid particularly because Keats’s youth provides Faulkner (and us, readers, by extension) with cogent and enticing suppositions for Ike McCaslin’s motivation, in *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

The most celebrated explication of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is still Cleanth Brooks’s in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1974). The critic points out, among other notions, that the Ode is “obviously intended to be a parable on the nature of poetry, and of art in general” (153). It may be more accurate to say, however, that Keats’s poem is not only about the nature of poetry and art but also about the paradoxical relationships between art and life. By exploring the implications of the paradox of movement in stasis, and stressing the value of mythic truth, the Ode discloses its central thematic statement: art is more permanent than life.

Brooks is right in arguing that the Ode’s main theme is “the fixity given by art to forms which in life are impermanent” (159). The critic surmises that Keats is certainly aware that the fixed moment of loveliness depicted on the Urn is more permanent than the fluid of world reality only *because* it is fixed (160). Indeed, the scene described in the Ode remains paradoxically alive *because* it does not entail human flesh at all but cold, ancient marble. To be sure, the Ode’s early stanzas (1-2) are concerned with telling paradoxes, for instance, the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the actual melody, of the figured lover to have a love warmer than in “real” life:

I

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (1186)².

As is usually the case, the paradoxes generate meaningful ambiguities. For instance, what exactly is a “Sylvan historian”? A historian who is like the forest, rustic, a woodsman? Or a historian who writes histories of the forest? Presumably, the Urn is sylvan in both senses. Besides, what is the truth which this historian seeks?

In its role as historian, the Urn must establish that myth, here depicted in art, is truer than fact. Hence, it is no wonder that this historian is not overly concerned with facts. We are never told, for example, exact dates, names of places, of people; nor do we ever learn the specific circumstances of the scene depicted. Mere accumulation of facts seems pointless. Indeed, as Brooks indicates, the Urn takes a few details and so orders them that we have — especially in terms of its famous concluding epigram — not only beauty but insight into essential Truth. This historian’s truth is the poetic beauty of the scene which the urn itself has immortalized, and the “history” presented has the validity of myth — myth, of course, as a sound perception into reality, not as idle fancy (213). Thus, considering the Sylvan historian’s view of reality, its message seems to be that the imaginative, mythic insight is capable of embodying the basic and fundamental perception of man, of art, and of nature.

The Ode’s central paradox of movement in stasis is readdressed in the famous concluding stanza (5). The recognition that the immortal men and maidens are “fixed” has certainly run through the second, third, and fourth stanzas as an ironic undercurrent. Now, the central paradox comes to conclusion in the eloquent oxymoron, “Cold Pastoral”. As Brooks clarifies, the word pastoral, sharply contrasted with the coldness of the marble, suggests warmth, spontaneity, the idyllic, the charming (163). Yet, paradoxically, this warm, lively scene is “frozen” onto a cold marble urn:

V

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (1186).

If the Ode is in fact a parable, it is an enigmatic one, and the paradoxes generate at least one more interesting ambiguity. As Brooks suggests, in the perplexing epigram that closes the poem, when the poet makes the Urn address the final question to man, one can emphasize that *beauty* is truth and place Keats with the aesthetes; or one can stress that *truth* is beauty and argue for an art *engagé* (153). At any rate, the very ambiguity of "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" ought to warn us against insisting on the statement in isolation, in detriment of contextual considerations. Ultimately, we realize that, yes, the Urn is beautiful, but its beauty is based on the poet's (and our own) imaginative perception of the mythic Truth which it entails, i.e., that whereas life is ephemeral, art is eternal.

We know for a fact that such a poetic perception of Truth intrigued William Faulkner. As the Mississippi writer turned seriously to fiction, around 1925, he was indeed emerging from a decade during which he had viewed himself primarily as a poet. Many scholars have shown that as a young poet Faulkner indicated literary preferences that were more Continental than American or Mississippian³. Drawing on these important years in which he produced most of the poems of *The Marble Faun* (1924) and *The Green Bough* (1933), critics have pointed out that lyrical passages throughout Faulkner's fiction testify to the profound effect of poetry on the writer's prose style. Faulkner himself often declared his admiration for Spenser, Shakespeare, Shelley, Swinburne, Eliot, Pound, Mallarmé, Gautier, Verlaine, and, of course, Keats (Davis 33)⁴.

