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ISAAC McCASLIN AND THE BURDEN OF INFLUENCE

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The fiction of James Joyce has long been acknowledged as a source of stylistic influence upon Faulkner's work. Parallels have been drawn between the two writers' similar use of compound words, synesthesia, discontinuities of time, classical and Christian myths, and the interior monologue. So pervasive indeed has Joyce's influence been upon writers of this century that one would be surprised if the author of "The Bear" had not been affected by him. Cleanth Brooks has further confirmed Faulkner's artistic debts by tracing specific passages from his work to those of Joyce, thus illustrating that the American writer borrowed more than mere stylistic elements from his Irish contemporary.[1] Perhaps most significant, however, Brooks provides conclusive proof that Faulkner had read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* early in his career, before he was fully able to assimilate and conceal his literary sources.[2] While it may be difficult to concede that a writer so thematically American as Faulkner was influenced in "The Bear" primarily by an Irishman only fifteen years his senior, such an argument, supported biographically, will underlie this paper. Further, I will use the poetic theories of Harold Bloom to show that the coming of age of Isaac McCaslin in "The Bear" is a "misreading" of the story of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait*.

Faulkner was characteristically skeptical of critical attempts to attribute too large a portion of his achievements to the influence of other writers, but he was always willing to admit respect for Joyce. In a 1957 interview at the University of Virginia, he was asked about the visit to Europe he had made in 1923 and about the degree to which he believed himself to have been influenced by Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson, who were then also abroad. He responded guardedly: "at the time...I wasn't interested in literature nor literary people." This fantastic claim—his book of poems, *The Marble Faun*, appeared in 1924—is followed immediately by the unsolicited disclaimer that "I knew Joyce, I knew of Joyce, and I would go to some effort to go to the café that he inhabited to look at him. But that was the only literary man I remember seeing in Europe in those days."[3] Faulkner may have revealed more than he hoped here. In another interview, he peculiarly referred to Joyce as "a genius who was electrocuted by the divine

fire."[4] The full meaning of this statement didn't come clear till the next year when he elaborated by saying that "James Joyce was one of the great men of my time. He was electrocuted by the divine fire. He, Thomas Mann, were the great writers of my time. He was probably— might have been the greatest, but he was electrocuted. He had more talent than he could control."[5] This qualified admiration, with its overtones of mysticism, is interesting for reasons best explained by turning to Harold Bloom.

According to the theory first advanced in *The Anxiety of Influence*, writers of the past two or three centuries are afflicted by a sense of historical belatedness and are inescapably bound up in relationships with previous writers who limit their potential for originality.[6] The anxious later writer of an artistic relationship exhibits in his work a "creative correction" of the stronger early writer; this correction (or revision) constitutes a psychic defense whereby the later writer (or ephebe) attempts to affirm his own strength of identity by willfully misprizing the accomplishments of the earlier writer (or precursor). While Bloom does not directly discuss the possibilities for biographical evidence of misprision, neither does his book dismiss them. And while we may read Faulkner's enigmatic evaluation of Joyce as alluding to his relatively early death at fifty-eight, the comment in this context appears more likely a suggestion that Joyce had not achieved greatness resulting from a more specific artistic failure. Further supporting such an antithetical interpretation of the quoted passage is the repeated use of the word "divine." Often noted for his rhetoricalness, Faulkner is nevertheless rarely given to religious or mystical hyperbole in interviews; and although he may be merely paying lip service to popular conceptions of Joyce's massive talent, "divine" here also may be read as Faulkner's veiled acknowledgement of Joyce as his true creative forefather, responsible for his artistic incarnation. Elsewhere in an interview, he designates Sherwood Anderson as "the father of all my works,"[7] but this claim is easily attributable to the anxiety of influence. For by publicly naming the weaker Anderson as his father, Faulkner assures his public that he had surpassed his father's achievements.

