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Go Down, Moses: Experience and the Forms of Understanding

John Earl Bassett

Go Down, Moses at first was to be simply a collection of five stories, the "general theme being the relationship between white and negro races here."¹ Writing to Robert Haas in May 1941 that he needed a quick money-making project, Faulkner outlined a volume to include "The Fire and the Hearth," "Pantaloon in Black," "The Old People," "Delta Autumn," and "Go Down, Moses." All were then in versions different from what appeared in *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* a year later. The book would have been much like *The Unvanquished*, a series of connected yet separate magazine pieces about the Civil War and the Sartoris family.

Soon thereafter Faulkner changed directions. He revised an unpublished story, "Almost," in which young Bayard Sartoris from *The Unvanquished* was a character, changed Bayard to Cass Edmonds, and placed the revised story, "Was," first in his new typescript. That summer he arranged the network of interracial genealogy that connects the tales, and developed Lucas from a stock comic figure into an individualized character with pride, dignity, and shrewdness. Then the story of Isaac McCaslin and a bear in the wilderness took over his imagination.

Ike McCaslin grows out of earlier Faulkner characters such as Horace Benbow, for whom corruption of the real and unattainability of the ideal, involvement and escape, presented such traumas. Quentin Compson is another predecessor, and moreover is the actual protagonist of "Lion" and an implicit protagonist of magazine versions of "The Old People" and "The Bear."² Quentin's obsession in *The Sound and the Fury* with recapturing a past that has fled, a state of purity or an idyllic world in which he plays a special role, anticipates Ike's similar fixations and a comparable inability to grow in time, to compromise and adjust.³ In *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin's quest to learn about his past, or more specifically to unravel a particular episode—Henry shooting Charles

Bon—becomes a search for self-justifying fictions about that past. Ike McCaslin similarly creates a fiction of self-justification.

In its final form, *Go Down, Moses* explores the relationship between such human fictions and the events, experiences, and feelings on which they are based. It dramatizes the tragic and comic distance between human understanding and the experiences being understood. It does not ridicule human fiction-making, but rather suggests the need for fictions, conventions, and social forms to contain and convey strong emotional experiences, and to make social action meaningful. It illustrates, however, the danger of reifying or mystifying codes and conventions as transcendent or preexistent. On the one hand, *Go Down, Moses*, grounded in paternalistic conservatism, repudiates the radical challenge to tradition, convention, and social continuity. On the other, it challenges social and racial assumptions of the South in which Faulkner writes, assumptions based on ignorance and exclusion of the experiences and perspective of half the population. By interweaving stories of blacks and whites in Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner illustrates the need for forms of communication and understanding that are not only open and dynamic, but also self-critical.

I

The opening story, "Was," establishes an ambivalently comic tone. It introduces two central themes—slavery and ownership of the land, and the ritualistic and conventional aspects of human behavior. "Was" immediately draws attention to its own fictionality. Set before the Civil War, its story is passed down orally to Ike later, and undergoes, Faulkner implies, the same distortions and alterations as all oral tradition. The absence of capital letters and conventional punctuation, as well as a cumulative style, draw attention to the fictive as well as the oral dimension of the discourse. When the actual "tale" begins, moreover, Faulkner deconventionalizes the realistic "hunt for an escaped slave" by a series of comic devices that at the same time conventionalize the chase as tall tale. Events are ritualized but bizarre. Uncle Buck stops for his necktie; he and Cass stay for breakfast before leaving home; at Warwick they stop for another meal and appropriate social exchanges; the whole sequence occurs "about twice a year."

Catching Turl, however, is not really what the chase is all about, at least to Buck and Buddy—to Turl it is. The chase is really an elaborate attempt to outfox Hubert so he cannot bring Turl back and meanwhile dump Sophonsiba on Uncle Buck. In tandem with the rituals, therefore, a series of games unify the story.⁴ The chase is a kind of game, or decoy-game, analogous to the foxes and dogs. Bets are placed: Hubert bets five hundred dollars Buck can catch Turl at Tennie's cabin. Games also involve traps, and finally Sophonsiba traps a husband. The only way out for Buck is through another game—a card game, and only on a rematch when his twin brother redeems him, with help from his black cousin. Apparently, however, even the poker game is not "for real," since Sophonsiba does finally marry Uncle Buck.

Games and rituals denaturalize the search for Turl, remove it from the category of serious slave hunt and develop it as symbolic comedy. Not only are they piled on top of one another, and presented with irony, but they are continually inverted. Faulkner opens up the very forms and conventions of communication in his society to radical examination. Although his novels rarely make explicit social or political criticism of the South, they profoundly examine the basic assumptions and codes on which the social and political systems depend.