Critics have pointed out significant intertextuality between Faulkner and English poetry, especially of the Romantic period. In particular, descriptions of the natural world of flowers, gardens, birds, morning and twilight reveal the great influence of Keats and Shelley. In fact, the influence of English Romantic poetry on Faulkner's fiction has been shown to extend beyond the level of style to include narrative technique and thematic concerns. The handling of narrative time, for instance, has been considered to be largely conditioned by the adoption of the romantic's static experience of temporal reality⁵. And several of the early novels show how the romantic attitude of immobility in relation to the external world of society and nature remains a central issue (Folks 184; Brooks *Yoknapatawpha* 32-65).

Surely, Faulkner's personal admiration for the English Romantics, in general, and for Keats, in particular, is common knowledge. During an interview with Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, vehemently asserting that a writer's

only responsibility is to art, Faulkner uses precisely the Ode which is the object of this study to illustrate his point. The flippant words are now celebrated:

If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; The “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is worth any number of old ladies (Meriwether 239)⁶.

In fact, the romantic image of motion in stasis, especially in terms of what it comes to represent in Keats’s Ode, occurs persistently in Faulkner, spanning his writings at least from 1924 to 1942. More precisely, the image is present, with slight variations, not only in the poetry, as mentioned above, but also in the fiction, in *Flags in the Dust* (Brooks *Yoknapatawpha* 5, 350-53), in *The Sound and the Fury* (Millgate 96), in *As I Lay Dying* (Canfield 370), in *Light in August* (Pascal 163), and, of course, in *Go Down, Moses*.

Since, considering all of Faulkner’s canon, Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” presents its most explicit degree of intertextuality with the Isaac McCaslin stories of *Go Down, Moses*, this article focuses on the key thematic relationships between the two works. Indeed, poem and novel share crucial themes. As L. D. Rubin, Jr. indicates, for instance, the ongoing Faulknerian contrast between the man of action, who lives and dies violently, and the man of sensibility, who is ineffectual in life, achieves a tension which is very close to the kind of tension between life and art that is, of course, the thematic core of Keats’s Ode (8-10)⁷. Besides, as Blanche Gelfant submits, Keats and Faulkner perceive and describe life mainly through a common pattern of “contrarities” (paradoxes), and indeed, as Keats’s Ode powerfully illustrates, art and life are antithetical, since the subject of art — artistic truth — implies permanence and unity, while the condition of life is change and multiplicity (46).

Given such central common views, it is understandable that Faulkner’s use of Keats’s poem should entail a moment of crucial importance in *Go Down, Moses*. Surely, the poem may furnish the key to a rewarding inquiry into Ike McCaslin’s motivation as a character. Faulkner draws on the Ode’s central paraphrastic suggestions regarding life and art, evanescence and eternity, and, by symbolic extension, explains the paradoxical achievement and failure of Isaac’s life⁸. Actually, one of the central thematic contrasts in *Go Down, Moses*—civilization in opposition to wilderness—appears to be directly drawn from Keats’s tension between evanescence and eternity⁹.

To pursue specific points of reference between poem and novel, the novel’s fifth chapter, “The Bear”, is the ideal starting point, closely followed by “Delta Autumn”, the novel’s next to last chapter. Gelfant is right in arguing that relationships between life and art are Faulkner’s central theme in “The Bear”, although I do not think this theme is so “implicit” or “unrecognized” as she submits. At any rate, her study clearly demonstrates how the Urn-imagery in the story directs attention to the elemental theme that it has in common with the Ode the conflict between the reality of life and the ideality of art (44-47).

The context in which Keats’s Ode appears in “The Bear” is always worth remembering. The specific references surface in the story’s famous

Part Four, which breaks up the time sequence and introduces an involuted style to recount a different order of experience, representing Ike's tortured mind, desperately seeking to grasp his own complex and suppressed heritage, and retracing the history of the family from the arrival of grandfather Carothers McCaslin in Mississippi.

It is from the old ledgers in the office of the plantation that Ike learns the whole truth about his family heritage. These ledgers record the outlay of clothing and supplies according to each sharecropper's credit. Ike discovers therein a series of personal memoranda which Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy wrote to each other. These are mostly concerned with the routine of the plantation, but one particular entry educes Ike's heartbreak and outrage:

Turl Son of Thucydus @ Eunice Tomy born Jun 1833 yr stars fell Fathers will (269)¹⁰.