Hugh Kenner has noted in a discussion of "Faulkner and the Avant-Garde" that "his equivocation about his knowledge of *Ulysses* is famous," a fact Kenner reads as evidence only that Faulkner believed "what writers learn from one another is either private or trivial."[8] What does Kenner mean here by "private"? In a companion

article, "Faulkner and Joyce," he analyzes some remarkable parallels of rhythm, dialect, and phrasing between Faulkner's work and *Ulysses*, and he argues that Faulkner had "read in" but had not actually read *Ulysses*. These findings lead Kenner to a curiously Bloomian statement: "A man quick to take hints, his mind full of a book he wanted to write, could readily have absorbed all those methods and more from *Ulysses* without really reading it."[9] Bloom's theory provides that the ephebe need not have actually read his precursor to fall under his influence. It is also typical of the ephebe to attempt repeatedly to resist or disclaim the influence of his true precursor; accordingly, while Faulkner freely praised Joyce, he also went to some trouble during an interview in Japan to deny the Joycean influence in his work.[10] What we see then generally is a series of discrepancies between Faulkner's personal statements about his art and the facts revealed by that art itself.

If this examination of the Joycean influence in Faulkner appears to disregard the portion of Bloom's theory which describes the precursor versus ephebe relationship in terms of dead writers versus living writers, a brief explanation should clarify my position. First, it is a mistake to interpret Bloom as saying that the anxiety of influence is a factor only where dead and living writers are involved. For example in *A Map of Misreading*,[11] the 1975 book which followed and expanded his earlier theory, Bloom himself studies the influence of Wallace Stevens on John Ashbery, whose careers overlapped for several years. "Dead" and "living" are primarily convenient terms for discussion. In the case of Joyce and Faulkner, each was writing at the height of his powers at the same time; significantly, however, Joyce's *Portrait* appeared a full ten years before Faulkner's first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, in 1926. Perhaps more important, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*—the volume of stories containing "The Bear"—was published just one year after Joyce's death in 1941.

"The Bear" has been called a novella, and certainly at 140 pages it is difficult to class as a short story. Joyce's *Portrait* is a short novel, also divided into five parts, each of which corresponds to Stephen's age over a given period, though—unlike the story of Isaac McCaslin—the chronological progression of the *Portrait* is linear.[12] Because many of the events in "The Bear" are treated more fully in other parts of *Go Down, Moses*, which Faulkner insistently referred to as a novel, he removed the long and difficult fourth section when he printed the story separately. The relationship between *Ulysses* and *Portrait* is

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similar to that between *Go Down, Moses* and "The Bear;" *Ulysses* profiles Stephen at later points in his life, and much of *Go Down, Moses* details actions both before Isaac's birth and after he has grown old. "The Bear," in fact, may be regarded as a microcosm of *Go Down, Moses*, since it touches upon events which span some 175 years. Centrally, however, the Faulkner story treats Isaac's life between the ages of ten and twenty-one; Joyce's novel chronicles Stephen's growth from six to twenty years. Both are essentially narratives of education and initiation which carry the protagonists through a series of epiphanies to adulthood.

The prominent twentieth-century theme of the search for and conflict with the father is a central problem for both protagonists. Indeed, Joyce and Faulkner confirm the centrality of this issue by giving their characters names allusive of familiar father-son relationships from Greek and Christian myths. An important difference between the two names, however, is that Daedalus was a skilled craftsman and loving parent of Icarus, whereas Isaac is best remembered as the young man who nearly became a sacrificial victim of the piety of his famous father, Abraham. The distinction here serves to mirror the precursor-ephebe relationship of the two authors. In this analysis it is necessary to see the experiences of Stephen and Isaac as poems, the protagonists themselves as poets, and their struggles for selfhood as mimetic of the artistic concerns of Joyce and Faulkner.

