THE PROBLEM OF TIME IN *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

by Carolyn Porter

Light in August opens with Lena Grove sitting in a ditch waiting for Armstid's wagon to reach her. In three pages we survey her whole history and return to the present moment of the wagon's approach:

> The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road.[1]

Faulkner goes on to extend and amplify the sense of time as both fluid and static. And in a seamless revery, Lena anticipates the future, recalls the past, and luxuriates in the present. Time seems to slow down, to approach but never quite to reach immobility. A hypnotic stillness envelops the "clatter" of the wagon as it approaches the waiting figure. The wagon's movement is evidenced by its sound but contradicted by its appearance, "suspended in the middle distance forever and forever." The familiar Faulknerian contradictions—motion and stasis, past and present, coexisting in an elongated moment—exemplify the language for which Faulkner has been both praised and damned.[2]

While the tensions between motion and stasis, past and present, have been noted to occur pervasively and offered as evidence for Faulkner's "failure" to resolve the very issues his novels develop,[3] and while debate continues as to whether his time is continuous or characteristically discontinuous,[4] we still have no adequate explanation for Faulkner's practice. I think, however, that we can approach the problem by defining a fundamental tension in *Light in August*. On the one hand, Faulkner fragments, distorts, and juxtaposes various time intervals, reconstituting past, present, and future into a newly ordered whole, so that events come to us not chronologically, but according to a principle of related meanings. Such is the principle of order in *Light in August*, where large chunks of the past are interpolated into the present and three separate stories are juxtaposed. On the other hand, Faulkner seems intent on sustaining the flow of time, not through a series of chronological events, but through a language which registers the

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relentless movement of creatures in a world marked by ceaseless progression. From this perspective, Faulkner's world is fundamentally in motion and it is its very motion which makes it endure. Lena Grove, despite her single-minded and limited nature, persists; and she persists *in motion*, into and out of Jefferson, to begin and end the novel. Thus, time as segmented and re-shuffled into a re-ordered whole, and time as the duration sustaining life, both operate in *Light in August*. And the tension between continuity and discontinuity, grounded in the effort to structure time and the need to respect its endless flow, informs both the novel's meaning and its structure. The spatialization of time allows Faulkner to slow it down, speed it up, fragment and reassemble it, even to halt it tenuously; but the sense of duration endows these spatialized and distorted fragments with the basic continuity which welds them together. This tension operates at several levels: it infuses the language with its peculiar energy, it helps to define character, and it makes possible the structural and thematic integrity of the novel as a whole. However, before approaching that novel, we need to develop a firm notion of what is implied by time as duration.

Faulkner's affinity to Bergson is greater than we have realized.[5] Bergson develops a metaphysics of time; his fundamental insights derive from his notion that our habitual spatialization of time should be distinguished from the real duration in which we live. For Bergson, intelligence constitutes one function of the human mind, and intuition another complementary one. Intelligence is the faculty which enables us to act on our environment by focusing on only those aspects of it which we can use. Intelligence allows us to see things as static in order to organize them for our practical and intellectual purposes. Intuition, on the other hand, begins with the perception of movement and sees immobility as only an abstract moment, "a snapshot taken by our mind."[6] Intelligence operates on the principle of "virtual action" which dictates that it extract from perception the information it needs to act (p. 68). It breaks up time into minutes, hours, and days so as to order the world for efficient use. Intuition, however, grasps "a succession which is not juxtaposition, a growth from within, the uninterrupted prolongation of the past into a present which is already blending into the future" (p. 35). This indivisible flow of time Bergson calls duration. In trying to represent this duration, all we can do is conjure up metaphors, like the one Bergson uses of beads lined up on a thread. The beads represent successive states and the thread is an inadequate emblem for duration (p. 83). Duration is something we intuit and cannot adequately articulate because the tools of language are all forged by the intelligence and derive ultimately from a spatialization of the external world. Further, this ceaseless flux is endowed with all the reality, all the positive values of Plato's world of Ideas. Duration is not only change, but constant, indivisible, indestructible change. For Plato, the world of becoming was by definition unreal. If Being is given once and for all in the

immutable system of Ideas, then the world of flux unfolding before us can add nothing to it; it can only constitute a "diminution" and "degradation" of it (p. 123). But once we note that change itself is constant, we can view it as duration and posit it as the fundamental ground of being, providing for sustenance and growth.