Figuring out the puzzle, Ike realizes that old Carothers had bought Eunice in the New Orleans slave market in 1807 and married her to Thucydus in 1809. A baby girl, Tomey, was born shortly thereafter. In 1832, when Tomey was twenty-two, Eunice drowned herself. Tomey's child, Turl, was born the following June, Tomey dying of childbirth. In 1837, old Carothers died, leaving the legacy to be paid to Tomey's Turl. There is critical consensus as to what happened. John Lewis Longley sums up the family's incestuous heritage and spells out Ike's predicament:

Carothers McCaslin fathered Turl on Tomey, his own near-white daughter. . . . Ike's problem is not so much to assess and assign blame but to find a way to cancel the past evil and expiate what has been done. He is not blind to the indifferent cynicism which the legacy demonstrates. Carothers knew he would never live until Turl became twenty-one; he cynically left the bequest to be paid by his [white] sons (96).

Ike is shattered by the discovery. And, as Longley suggests, there is indeed more than simple depravity in Carothers' actions. The fact that old Carothers gets a child on his own daughter and, subsequently, dismisses them both with cynical indifference indicates that he simply did not regard them as human at all. Summing up Ike's conscious view of his corrupt legacy, and referring to Old Carothers's crassness, Longley concludes: "The black men, women, and children in his care do not have souls infinitely precious to God but are chattels like mules or cotton, to be used or sold as the owner sees fit" (ibid).

In the crucial earlier scene in which the fyce (symbolizing Ike himself) holds Old Ben at bay, Ike has learned the meaning of one of the true values which has touched his heart — courage. The element of courage that is emphasized in Brooks' definition of thefyce interestingly reiterates Ike's cub-like, epiphanic experience: "A fyce", says Brooks, "is a small mongrel dog with a good deal of fox or rat terrier in its makeup. It is quick, nervous, and its tendency to do a great deal of yapping and frenzied barking may conceal the fact that it really has a great deal of courage" (*Encounters* 139). Ike is only fourteen at the time and is, of course, unable to shoot the

bear, although his reasons for not killing the beast have nothing to do with cowardliness. Yet, the moment is a true rite of initiation and, vis-à-vis the fyce's intrepidity, Ike undergoes a profound spiritual experience, to which he and his older cousin McCaslin Edmonds (Cass), who along with Sam Fathers and Buck McCaslin has stood as a father to Ike, later attribute Ike's courageous — if problematic — repudiation of the McCaslin inheritance (Volpe 245).

Part Four of "The Bear" begins when Ike McCaslin is twenty-one years old (1888). "If Parts One through Three were Ike's coming-of-age in the wilderness", says Daniel Hoffman, "Part Four is his coming of age into society" (386). At this later moment, we have the long debate between Cass and Ike, which finally resolves itself into the classic dichotomy between the claims of the active and the contemplative life. Searching in art for the meaning of Ike's experience, Cass reads and comments to Ike on the content of "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

He [Keats] was talking about truth. Truth is one. It doesn't change. It covers all things which touch the heart honor and pride and pity and justice and courage and love.... They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know truth (297).

Ike McCaslin and Cass have been arguing about Ike's rejection of his inheritance — the plantation which has passed from Ike's grandfather (Carothers McCaslin), through Ike's father, to Ike upon his recent twenty-first birthday. Most of the substance of Part Four is taken up with Ike's attempt to articulate to himself and to Cass the reasons for his repudiation. The tension climbs to a pinnacle when Cass wants to know exactly why Ike did not shoot Old Ben during the earlier episode with the fyce, mentioned above. Ike cannot answer. Cass clearly believes that the explanation for Ike's inaction, in not being able to shoot the bear, and his action, in repudiating his inheritance, is in Keats's poem. With deliberate movements, Cass rises, crosses the room, picks up from the shelf the book of Keats's poems, returns to Ike's side, sits down, and opens the book. He then says — "Listen" — and reads the entire Ode to Ike. Then, he says — "Listen" — once more, and rereads the Ode's second stanza. Finally, he closes the book, lays it on the table, and quotes the stanza's last lines:

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (297).