The poker game is the most important example in "Was" of inversion.⁵ It is based on a condition counter to all other poker games—to lose is to win, to win is to lose: "The lowest hand wins Sibbey and buys the niggers" (p. 24). To win the hand is to "lose" a slave or a wife or some other responsibility. Faulkner examines the meaning of ownership. Ike McCaslin owns "no property and never desired to since the earth was no man's but all men's" (p. 3). The McCaslin-Beauchamp line, however, owns not only land and goods but also persons—slaves. In this world, moreover, people still call their land by a name such as Warwick, ask "knights" to wear their ribbon, and think of themselves as retaining virtues of medieval feudalism. One commodity still to be exchanged is woman. Getting the unwed sister married is a primary motivation for brother and sister alike. To include her in a poker game whose pool also includes money and slaves is to emphasize she is an article of exchange—if an unwanted one. But it is also to emphasize the parallel courtship story of Turl and Tennie, as anxious to be together as Buck is to stay unmarried. Beneath the humor of the tall tale lies the inhumanity of slavery. As in so many stories,

however, Faulkner has it both ways. The humor, and Buck and Buddy, suggest that slaves were not always so badly treated; but the irony implies that the inhumanity inhered not only in particular realities but also in the institution itself. Similarly the story of flight from entrapping females nourishes Faulkner's misogyny, even as he shows an awareness that woman's position in that world is at best ambiguous.⁶

II

The final story, "Go Down, Moses," reflects a similar double perspective—the difficulty of shared participation between races whose conventions and rituals have developed along different lines, and yet the need for mutual understanding. In the final scene, after Gavin Stevens has responsibly if paternalistically arranged a collection to pay for Butch Beauchamp's funeral, and has even accommodated old Miss Emily's need to play her part, the black family and its friends gather to mourn their lost child. Invited to join them, Gavin and Emily stay for a short while "about the brick hearth on which the ancient symbol of human coherence and solidarity smoldered" (p. 380). Aunt Mollie's grief, Gavin learns, and that of the community gathered under the roof, is given form by means of the allegory of slavery implicit in the spiritual "Go Down, Moses," and the exaggeration that Roth Edmonds has "sold my Benjamin" to Pharaoh. It is expressed through responsive chants quite alien to Gavin.

He can try to understand the cultural experience he witnesses, but only as an outsider, for he cannot be part of the performance itself.⁷ He retreats from the fearful suffocation he feels in being part of the "other" for this gathering of blacks. Gavin does, however, partially comprehend that what he witnessed was not uncontained emotionalism but a ritualistic and sincere controlled expression of grief. He also understands, as the newspaper editor cannot, why Mollie would care so much about having the whole story in the newspaper even if she cannot read it.

Yes, he thought. It doesn't matter to her now. Since it had to be and she couldn't stop it, and now it's all over and done and finished, she doesn't care how he died. She just wanted him home, but she wanted him to come home right. She wanted that casket and those flowers

*and the hearse and she wanted to ride through town
behind it in a car. (p. 383)*

The spiritual, a proper funeral, and a newspaper notice are Mollie's ways of containing her grief, as remote as they may seem from the actual death.

III

In "Pantaloons in Black" Rider grieves deeply, for the loss of his wife, but he has no form, convention, or code by means of which to convey and contain his grief. The proprieties of the funeral offer him no solace. He will not play the role of bereaved husband but insists on furiously flinging the dirt himself on the grave. The mourning of kin and friends provides no community for Rider.⁸

Rider is a John Henry of a man, as he proves at both the funeral and the sawmill. In asserting his strength and his identity however, he severs himself from all human connections. At his aunt's home he is bored and feels restricted. Though he lives on Edmonds's property he is totally removed from paternalistic protection. He has no use for God:

"Whut faith and trust? . . . Whut Mannie ever done ter Him? Whut he wanter come messin wid me and—" (p. 145)

Rider in his grief strikes out against family, friends, God, and even the moonshiner who would deny him the gallon jug that is his refuge and his antagonist:

he drank and then held the jug poised, gulping the silver air into his throat until he could breathe again, speaking to the jug: "Come on now. You always claim you's a better man den me. Come on now. Prove it." (p. 148)

The game he enters, however, is against neither god nor liquor but against a group of dice rollers in the boiler shed. Unable to retaliate against the god who cheated him of Mannie, he takes revenge upon the white man who hides a second pair of dice. In so doing he ensures his own death at the hands of a lynch mob, in accordance with another code of the region. But Birdsong, as

apparently everyone knows, " 'has been running crooked dice on them mill niggers for fifteen years' " (p. 156). Not only is Rider's violent action therefore wilfully self-destructive, but his very joining of the dice game is suicidal. Unlike Molly and Lucas Beauchamp, Rider cannot incorporate his emotions and actions in accepted codes within the social structure. Without doing so, the individual's assertion of selfhood is self-destructive or, as in Ike McCaslin's case, sterile.