Faulkner's story swerves from its Joycean model near the beginning with Isaac's developing consciousness of his heritage and paternity. He is ten years old. His mother and father have been dead for some time. "He had already inherited then, without ever having seen it, the big old bear with one trap-ruined foot" (192-193) that had grown legendary in the land where it was hunted each year, but that Isaac is too young to take part in the pursuit of because he has not yet "entered his novitiate to the true wilderness" (195).[13] Bereft of both parents, unable to join the hunters, Isaac is essentially uncreated and thus paradoxically must beget himself. The images here are ones of presence and absence (birth and paternity), and the irony of his situation is that his partner in self-creation is no blood relative but "a son of a negro slave and Chickasaw chief" (206)—Sam Fathers, whose name is no accident. A former slave owned by Isaac's dead grandfather Carothers, Sam is noble and well-respected by the hunters, in ironic contrast to his dead master whose acts of miscegenation and incest produced only ill; the product of mixed bloods himself, Sam's role in

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Isaac's spiritual birth is ironically mixed also, though productive instead of good. To Isaac it seemed "that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth" (195), and the wagon ride through the woods is described in imagery evocative of sexuality and parturition. In choosing or being chosen by Sam Fathers, Isaac exhibits a reaction-formation against his own ignoble bloodlines, as Faulkner also is reacting against Joyce.

The stage of revision discussed above—*clinaman*—moves swiftly to the answering *tessera* which concludes part one of the story.[14] When Isaac at age eleven finally sees the bear, he recognizes it as part of the entire "wilderness coalesced" (209), which is his legacy. Faulkner's use of the bear here, as synecdoche for the wilderness, operates by accretion in the rhetorical final passage describing the appearance of Old Ben. The last step in a revisionary dialectic, the bear for Isaac represents the nature myth against which his troubled blood heritage still serves as limitation. Most complex, however, are the psychic choices Faulkner's protagonist must make before he is allowed to confront the animal. If he has symbolically denied his birthright by effecting self-creation with Sam Fathers, he is still bound to the trappings of that birthright: the gun, the compass, and "the old, heavy, biscuit-thick silver watch which had been his father's" (207). These he must abandon, and does, in a reversal of selfhood which rejects for the moment those ancestral instruments of aggression, space, and time— of civilization—which his earlier initiation to the camp of hunters had awarded him. Thus, Faulkner and Isaac McCaslin both antithetically complete their precursors; by turning against himself, Isaac ultimately furthers the formation of his self-identity.

As Isaac had become the protégé and spiritual progeny of Sam Fathers, had participated in forging his own origins, had achieved communion with Old Ben—symbol of the wilderness and his new legacy—"So he should have hated and feared Lion" (209). For the huge dog is the agent of a harsh *kenosis* in the poem of Isaac's experiences which comprise "The Bear." Isaac appears to be only continuing "the yearly pageant-rite of the old bear's furious immortality" (194), repeating the traditions of the hunt which had been bequeathed to him. But the addition of Lion results in the death of both Old Ben and Sam Fathers when Isaac is sixteen. The afflatus with which his imagination had imbued the bear and man is emptied out, as is his strength of imaginative anteriority that he had gained from them. This revisionary stage or ratio covers parts two and three of the

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story and is marked throughout by the presence of the dog—blank, mechanical, amoral—like Popeye of the earlier *Sanctuary*, functioning here as a metonymy for mortality, dying with its victims. The big woods, once rich and full, now appear empty of all but "wildcats and varmints" (253); and Isaac, who had previously set aside his watch and compass, falls back into time and space so that part four of the story begins with the flat statement, ominously uncapitalized: "then he was twenty-one" (254).