As argued above, in this stanza, Keats deepens the theme of the paradox of permanence and evanescence which the first stanza adumbrates, starting the movement toward the ultimate affirmation of empathy, of the power of emotion, of artistic insight, and the eternity of art and mythic Truth, as the Urn freezes its figures into an endless non-moving motion. Caught in a moment of "wild ecstasy", the "Bold Lover" will forever chase the girl without coming any nearer; he will chase her, transcending time, as long as the Urn endures. And the truth which Cass means is not only the central theme of the lines he quotes but of Keats's poetry in general: the

desire for transcendence itself. The Urn's unheard melodies are sweeter because they can be imagined as whatever we want; and, inspired by the "artificial" scene on the Urn, we can pretend there is no time, no change, no death.

For Ike, the scene depicted in Keats's Urn and read out loud by Cass depicts "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). Thus, as Cass implies, Ike McCaslin in a sense becomes the Urn's "Fair youth" who wants the moment to last forever, no matter how thwarted his aspirations will be, since, in Faulkner, there is ultimately no actual possibility of transcendence.

In fact, Faulkner repeatedly says, in referring to himself as a writer and to others as artists, that they all have a "dream of perfection", impossible to be fulfilled, and that, actually, if they ever did fulfill it, they would have to kill themselves. That is why the artist keeps writing, revising, trying again and again with a new work, in a never-ending process: transcendence remains a desideratum (Canfield 366)¹¹.

As Gelfant points out, Faulkner's admiration of Keats's Ode is linked to an ideal — not a reality — of timelessness that was to become the recurrent motif of his own work¹². The critic insightfully asserts that, for Faulkner, "timelessness implied the existence of a Platonic world where the pure and the inviolate form of truth endured immune to the vagarious demands of ordinary life" (47). To be sure, this is the world especially accessible to the romantic imagination, and Faulkner, whose sentiments were recognizably anti-modern, seems to have wanted to advance in his art much of his often romantic view of reality¹³.

Yet, further analysis of Ike's inaction, in not killing the bear, and of his action, in repudiating the land, however, is necessary if we are to grasp the nature of his motivation and of his character fully. Ike's initiation and what he must achieve in order to mature as a "human being" are played upon at length. His going into the wilderness sets in motion a drama of man against beast. As Brooks indicates, if the object of the hunt in the novel's fourth chapter, "The Old People", is a relatively small animal, a deer, in "The Bear" the quarry has mythic proportions. Ike must train under Sam Fathers so that he can gain the skill and other wilderness traits — "humility", "pride", "bravery", and the "wild invincible spirit".

What is more, in order to be allowed to see Old Ben (not to slay him), Ike must meet nature on its own terms. He has to divest himself not only of his gun, which he leaves back in camp, but also of his watch and compass, left on a bush. These renunciations are fraught with ceremonial significance. As Hoffman asserts, "Ike has [to] cut himself off from what is man-made — the metallic objects, the implements that impose measurements upon time and our directions upon space" (393). In Brooks' words, Ike "must not be 'tainted' by civilization" (*Encounters* 137-38).

Ike's initiation is again thematically linked to Keats's Ode. When we trace Faulkner's allusion back to Keats's poem, the speaker's addressing the Urn as "Sylvan" strikes an evocative note at once. Certainly, on a very literal level, the forest of the poem resonates against the forest of the story, and the reader thinks of the importance of the great woods in the rites of Isaac's initiation (not to mention in Ike's despondency as a defeated old timer in "Delta Autumn"). It is, of course, in the woods that the rites and ceremonies that impart essence to Isaac's life take place. Faulkner, in fact, calls the annual trip to the forest a "yearly pageant-rite". As Gelfant demonstrates, the world of the forest which Ike enters differs from the ordinary world in an important way. Using a pictorial metaphor, Gelfant shows that the sylvan world presents a ritualistic, "frieze-like" arrangement of moving figures, "men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters" (*GDM* 191), poised against a set background (Gelfant 49), with "the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and relieved against it" (*GDM* *Ibid*). This clear depiction of movement in stasis again suggests the Urn-like quality of Keats's "brede of marble men"¹⁴.

After Ike's successful initiation, entirely carried out in the forest, he, in "Delta Autumn", does appear to have become identified with divine, timeless wilderness: "coevals ... the two spans running out together, not toward oblivion, nothingness, but into a dimension free of both time and space" (354). The wilderness seems to Ike as immutable as the trees on the Urn. Ike is, of course, shortsighted. As Gelfant submits, in the Ode the trees are immutable in that they are strictly art-forms, belonging solely to a timeless order (60); whereas in the "real-life" world of Ike's forest, the wilderness is by definition temporal, doomed.