Faulkner questions the romantic notion of the self, as an autonomous entity in natural opposition to social institutions. To a great extent the self in Faulkner's fiction is defined by its relationships to other persons and groups; and a failure to reach such satisfactory relationships means not simply alienation of the self but denial of the self. Yet for Faulkner, as for Hawthorne, the individual finds that the very institutions and communities required to define the self also restrict and deny it. Faulkner does not quite reject the romantic notion of the self, however, for there remains an ineffable portion of identity which continues to perplex him. On the one hand it seems to go down to universals that connect all persons and outlast any social institutions; on the other it seems to spread out to the infinite diversity among human beings.

To understand others *only* through function and relationship is incomplete, depending on categories and stereotypes; to understand through universals is futile for they do not take the same form in all persons. The second half of "Pantaloon in Black" illustrates a failure to master Rider's experience, in available epistemological and social codes, at least as profound as Rider's failure to master his own experience in available behavioral and social codes. The deputy sheriff not only generalizes Rider into

"Them damn niggers, . . . I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they aint human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes." (p. 154)

He also compounds his error in individual understanding into

misunderstanding of a race; or rather because of generalizing the race, he must misunderstand the individual. He can no more comprehend how a grieving man can throw dirt on the grave and go back to his daily work than the wife in Robert Frost's "Home Burial" can. The deputy sheriff represents not only man's general misunderstanding of man, but also the white's misunderstanding of the black, and the paradox that the codes and conventions helping one to make sense of, survive in, and control his world are often unavailable because of the dominating influence of other codes and conventions. Gavin Stevens in "Go Down, Moses" is the foil to the deputy in "Pantaloon in Black," at least aware of what he does not know. Similarly Lucas Beauchamp is a foil to Rider. Whereas Gavin appears later in *Go Down, Moses* than the deputy and thereby implies some optimism on Faulkner's part about the capacity of whites to learn some day, both Rider and Butch Beauchamp appear later than old Lucas and imply much more pessimism about the future of a younger generation of Mississippi blacks.

IV

Lucas Beauchamp, unlike Rider, is shrewd enough to limit his self-assertions within the conventions of the system: he gambles, but not suicidally. In the process of revision Lucas became at least a mixture of comic stereotype and individualized hero. Though in some ways the old Cunnel "daubed over with" black, one who mystifies the McCaslin blood as a white scion might, Lucas does embody a dignified, existential aloneness like that of Carson McCullers's Dr. Copeland. Faulkner, moreover, dramatizes the mutual blindness of a Lucas and an Edmonds to the secrets of the other's heart and to the very forms by which they might understand experience. He also realizes that the white was more ignorant of the black than the black of the white. Knowledge of the "ways of white folks" has been necessary for blacks to survive; and it continues to help Lucas.

The first part of "The Fire and the Hearth" establishes tension between the individual and the social code, personal responsibility and social restriction. Lucas is a stock character up to the mischief of running a still on Edmonds's property, and depending on Edmonds to keep him out of trouble with the law, the white man's law. Responsibility, Faulkner often indicates, must accompany

rights. In the South women and black people have but limited responsibilities; at the same time, excluding them from normal responsibilities is the surest way to deny independence and rights. Lucas in the course of the story rejects even as he exploits his traditional role, challenges social codes but does not risk self-destruction, and assumes responsibility as he defines his own individuality.

Lucas owns no land. Edmonds owns the land, and Lucas has worked a portion of it, with pride but not gratitude. He is proud to be "the oldest living McCaslin descendant still living on the hereditary land" (p. 39). The Edmonds family, moreover, descends from old Carothers on the *distaff* side, as both know. Except for old Uncle Ike, the "rightful heir" and the conveyor of a thousand dollar patrimony to Lucas, Lucas is the descendant closest to old Carothers. It may be as much a sign of Faulkner's blindness that Lucas is more concerned about Carothers than about his own father Turl, as it is that Dilsey considers the white Compsons more often than her own family. But in *Go Down, Moses* Lucas's pride in the blood is more to the point, for as Lucas romanticizes the McCaslin connection, Cass Edmonds mystifies Lucas's Negro stock: "*a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years when my own anonymous beginnings became mixed enough to produce me*" (p. 71). Moreover, Cass believes:

He's more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and complete, contemptuous, as old Carothers must have been, of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own. (p. 118)