For Stephen Dedalus, on the other hand, an approximately parallel regression or ebbing is reached by quite different means; and a point-by-point comparison between the experiences of the two young men is neither possible nor desirable. Stephen's self-consciousness begins much earlier and more conventionally with sense impressions, the dawning recognition of his Catholic heritage, and the eventual exertion of independence in the rector's office where he objects to his unjust pandying by Father Dolan. This phase is followed by a period of personal tension between his real and ideal worlds, which merge at the end of chapter two in his seduction scene. With chapter three Stephen's (and Isaac's) low point is reached, through the religious retreat, the sermon about hell, his vision of personal depravity, and the eventual confession—an emptying out of those thoughts and actions he had previously perceived as strengths and pleasures. Isaac's story is organized by means of a nature myth, whereas Stephen's gains coherence primarily through the more familiar tenets of Christianity.

With the deaths of his imaginative precursors, Sam Fathers and Old Ben, Isaac is torn from the timelessness of the myth of nature and thrust back into the realities of his ancestral past. With the additional blow, also at sixteen, of the discovery of the incestuous and miscegenous misdeeds of his grandfather (which the reader doesn't learn until later), he is thrust back into the even more tainted time of man's first sin. For these reasons the long conversation of part four, with his cousin Cass when Isaac is twenty-one, interrupts the chronology of the story and attempts to place the kenotic deaths in historical perspective. Why is man bound to ancestral history? How can he escape it? By rehearsing mankind's blighted past, from the Garden of Eden to the Civil War, Isaac hyperbolically de-individuates the role his recent ancestors had played in settling the land. They are neither to be commended for their pioneering achievements nor condemned for their role in the destruction of the wilderness, because they were part

of a sublime scheme that had gone awry before they were born. The counter-sublime Isaac would adopt for himself necessitates his repudiation of the ownership of land; however, by embracing a Christian sublimity which he presumes had been denied his ancestors, he represses much of his normal humanity, as we shall see. The high and low images cluster about his evidences of man's manifestly fallen state. The genealogical limitations imposed by his experiences at sixteen are synthesized into a rejection of the land which has been twice his birthright.

A repudiation of his twin inheritance, however, is not enough for Isaac, and the last section of the story finds him adopting a Christ-like existence as a means of self-purgation. The metaphorical life of the carpenter he adopts and the tools he buys represent a conscious sublimation of the ease and luxury enjoyed by his landed, slaveowning ancestors; but on a broader and more significant scale, his new asceticism—his *askesis*—attempts a selfish isolation from society in general. This isolation approaches solipsism because his Christ-posture betrays him as no longer content merely to deny his birthright and tainted legacy; rather he yearns again to attain the self-created ideal he had enjoyed as a young hunter in the big woods before the fall of Old Ben and Sam. In terms more specific to the anxiety of influence, his design is no longer simply to negate influence, but instead to become an influence. In so doing, he yields up his common humanity to such a degree that making love with his wife—surrendering his virginity at last—becomes a struggle to which he reluctantly succumbs only because he desires a son. His only available approach to self-creation is fatherhood, yet this fulfillment he is never to achieve.

Part five of "The Bear" is Isaac's *apophrades*. Everything appears much as it had at the beginning of the story, though now we are conscious that the timber rights to the land have been sold and that, after this final hunting trip, Isaac would not return again. Here he attempts to shed the growing solitude of *askesis*, the solitude which at eighteen years he had not yet pledged but which the events of his sixteenth year had already decided for him. He opens himself once more in the big woods to the influence of his precursors, both mythical and genealogial, and finds that the latter has overwhelmed the former. Symbol of his fallen ancestries, the train still "resembled a small dingy harmless snake vanishing into weeds" (318), but it had now "brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill" (321). Imaged as a

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serpent, the train here forecasts the fall of the belated wilderness and of the vestigial myth of nature. Isaac's mythical precursors, Sam Fathers and Old Ben, are rendered impotent and thus cannot return to him; he must return to them, to their graves. When he does, he is confronted by a huge rattlesnake, which many critics have mistaken for a symbol of the wilderness because he addresses it "Chief...Grandfather" (330), as Sam had addressed the great buck in "The Old People." Through metalepsis the snake comes instead to represent the train, which, by means of its association with the fallen world, in turn conjures his Grandfather Carothers, whom he is in fact addressing. The deadly snake, then, may be seen as having diminished the timeless and regenerative world of natural myth by encroaching upon the burial plot. Isaac's vision of Boon beneath the tree full of squirrels enforces this reading; Boon's mad attempt to possess the squirrels is in degenerative contrast to the incident twenty years before when he had sat beneath the treed bear "all that night to keep anybody from shooting it" (319), so that it could escape to safety the next day.