And is the wilderness ever depicted as timeless in *Go Down, Moses*? The answer points to a negative. Drawing once again on the possibilities of intertextuality, we have to grant that, as the major eighteenth-century English poets so ably demonstrate, the natural world does have some sort of changelessness¹⁵. In its cyclical regularity the natural world does somehow remain "the same" through time. According to this view, true changelessness is in nature's predictable and trustworthy rhythms of motion of days and nights, and seasons, etc. Faulkner, however, does not subscribe to this neoclassical view of nature. For: one thing, as Brooks shows, the natural world in Faulkner is far from predictable, balanced or Edenic, and Ike is no advocate of the concept of the Noble Savage (*Encounters* 145). Moreover, in their activities in the forest, Ike himself and his hunting companions have to accept the brutal pattern of nature in the struggle for survival and inevitable death. In a word, the wilderness in the novel cannot be timeless, and the lumber companies and the logging trains that appear in "Delta Autumn" clearly testify to that.

Once again, Keats's Ode explains Ike's motivation. As suggested earlier, the analysis of the main thematic issues in the poem shows Ike's reason for not killing Old Ben. Ike does not seem eager to bring the ritualis-

tic hunt to an end (neither does Sam, for that matter). As suggested above, failure to shoot, as it were, stamps Isaac onto the Urn with the other figures in an attitude of what Larry Marshall Sams has called “non-acting” action (637). And, in Ike’s case, there appears to exist even a desire to be like the figures on the Urn, free of time. Nevertheless, as argued above, this sort of transcendence cannot be achieved in life, only in art. To attempt freedom of time in life is to attempt to stop time, and the result may be immobility, a statue-like fossilization. Isaac McCaslin, anyone?

The Ode also explains one final, key thematic issue in the novel: Ike’s repudiation of his material heritage. As the last living male descendant of Old Carothers through the male line, the Edmonds descending from Old Carothers’ daughter, Carolina, Ike is the legal heir to the McCaslin plantation (Volpe 231). Ike, of course, boldly repudiates his heritage, and his two acknowledged reasons are apparently valid. The first has to do with what he learned from his real father, Buck McCaslin, and from his mythical father, Sam Fathers: since nature, and therefore land, belongs to all men, it is communal property, and no individual can own it. The second reason, however, as Brooks submits, seems to have weighed more. As we have seen, reading the commissary entries, Ike discovers that his grandfather had begotten a child on Eunice, one of his slaves, and then had committed incest with his own daughter, born to Eunice. Ike was sixteen when he found out the secret, and he has been deeply and permanently affected by it. In later rejecting the plantation, Ike nobly attempts to break with his corrupt past, with the terrible legacy of his grandfather, and, as in Gelfant, with “the entire Southern slave economy that had made such a legacy possible” (54).

Sadly, despite Buck’s communal and “altruistic” views regarding property¹⁶, the legacies which Ike rejects from his white progenitors turn out to be empty myths of racial purity and superiority, of noble lineage, of inherent worth. In fact, the conflict between an inherited empty code and the actuality of human relations is indicative of the complexities and tensions that often pull modern man (and not only North American Southerners) in opposite directions. It is certainly this pattern of tension and guilt that is the core of Isaac McCaslin’s heritage. Ike repudiates his due material inheritance and becomes “priest of the wilderness”, choosing instead Sam Fathers’ patrimony, the code of the natural world, rather than the social pattern that is Cass’s and his own heritage, represented in the land. As Volpe sensibly suggests, Ike’s indoctrination by Sam Fathers eventually leads the young man back through time, beyond the crimes of his immediate ancestors and of his “civilized” heritage, back to man’s sources — the forest, the earth (186).

This is a clear — and praiseworthy — attempt to stress the essential human being and his relation to the essential pattern of nature. The process of retrieving man’s essentiality must be executed *away* from the civilized world¹⁷. What matters is that through his initiation Ike is forever “tamed out of his blood”, and in a way he does embrace some of the true virtues of

“honor”, “pride”, “justice”, “courage”, and “love” affirmed by Faulkner in the novel (Volpe 243-44).