Similarly Ike McCaslin will romanticize the noble blood of Sam Fathers, scion of kings on both sides (whereas Boon Hogganbeck was of Chickasaw blood but merely plebian). The entire novel, however, undercuts such mystification of "blood" as a code. Old Carothers, as Ike realizes, was an "evil and unregenerate old man" (p. 294). At least he was no more "noble" than old Colonel Faulkner or Thomas Sutpen or any of the other real or fictive

frontiersmen who carved plantations out of wilderness bought or stolen from Native Americans not two generations before the Civil War. But to pretend nobility of blood in Mississippi, if finally as ironic as to call one's plantation Warwick and not to listen to anyone calling it anything else, is no more ridiculous perhaps than to pretend nobility of blood in Europe or England or anywhere else, where once again it all leads back to adventurers or criminals or outcasts. Faulkner does not explicitly ridicule peerages or titles any more than he does the class system, but he does challenge their prima facie value. They have never been more than invidious codes operating in society, and they pass away as surely as the Warwick peerage passed to, and then from, the de Beauchamp family between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Sam Fathers's "noble" blood, too, finally has no relevance except to the romantic imagination of Ike McCaslin, who creates his own "Warwick" of Sam's life. But within such a framework Lucas uses all at his disposal to create a context for his own pride and identity.

In the sequence of three stories within "The Fire and the Hearth," Lucas moves from dependency to independence, from type to individual, from diffidence to assertion of self. In doing so he challenges the codes that restrict him but only in order to reshape the codes to include him. In walking a personal tightrope between paternalistic conservatism and racial progressivism, Faulkner articulates a vision of the black who can bring change to the South; but Lucas is an old man, and Faulkner never provided a younger alternative.

In each story Lucas gets into difficulty that threatens his position in familial, legal, or social relationships. In each case he is trying to make or find money. He loses the still, which has given him his independence from Edmonds, partly because his kin are too old or too disloyal to help. From then on he searches, with the help of a divining machine, for the legendary McCaslin treasure, part of which, so local folklore reports, was carried off by two white men several years earlier. Faulkner, who had just used the salted gold mine and legendary treasure routines in *The Hamlet*, drew on them here in a different way. In that part of the story printed as "Gold Is Not Always," Lucas is the trickster and plays Flem Snopes's role in order to fool the gullible white salesman into renting back the machine to search for the treasure. Lucas, however, had endangered his own relationship with Roth by stealing the mule for collateral. Certain kinds of theft and appropriation are sanctioned by the

racial codes, but not this. Nonetheless Lucas is resourceful enough to fool two white men at one time—and still own the divining machine, for he has not given up on the legend.

If Lucas is vulnerable to the pseudotruths of oral tradition, however, he is not in awe of the written word. Lucas tricks the salesman by means of a simple ruse—telling the man that he misread the chart, that the treasure is really on another part of the land from that searched (p. 91). Credulously the man does not consider forgery. Lucas has already shown his willingness to exploit the white man's trust in written documents. When in danger of imprisonment for running an illegal still, he either obtains a fraudulent marriage certificate for his daughter Nat and George Wilkins, one that shows they have been married since October, or he alters the real one. In either case he assures that all potential witnesses, since they are related to him, are precluded from offering damaging courtroom testimony, and thereby saves his skin. In both stories Lucas assumes responsibility, resourcefully outwits white folks, and asserts independence. If Lucas seems too credulous in his own search for treasure and his belief in local lore, he is no more so than whites in the novel when governed by their own traditions and documents.

In the final section of "The Fire and the Hearth" Molly is prepared to divorce her husband for spending all his time hunting for hidden treasure. Lucas's quest symbolically may seem to be for the black self plowed into the Southern soil for no wages, or rather for that treasure of wages due for so plowing the self into the soil. But for Lucas it is simply a search for the money that means independence for him, as the still once did. Again Lucas comes up against the white man's law. He seems willing to end his marriage, and even his change of mind is ambiguously motivated. Possibly he returns because of tenderness for Molly, or possibly because he is too old to search for El Dorado, or possibly and more likely because the divorce itself reaffirms the dependence of blacks on white paternalism. Roth Edmonds can ease the case through court, as he once rapidly arranged a divorce for Oscar and an unnamed "yellow slut . . . from Memphis." To allow the divorce is to deny what Lucas really lives for. To terminate proceedings, especially in the deliberate performance Lucas stages—with no humility before judge, clerk, or court—is to assert independence and responsibility in the same action. With Roth in the courtroom Lucas can both perform in front of Roth himself, and also preclude reprisals by the

white man's law.

In all three parts of "The Fire and the Hearth" Faulkner considers an individual in relation to conventions, codes, and institutions that define his social world. Lucas's story sets a context for the more fully elaborated story of Ike, which also examines the definition of the individual in his world through such means as initiation and patrimony. Lucas, unlike Ike, is the individual not allowed by the codes themselves to establish fully an identity—and yet by exploiting and modestly challenging those codes, doing just that. Roth Edmonds may even be more aware of Lucas's individuality than of his own. In two major embedded revisions, moreover, Faulkner perceptively explores the implications of Lucas's struggle.⁹ The first (pp. 45-59) is a confrontation between Lucas and Zack Edmonds at the time of Roth's birth. The second (pp. 104-16) covers Lucas's early decision to stay on the land, Ike's delivery of a thousand-dollar legacy and awareness of the implications of his earlier renunciation, and Roth's initiation into the meaning of being white in Mississippi.