The return of the dead to Isaac is also a return of the dead James Joyce to Faulkner. The Christian symbology of the conclusion, as well as Isaac's adoption of a Christ-posture, represents a renewed influx of style and theme which had been so central to the earlier *Portrait*. The parallels are remarkable. Isaac chooses for himself a vocation as a carpenter because Christ too had been one, whereas Stephen in the parallel chapter rejects a vocation of priesthood, in turn rejecting Christianity. While Stephen's affirmative decision comes as an epiphany gained from the sudden, imagistic vision of the girl on the beach, Isaac's negation emerges from his poring over old plantation ledgers and from the exhaustive midnight conversation with his cousin. Each in his own way declares a refusal to follow his ancestry, though Stephen quotes the *non serviam* of Lucifer. More similar is the development of personal philosophies that each young man broods over and expounds at length, Stephen's largely aesthetic, Isaac's historical and moralistic. Finally, Isaac's "Chief...Grandfather" salute appears as an ironic echo of Stephen's journal entry which concludes the *Portrait*: "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead."

The *Bildungsroman* has been a popular vehicle for twentieth-century fiction writers. If Bloom's theory is correct that the more historically belated a writer is, the greater becomes his struggle to attain originality, then twentieth-century literature would lend itself

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best to antithetical criticism. *A Map of Misreading* provides some fresh insights to the critical problems associated with "The Bear;" and the striking parallels of plot between the two narratives, along with recent biographical findings, appear to affirm the theories advanced in *The Anxiety of Influence.*

NOTES

[1] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven and London, 1978).

[2] Ibid., pp. 132-133. Brooks apparently is the first writer to have noticed in Faulkner's second novel, *Mosquitoes* (1927), the brief phrase "yet weary too of ardent ways," which "represents a very slight reworking of the first line of the villanelle composed by Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*"

[3] *Faulkner in the University*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (1959; rpr. New York, 1965), p. 58.

[4] Ibid., p. 53.

[5] Ibid., p. 280—syntax distorted there.

[6] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, 1973).

[7] *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. Robert A. Jelliffe (Tokyo, 1956), p. 144.

[8] Hugh Kenner, "Faulkner and the Avante-Garde," in *Faulkner, Modernism, and Film: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1978* (Jackson, 1979), pp. 183, 184.

[9] Ibid., p. 27.

[10] *Faulkner at Nagano: "The names I mentioned yesterday* [Anderson and Dreiser] *were the names of the men who I think influenced me. When I read Joyce and Proust it is possible that my career as a writer was already fixed, so that there was no chance for it to be influenced other than in the tricks of the trade" (44). "I meant only that I had named the ones which I felt were my own masters, that had influenced me" (45).*

[11] *Harold Bloom, A Map of Misreading (New York, 1975). For much of my discussion of "The Bear," I follow the graph or "map" Bloom provides on page 84.*

[12] *For a chart and discussion of the difficult chronology, see Thomas J. Weretenbaker, Jr., "Faulkner's Point of View and the Chronicle of Isaac McCaslin," CE, 24 (1962), 169-178.*

[13] My text here is the Random House reprint of its original 1942 edition

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of *Go Down, Moses.*

[14] I use these terms as Bloom uses them: *clinamen* stands for artistic misprision and alteration; *tessera* is completion and antithesis; *kenosis* involves an ebbing, emptying, or diminishing; *daemonization* is the establishment of a personal counter-sublime; and *apophrades* is a reinfusion of the precursor's influence, a return of the dead.