Unfortunately for Ike McCaslin, and, *sotto voce*, for any hopes in regard to a solution to racial problems in the American South, the outcome of his story reveals that although in his paralysis he boldly repudiates his material heritage, Ike is unable to repudiate the social (and racial) heritage. By repudiating the crime of his grandfather and, by implication, the crime of his own society; and by trying to live by the code of nature, Ike does achieve some heroic dimension. But that very repudiation will have problematic consequences for himself as a human being and for his community: apart from the romantic idealism of the act, what, in fact, does Isaac McCaslin accomplish by giving up marriage, fatherhood, and property?

To be sure, during the heated discussion in the commissary of the plantation that stands as the fulcrum to the present analysis, Cass Edmonds argues that his younger cousin is not facing his responsibilities, that he is in fact escaping them. Cass is right; although Ike courageously surrenders all to expiate the violation perpetrated by his ancestors, he is not free of the social (and racial) curse of his heritage. Brooks raises the relevant question: did Ike act properly in “freezing” and relinquishing the plantation¹⁸? The price for making himself poor has been high. More importantly, Brooks reminds that as we all know, “power in itself is neutral — it can be used for good as well as for evil. In giving up his property, Ike gave up his power to do good. In setting himself free, Ike has also shirked his responsibilities” (*Encounters* 156).

As Gelfant suggests, Keats’s Urn becomes a symbol of spiritual aspiration for Ike, “confirming his vision of a dimension free of time and space where all the things that touch the heart remain inviolate” (55) and become Truths. For Ike, the Urn, itself having transcended time, surviving through the ages to express an unchanging aesthetic and mythic Truth, symbolizes the possibility of human transcendence. Yet, the kernel of Ike’s predicament is precisely this “Urn-like” condition. His own story freezes him into the same eternal pursuit that the Urn imparts onto the “Fair youth”. Sadly, for him, when he gives up the land that was legally his in the name of Truth, he becomes immobile like the Urn figures.

Moreover, when he attains the goal of unity with nature, it seems to turn out not what it should be. This pathetic situation is all too clear “Delta Autumn”. As Gelfant perceptively demonstrates, the last time we see Ike return to Big Bottom, he is an old, weak man who seems to be hiding. Evidences of historical change are shockingly undeniable, and the worlds of time and timelessness now “meet at a narrow boundary” (53). Isaac is now seventy-five; in spite of his initiation and unity with nature, he has lived within society virtually all his life, each autumn going back into the woods, which he must travel farther and farther to find. From the evidence of the events of the novel, he has not been able to teach the wilderness code to anyone after him. His travelling companions in “Delta Autumn” are sullen and cranky — and mock Uncle Isaac.

A final, devastating reality confronts him. A sort of incest, after one century, occurs again between the white and the black sides of the McCaslin family. When Ike meets Roth Edmonds' mistress and discovers that she has Negro blood, the natural man has become much weaker than the social man. Brooks clarifies the situation:

The girl who comes into Ike's tent holding her infant son turns out to be the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim [James Beauchamp], and thus the great-grand-daughter of Tomey's Turl [Terrel Beauchamp]. Since the father is Roth Edmonds, Old Carothers' sin which caused Ike to repudiate his inheritance appears once more (*Encounters* 155).

And when Ike pleads with the girl to go North and marry someone of her own race, the girl's powerful response summarizes his failure:

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 (363).

As many have pointed out, Ike's repudiation of the legacy has really been in vain: the latest descendant of Old Carothers has begotten a child on the latest descendant of the slave woman, Eunice, whom Old Carothers had ravished and left so many years before¹⁹.

Yet, the question — what should Ike have done? — remains. In an interview with Cynthia Grenier, Faulkner himself declared that Ike should have done more than just repudiated his inheritance, "He [Ike] should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people" (Meriwether 225). Certainly, Ike does manage to uncover the essential, natural man within himself, but he is never able to fuse into one harmonious personality the social and natural aspects of his being. The rift is revealed mainly by his failure to have any effect at all on the society which he has shunned. This modern-day, frustrated Moses becomes fixed in a posture of arrested motion; he is changed from man to artifact, like an immutable figure within a work of art.

Only outside of history — in art and artifacts, on an Urn or in an Ode, or in a story — can a timeless gesture retain its viability. If Ike cannot kill Old Ben, neither can he succeed in maintaining himself perpetually in the stance of the hunter facing the hunted. In seeking to "catch" time, he has become immobilized, while, around him, the "timeless" wilderness falls to the axe (Gelfant 65; Rubin 9).