Ike McCaslin reveals in this story a guilt and remorse for that renunciation that does not appear in "The Bear" itself. Faced by Lucas

He thought, *Fifty dollars a month. He knows that's all.
That I reneged, cried calf-ropes, sold my birthright,
betrayed my blood, for what he calls not peace but
obliteration, and a little food.* (pp. 108-09)

He might act no differently if faced with the same choice in 1895 as seven years before, for he is unable to convert patrimony and education into practical action. Lucas stands to inherit far less than Ike, it would seem, but he converts it all: a thousand dollars and a myth of the blood from old Carothers, the strength of the lion and the wiliness of the fox from his black forebears and the heritage of slavery. Roth, however, has a different experience: "he entered his heritage. He ate its bitter fruit" (p. 114). He learns his closest companion Henry, as "Negro," is taboo. He makes the rationalizations needed to dehumanize a human. He learns, moreover, his own father was bested by Lucas over a woman.

Lucas had once challenged the rules to the limit—when he nearly killed Zack Edmonds over Molly. But even that challenge he made within certain conventions. It was over a wife, and took the form

of a duel—not in the traditional manner, in which a black could hardly duel a white, but nonetheless ritually with two weapons. The entire episode, in fact, smacks as much of ritual as of crisis: the initial demand (p. 47), reciprocal insults (pp. 52, 55), references to the revered patron old Carothers, the arm-wrestling interlude (pp. 55-56), and even Lucas's description of it as a scenario (p. 56). Unlike the rituals in "Was," this one is not ironic or ludicrous but very serious. It does suggest, however, that human behavior, whether grief or anger or rage or ambition, only has meaning and significance when incorporated in forms that themselves can complete the act of meaning. Lucas, unable for six months to react significantly to the loss of Molly, finally can when he embodies his action—clumsily but effectively—in a form that can be meaningful to both Zack and himself. While willing to take the consequences within the community, even lynching, he both exploits the codes and slightly alters them to achieve his end. Afterwards he knows how to succeed within the new limits. He can call his patron "Mr. Edmonds," not the deferential "Mr. Zack" nor anything more equalitarian; he can put money in the white man's bank and know the written passbook there is sacred; he can farm his land but also have his own "business." On the other hand, Lucas always adapts within the system, and Faulkner at no point suggests a course of action that would apply to the majority of Southern blacks within a network of social and economic restrictions rather than to a special, perhaps unique, black gentleman within a simpler paternalistic arrangement.

V

Whereas Lucas plays with the system and Rider assaults the system, Isaac escapes the system. He cannot make the necessary compromises to live in an imperfect and changing world. Faulkner himself denied that Ike was ever meant as a positive model, and more recent critics have emphasized Ike's escapism over his idealism. The line usually runs that had Ike accepted his inheritance, tainted as it was, he might have positively affected the lives of the black tenants and employees for whom he shows such concern.¹⁰ Given Ike's quixotic impracticality, of course, there is little reason to believe he would have improved the lot of any dependent in the complex world of farms and banks, for he trained himself to the simpler world of wilderness and carpentry.

Ike's idealism has another drawback. Tied to universals, therefore abstractions, of the heart's knowledge, it is rigid and unchanging in time. It is transcendental. Faulkner always criticized excessive attraction to abstract purity not only because it denied change and life in the real world, but also because it reflected not a mature moral imagination but rather an infantile fantasy of a state of childhood bliss. In the career-long exploration of this theme by Faulkner, Ike is a transitional figure. He grows out of Quentin Compson, who would even more obsessively and self-destructively deny the corruptions of time; and he gives way to Gavin Stevens, a more mellowed, less catastrophic quixotic idealist.

Ike is also a literary half-brother to Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, who is initiated by means of a whalehunt not a bearhunt. But Isaac is Ishmael having fallen from the masthead, having accepted Ahab's version of the whale. The mythical monster is converted from an embodiment of evil (to Ahab, not Melville of course) into an honorific myth (to Ike rather than Faulkner). The overwhelming sea becomes the far more vulnerable wilderness, disappearing even as Ike fixes on the belief that it is eternal. Most importantly Faulkner illustrates in Isaac the individual who does not, like Lucas, use, adapt, and exploit the codes, fictions, and myths of his world to live as an individual, but who twists his world to fit codes and myths which he has reified. Faulkner, nevertheless, does not just treat Ike ironically. Ike argues for the importance of moral ideals distinct from their embodiment in action; and no matter how solipsistic such "ideals" may turn out to be, no matter how foolish their articulation may seem, Faulkner does not deny their importance.