Yet Ike's fall, played against the background of the fall of the wilderness, is extremely touching. After all, despite (is it *because* of?) the helpless condition in which his repudiation of worldly possessions places him, the act displays Ike's capacity for true self-denial as well as his ability to act against his own material interests. In this important respect, Ike has an admirable, heroic stature. But, as Faulkner implies in the Grenier interview above, Ike's decision deserves more disapprobation than praise. If Isaac feels so strongly about the wrong which Carothers did and about the plight of the Negro, why does he make a decision that renders him powerless to do anything at all for his cause?

As is common knowledge, the title of the novel is taken from the words of the Negro spiritual, "Go Down, Moses, and Set My People Free"

(Tuck 103). But if Isaac McCaslin is the Moses figure, he has failed in his mission. His renunciation is a strictly personal act; his possible salvation is therefore only a personal possibility. In fact, he frees neither his people nor himself. Ike is ruefully mistaken when he tells Cass, “Sam Fathers set me free”. Despite his communion with nature, Ike’s renunciation of the cursed land and of civilization has not really freed him from under the shadow of slavery, as Roth’s mistress shows him only too well.

And the black people in the United States — North and South — are not free, either. Ike himself admits that it will be a long time before real freedom comes about. At the end of the novel, the action reaches the 1940s and blacks do not enjoy freedom in the American South. Considering the fate of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, whose body in the novel’s final chapter arrives in a casket from the Illinois State Penitentiary, the North cannot guarantee freedom, either. In a chilling way, Ike takes too much of Old Carothers with him to be able to serve as a Moses leading the Negroes out of bondage. The tragedy is that, nevertheless, Ike is sensitive and has come closer to the natural within himself and to debunking his empty social legacies than any of the people around him.

But, as Canfield keenly asks, whose reading of Ike McCaslin is the most complete? Faulkner’s, as advanced in the Greiner interview? Lucas’s, who thinks that Cass fooled Ike out of his patrimony (44)? The other hunters’, who think that Ike “just quit” (309)? Ike’s own? One imaginable by Keats’s “Sylvan historian”, as suggested by Cass’s intertextual allusion? Like General Compson, we wish we could spend the night with Ike and get the truth out of him (309). There is no need, however, to resort to recent developments regarding the relativity and multiplicity of signification everywhere in poststructuralist theory to realize that, ultimately, Ike is a Proteus, and that there can be no definitive explanation for his character. In any event, Isaac McCaslin is surely not the first character experiencing the paradox of stasis in motion in literary history and intertextuality provides a valid — and altogether helpful — insight into his motivations.

Aesthetics, broadly defined by Holman and Harmon as “the study or philosophy of the beautiful in nature, art, and literature” (6), has always been the object of humankind’s intellectual curiosity, from Plato and Aristotle, to Kant, Schopenhauer, and Croce, to Terry Eagleton, Paul de Man, and Jacques Maritain. Holman and Harmon’s definition proceeds to clarify that the term has at once “a philosophical dimension”, addressing the questions — “What is art? What is beauty? What is the relationship of the beautiful to other values?” — and a “psychological dimension — What is the source of aesthetic enjoyment? How is beauty perceived and recognized? From what impulse do art and beauty arise?” (ibid).

These complex questions must be kept in mind by anyone who investigates the relationship between art and beauty. In fact, in “Art and Beauty”, fifth chapter of *Art and Scholasticism*, inspiringly, Jacques Maritain goes

back to Saint Thomas's definition of the beautiful as that which, being seen, pleases: "*id quod visum placet*". "These four words", submits Maritain,

say all that is necessary: a vision, that is to say, an *intuitive knowledge*, and a *delight*. The beautiful is what gives delight — not just any delight, but delight in knowing; not the delight peculiar to the act of knowing, but a delight which superabounds and overflows from this act because of the object known (23).

And, proceeds Maritain,

If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the very fact that it is given to the soul's intuition, it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful (*ibid*).

Still drawing on Aquinas, the French thinker concludes, arguing that the beautiful "has the savor of the terrestrial paradise, because it restores, for a moment, the peace and the simultaneous delight of the intellect and the senses" (24).

It is precisely this transcendental insight, ephemeral of necessity, in which the artist shapes "matter in order to delight the spirit" (24) — delighting both the senses and the intellect —, that encapsulates the essential Truth educed by Beauty in art, which Keats acclaims at the end of "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Yet, as we have seen, if Keats's "Fair youth", in his beautiful, marble-like, paradoxical, movement-in-stasis pose, suggests a romantic transcendence of time by art, Faulkner's Ike McCaslin seems, by contrast, frozen, as it were, in a typically modern, existentialist despair.

Moreover, poem and novel both suggest that the most important aspect of dealing with art lies in the spirit's transcendental assimilation of experience — a profound, worthwhile, but uncontrollable process. Seemingly, human beings cannot consciously project such an experience into themselves, but must depend upon confronting art, either as creators or spectators. Perceiving something of the transcendence inherent in art, we recreate within ourselves the beauty of heart-felt truths. To paraphrase Keats, this is all the truth we know on earth, and all we need to know.

Hence, as the meaningful exchanges between "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and *Go Down, Moses* demonstrate, the significance of intertextuality is *not* that it is the only interpretive possibility generated out of the deconstructive meaninglessness of the respective texts, as might be suggested by most poststructuralist aesthetics; on the contrary, in the hands of "strong" writers (*viz.* Harold Bloom, *Anxiety*) — such as William Faulkner — intertextuality becomes a rich source of compounded meaning, of meaningful insights into transcendental Truth.

NOTES

- 1 All parenthetical documentation, overall mechanics, as well as list of works cited herein comply with the MLA Style Manual, by Walter S. Achtert and Joseph Gibaldi (New York: MLA, 1985).
- 2 All references to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” apply to the Harcourt edition cited below.
- 3 See, mainly, William Faulkner, *University Pieces*, ed. Carvel Collins. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft P, 1962; and Carvel Collins’s *William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1962.
- 4 Thadious Davis reminds us of Faulkner’s own essay regarding literary influences: “Verse Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage”, in Carvel Collins’s *William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry*, 114.
- 5 I have in mind here, of course, William Wordsworth’s “spots of time”, for instance.
- 6 Moreover, biographers have shown that as a tribute to the beauty of his favorite mistress (Meta Carpenter), Faulkner gave her a passionate variation of Keats’s Ode, which ended, “Forever shall I dream / And she be fair. / Meta, my darling, my love. / My dear love. / My dear, dear love” (Oates 146).
- 7 In the critic’s discussion, the remark is equally applicable to *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*.
- 8 Larry M. Sams clarifies the ways in which both the poem and the Isaac stories that appear in *Go Down, Moses* ground their most substantial impact on a series of contrasts (635).
- 9 On a first reading, Ike seems to strive for, or represent, the eternity of the wilderness. Part of his failure, of course, is the tragedy that the wilderness turns out not to be eternal. This issue is addressed in more depth below.
- 10 All references to *Go Down, Moses* apply to the Vintage Books Edition cited below.
- 11 In this respect, Canfield notes especially the Stein interview cited below.
- 12 Gelfant cites Faulkner’s essay, to which Thadious Davis also refers, “Verse Old and Nascent: A Pilgrimage”, *Double-Dealer VII* (1925): 129-31, as containing the writer’s main thoughts on the issue.
- 13 On the biographical level, as said above, Faulkner’s interest on Romanticism has been fully documented. There is plenty of evidence that early on in Faulkner’s career, his friend and mentor Phil Stone would often lecture on and read to him from Shelley and Keats (Oates 16-17).
- 14 Celfant’s article explains at length how the initiation rites in “The Bear”, especially the ritualized hunt, definitely yield the merging of characters and idealized figures into friezes, clearly resembling the scene on the Urn.
- 15 See, for example, Alexander Pope’s “Windsor-Forest” and “Winter”, as well as James Thomson’s “The Seasons”.

- 16 Brooks explains that Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy were not really trying to have slavery abolished. For all their social consciousness, they were only “very peculiar” slave owners, indeed “Southern-born abolitionists” who only tried to hold slavery at arm’s length (*Encounters* 130).
- 17 Within the perspective of American literary history, of course, Emersonian Transcendentalism has shown that in the world of nature the pattern of existence is clear and simple, whereas in society, conversely, pattern is superimposed upon pattern until essentials are indistinguishable and almost unknowable.
- 18 The word “freezing” is fascinating in this context. One even wonders if Brooks is here subliminally referring to the figures in Keats’s Ode.
- 19 Canfield (374), Sams (636), and Brooks (*Encounters* 155).

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