Isaac, unlike Ishmael of both the Bible and *Moby-Dick*, is a favored son not an outcast. He is patriarch, however, to no race. He sires no Jacob, but instead knows that like Esau he "sold my birthright . . . for . . . obliteration, and a little food" (p. 109). He is conscious of one meaning in his name:

'an Isaac born into a later life than Abraham's and repudiating immolation: fatherless and therefore safe declining the altar because maybe this time the exasperated Hand might not supply the kid—' (p. 283)

But in effect he turns himself into the sacrifice. He sacrifices himself to the wilderness and the land and renunciation of property, and

does so through a kind of pride, and a Messianic complex. God chose Grandfather "out of all of them He might have picked. . . . [He had foreseen] that Grandfather would have descendants, the right descendants" (p. 259). Isaac is the chosen descendant, able to renounce his worldly patrimony because he adopts more godlike origins—the wilderness, the ancient nobility of Sam Fathers, and "He" whose testament Ike has recreated as "the heart's truth" (p. 260).¹¹ Ike's unabashed primitivism supplants the Bible as a text "expounded in the everyday terms" which the lowly would comprehend and which would carry the truth over years to those who would not hear "His words" directly. No book can capture the truth, for "there is only one truth and it covers all things which touch the heart" (p. 260). It is this romanticism, subordinating the white man's written tradition to an inner light, which *Go Down, Moses* both offers as a challenge and itself challenges through Cass, Lucas, and the social network of the novel.

Ike's talk about the "heart's truth" remains rather vague. If man can know it "only through the complexity of passion and lust and hate and fear which drives the heart" (p. 260), those too are concepts, meaningful largely as categories for certain specific human experiences, the very ones Ike gradually eschews because they corrupt the purity of the world he creates for himself. He becomes a living solipsism, recreating in his own image not only *The Book* but also the oral traditions of his world, the codes of kinship, property, and growing up, and the myth of America and the American frontier as "the New Land." Like Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Adams before him, Faulkner explores the ironies of the American, educated to live in a world which is destroyed as it is created, created by an act of destruction, and in his miseducation searching for origins that are timeless and pure, that reify the myth of America in spite of the realities of farms and banks and classes and machinery and profits.

Ike grows up with all the tales and legends of his people.

For six years now he had been a man's hunter. For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document:—of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had

been his to convey. (p. 191)

Ike is entranced by the old tales, becomes unable to separate them from reality, mystifies the old tales into his origins. When Sam Fathers

talked about those old times and those dead and vanished men of another race from either that the boy knew, gradually to the boy those old times would cease to be old times and would become a part of the boy's present. . . . (p. 171)

As Faulkner had illustrated in *Absalom, Absalom!*, man creates narrative fictions out of fragmentary evidence in his world; and cultures create myths in the same way. Ike McCaslin is Faulkner's example of the individual who mystifies the narratives and myths as real, not just explanatory models. When he does understand the fallacy of a text, as with the Bible, he creates a metafiction, the heart's truth, to resolve his dilemma. Ike tries to create meaning and value in his own world, but the novel implies that not only is man constrained by the patterns of his culture but also he derives much of the meaning and many of the values of his life from those patterns and their history.

Ike as well as Sam is really Had-Three-Fathers, a dispossessed scion of a decaying world. Child of his parents' old age, he inherits a second father—his cousin Cass—but turns him into the son by passing the patrimony on to him. Then, to deny his historical past and to invent a new origin for himself, he chooses a third father, Sam. Rather than inherit the plantation, tainted by ownership of several kinds, he makes his inheritance "the big woods" and "the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot" (pp. 192-93).¹² Ike is the American identifying himself with the New Land and disdaining the corruptions of the Old World even when they are American. Ike is the last descendant of romantic primitivism, as Santayana's Oliver Alden is of New England puritanism, perhaps more culpable because he has more options. Ike's own choices, however, are pseudoreligious, the occupation of the Nazarene without commitment to and involvement with the outcasts, the temple of a pagan wilderness without the cultural context of a pagan society.

Ike not Faulkner defines his initiation as "his novitiate to the true wilderness," "his apprenticeship in the woods," a rebirth (pp. 194-

95).¹³ "The Bear" is, of course, a story of the rites of passage—the boy leaves the world of women, proves himself in primitive combat, eats special food, is admitted to the mysteries of men. But it is Ike who turns the annual two-week November trip into a totalistic model for his life. Each section on the apotheosis of the experience is prefaced by "he believed" or "it seemed to him." Such signals from the external narrative voice do not eliminate the seriousness of killing Old Ben to Walter Ewell or Sam Fathers or the other hunters; but Ike alone generates a myth out of the hunt, even though its significance at some point in his life is divorced from the facts of the hunt.

If he cared more about the hunt than its symbolism, in fact, "he should have hated and feared Lion" (p. 209). But he did not, for the wilderness had become the setting for a solipsistic drama of self-justification, and "It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve" (p. 226).

To flee from ownership of his own land and to hypothesize that ownership of land is *prima facie* interdict are to beg the question of precedence in one's own actions: is the theory a rationalization, or is the action a realization of principle? In either case, the self-authored principle or the universal moral law, Isaac is in conflict with social institutions, which in his world not only allow ownership but depend on it.¹⁴ The very notions of justice and freedom and equity in that world are connected, for better or worse, to what Ike would deny. The world of farms and banks is not superior to the world of hunting and communal ownership—Faulkner does not suggest that—but it is the world of Ike McCaslin. To deny culture-specific forms of one's own culture is not to change unjust systems or "to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood" (p. 257) or even to communicate a message to one's coevals, but rather to render oneself impotent in action and communication.

Yet for all Ike's repulsion at land ownership and the taint of person-ownership, he is still limited by the boundaries of his own culture. Without the primitive ritual of the hunt in childhood, he would have had to search for another means of escape. Though he eschews the world of commerce, he believes that an individual can *pay* for his guilt, can buy his indulgences. Relinquishment of his

patrimony is a way to *buy* peace. He continues to buy his way out by bringing thousand-dollar inheritances to the black descendants of Old Carothers. Thereby he makes all the heirs inherit the fortune, the tainted fortune. He fails to locate one heir—the long-departed James; but when James's granddaughter returns, having reenacted the old tale with Roth Edmonds, Ike would buy himself off again with a sheaf of banknotes (p. 361). Moreover, despite his moral universals, he is unable to escape the caste system of racism which makes not only the marriage of white to black but the possibility of it horrifying, inadmissible to the mind for "a thousand or two thousand years" (p. 361).

The miscegenation had not been traumatic for Ike when he combed the ledgers. Southern boys would grow up knowing, whether told or not, of the exploitation of black women by white men. Rather it was incest—the universal taboo—and suicide. The element of Quentin Compson in Ike is clearest here, though for Ike incest does not correspond with a wished-for idyll, but is another sign of the curse, the curse from which "Sam Fathers has set me free," the curse on the land. But even the "curse" becomes no more than a final rationalizing fiction, common in the South from Reconstruction onwards.¹⁵ It generates a series of explanations about the Civil War, Reconstruction, carpetbaggers, and the tragedy of continuing racial conflict. It suits Ike well because, like the myth of the wilderness and the land, it is eschatological, it presupposes a second fall of man, and it provides for a savior. It also provides a reason for alienation, the self-imposed and self-righteous estrangement of the righteous individual from the institutions and dominant codes of his society. He renounces, washes his hands, creates a new past for himself and thereby a new self-myth, and by adopting a way of life that shelters him from change he can continue to believe that he is part of an ordained melioristic fate while avoiding the dangers of human corruption and time.

Ike confuses life and fiction. When Cass offers him a conventional reading of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" based on accepting the loss of bliss and the impossibility of particular realities being identical to "Truth" or to those important abstract values—"Courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty"—Ike repudiates such a compromise.¹⁶ "Somehow it had seemed simpler than that, 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" (p. 297). Threatened by the complications of the poem and his situation, Ike falls back on "I am free," free from the curse, his legacy. Faulkner's final comment on this freedom is: "there had been a legacy"—the story of the silver cup, which "had become not only a legend but one of the family lares" (p. 301). The silver cup, whether because of a mystical transformation or the brute economic facts of Uncle Hubert's financial distress, becomes a tin coffee pot as the novel transforms Ike's Christ-Galahad-Quixote self-image into a picture of a sterile and rigid old man.¹⁷ Ike meanwhile has forgotten the distinctions—not simply between life and fiction, for fictions and myths change as they are possessed by new users, but between the simple brute object of the fiction (the woods, the bear, the hunt) and the total process of the fiction or myth.

NOTES

¹Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 139. Also see Chapter 48 of Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974).

²The unnamed boy of these stories is much like the Quentin of "Lion" and the boy in "A Courtship." He learns from his father, as Quentin does in "Lion" but as Ike cannot.

³In *Go Down, Moses* the wilderness, described as a woman to be loved, has replaced the mother and the sister (p. 204). Further references to the novel are to the Vintage Books edition of 1973. Page numbers are incorporated into the text.

⁴One article which considers this element in "The Bear" is Eric Jensen, "The Play Element in Faulkner's *The Bear*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 6 (1964), 170-87. On the mixed tone in this story see Walter Taylor, "Horror and Nostalgia: The Double Perspective of Faulkner's 'Was,'" *Southern Humanities Review*, 8 (1974), 74-84. Also see his "Faulkner's Pantaloon: The Negro Anomaly at the Heart of *Go Down, Moses*," *American Literature*, 44 (1972), 430-44.

⁵On the poker game see Karl F. Zender, "A Hand of Poker: Game and Ritual in Faulkner's 'Was,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (1974), 53-60; and Raymond G. Malbone, "Promissory Poker in Faulkner's 'Was,'" *English Record*, 22 (1971), 23-25.

⁶Recent insights into the form of *Go Down, Moses* and its relationship to Faulkner's poetics can be found in Gary Lee Stonum, *Faulkner's Career: An Informal Literary History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 153-59 et passim; Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning*

of *Form in Faulkner's Novels* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), pp. 130-39; Arthur F. Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), pp. 215-44; and Weldon Thornton, "Structure and Theme in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*," *Costerus*, 3 (1975), 73-112.

⁷On this distinction see Dell Hymes, "Breakthrough into Performance," in *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 11-74.

⁸See p. 135: "... until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read."

⁹The fullest study of Faulkner's revisions is Joanne V. Creighton, "Revision and Craftsmanship in Faulkner's 'The Fire and the Hearth,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (1974), 161-72, later included in *William Faulkner's Craft of Revision* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977).

¹⁰The issue on both sides has been so fully and often presented, no documentation is necessary. But for a recent interpretation that reduces the distance between Ike and Faulkner, see Richard H. King's insightful study, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), Ch. 6. On "Ike's role in creating the myth of his own initiation," see Paul S. Stein, "Ike McCaslin: Traumatized in a Hawthornian Wilderness," *Southern Literary Journal*, 12, No. 2 (1980), 65-82. On Ike's mystification of the myths, see J. Douglas Canfield, "Faulkner's Grecian Urns and Ike McCaslin's Empty Legacies," *Arizona Quarterly*, 36 (1980), 359-84.

¹¹See T. H. Adamowski, "Isaac McCaslin and the Wilderness of the Imagination," *Centennial Review*, 17 (1973), 92-112.

¹²See the recent discussion of "The Bear" by Wesley Morris in *Friday's Footprint: Structuralism and the Articulated Text* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979).

¹³Ike is obsessed with the written text, for example the ledgers; but he also sets out to destroy it. He identifies with a New Testament code, not a patriarchal Old Testament one. That in effect justifies the killing of the father through the text: the central message is replacement of the old text with a new text. In the New Testament, moreover, the son is a successful usurper: even in dying he becomes equal to—one with—the father in godhead. Ike replaces a code that involves sin and guilt with one centering on simple truths of the heart. He also replaces fathers continually—his own dies when he is young; Cass the second father he turns into his inheritor; and Sam is chosen even as his demise is near. Ike successfully replaces all the fathers; and by being uncle to half a county and father to none, he ensures the same fate cannot be his. The wilderness, old and eternal in his eyes, moreover, is the mother and the woman to be loved. *Go Down, Moses*, inexplicably, has received less serious psychoanalytical criticism than Faulkner's other novels.

¹⁴Faulkner's own obsession with buying land at this time is one factor behind this issue in *Go Down, Moses*. On the importance to this novel of

Faulkner's reconciling his artistic self-image and his social self-image, see Karl Zender, "Faulkner at Forty: The Artist at Home," *Southern Review*, 17 (1981), 288-302. Zender also focuses perceptively on Faulkner's relationship to Lucas.

¹⁵Early critics such as Maxwell Geismar saw the curse as a belief held by Faulkner rather than a deliberate theme. In a rather complex way there is some truth to the notion, but clearly Faulkner does consciously explore Southerners' sense of a regional curse. One study with insights into Faulkner's struggle with such issues in this novel is Myra Jehlen, *Class and Character in Faulkner's South* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), Ch. 4.

¹⁶On Faulkner's use of Keats's poem, see Larry Marshall Sams, "Isaac McCaslin and Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" *Southern Review*, 12 (1976), 632-39; Blanche Gelfant, "Faulkner and Keats: The Identity of Art in 'The Bear,'" *Southern Literary Journal*, 2, No. 1 (1969), 43-65; and Joan S. Korenman, "Faulkner's Grecian Urn," *Southern Literary Journal*, 7, No. 1 (1974), 3-23.

¹⁷The influence of Cervantes on Faulkner's late fiction has been often noted; but Cesare Segre's article on *Don Quixote* can also suggest new ways of looking at *Go Down, Moses*, and perhaps Cervantes's influence on it. Note especially the discussion of the novel unfolding on two planes—one of quixotic unreality and one of reality; of perspectivism at the levels of character and writer; of the thematic treatment of confusion between life and art, "the ideal with its material explication"; of the relationship between the desire to believe and objective reality. "Rectilinear and Spiral Constructions in *Don Quixote*," *Structures and Time*, trans. John Meddemmen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 161-96.