Bergson applies the notion of duration to the solution of a variety of philosophical problems, whose complexity would take us far afield. But his discussion of memory and freedom is of particular relevance to both an understanding of duration itself and its role in Faulkner's fictional world. According to Bergson, the "past . . . is necessarily automatically preserved" (p. 162). The present is a "certain interval of duration" like a sentence now being pronounced. Our attention spans the interval defined by the sentence, which can be elongated or shortened, "like the interval between the two points of a compass." The interval represented by one sentence can be stretched to include two by a change in punctuation. Accordingly, "an attention which could be extended indefinitely would embrace, along with the preceding sentence, all the anterior phrases of the lecture and the events which preceded the lecture, and as large a portion of what we call our past as desired" (pp. 178-179). The present, therefore, is a function of the extent of our "attention to life" (p. 179). The distinction between the present and the past is a result of our apparent inability to sustain that attention. The present becomes past only when it no longer commands our immediate interest. In other words, if we did not have to channel our attention toward the future, if our "attention to life" were not repeatedly interrupted by the urgencies dictated by the practical concern of accomplishing our particular ends, our present would include our "entire past history . . . not as instantaneity, not like a cluster of simultaneous parts, but as something continually present which would also be something continually moving" (p. 180). We forget events in the past as long as they have no bearing on our immediate concerns. But a radical alteration of our orientation toward the future, such as that presented by the threat of sudden death, can effect a loss of interest in the necessities of action and restore that "attention to life" which allows the past to flow into the present as an indivisible part of it. Thus we would live in a "perpetual present" which is like a melody and has "nothing in common with immutability, or . . . with instantaneity. What we have is a present which endures" (p. 180).

Perhaps the most attractive feature of Bergson's metaphysic is the freedom it bestows on all organic life and particularly on human consciousness. We exist "in a concrete duration where the idea of necessary determination loses all significance, since in it the past becomes identical with the present and continuously creates with it—if only by the fact of being added to it—something absolutely new" (pp. 184-185). Perpetually exfoliating unforeseeable forms of life, duration endows us with freedom not as a system of

choices, but as an open-ended growth which is never completed. Events do not emerge in two stages first as possible and then as actual. "The possible is . . . the real with the addition of an act of mind which throws its image back into the past, once it has been enacted" (p. 118). "The possible is [a] mirage of the present in the past" (p. 119). Consequently, the fact that we can look back into the past and find conditions of possibility for the present situation does not imply that those conditions necessarily and inevitably produced the present. We remodel the past in the act of finding causal antecedents to explain the present, just as we recall from our own past only those events which assist us in our immediate enterprise of coping with the future. But in neither case does the past pre-exist as a system of possible options; only in retrospect and in the service of our present needs and interests does the past organize itself into relationships.

Bergson, then, sees us as cut off from real duration by our habitual need to spatialize time. Our problems derive not from the failure to escape time, but from our inability to penetrate it. Yet this is only an artificial inability arising from the intellectual disposition to hypostatize instants of duration in order to act in the external world. We all experience duration intuitively as the ongoing movement of our world. Bergson views this very persistence of life, manifesting itself in ceaseless change, as the ground of being and the insurance of freedom. All our efforts to spatialize time, to order and regulate and abstract from the change within which we exist, are fabricated structures manufactured in the service of utility and necessary to our survival, but ultimately unrelated to our endurance. We survive by organizing our environment so that it will serve our needs, but our endurance is bound up with the duration which underlies and sustains our very continuity with the world of living beings.

What is remarkable about Bergson's discussion of duration is his apparent inability to recognize the urgency implicit in our fabrications. By referring all human effort to organize and spatialize time to an intellectual faculty whose function is basically utilitarian, Bergson fails to account fully for the human need underlying the intellectual enterprise whose dimensions he so readily circumscribes. While intuition may put us in touch with duration, surely what it discovers there is not wholly attractive. Ceaseless change, while it endows life with freedom and continuity, nonetheless compels us to order it in the effort to create a distinctively human meaning. Bergson's notion of intuition is his way of humanizing duration, but history would lead us to believe that further humanization is necessary.

According to Frank Kermode, who is fundamentally concerned with this urge to order as it manifests itself in fictions, men are thrust into the world *in medias res*, and so make "imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle."[7] Characteristically, these patterns

inform time with meaning by circumscribing it within an interval and organizing it around a *kairos*, a moment in time filled with significance, whose paradigm is the Incarnation. Fictions, then, perform a larger task than Bergson's "fabrications"; fictions not only enable man to act, but attempt to inform his acts with meaning. The simple fiction of clock time is Kermode's model for the plots we impose on pure duration in the effort to order it and so make meaning of it (pp. 44-45). But in between the tick-tock, the ordered interval, comes the tock-tick of pure successiveness, and as our fictions grow more complex they attempt to accommodate this tock-tick of unhumanized duration into a larger fiction which will invest it with meaning. Moreover, the more thoroughgoing our acceptance of time as ceaseless and endless, the more complex and urgent are our attempts to appropriate it within a fiction. (Bergson's duration is necessarily endless, since perpetual growth is open-ended, constantly creating unforeseeable forms. The time between tock and tick is that time which repels our effort to circumscribe it within an ordered interval.) What our fictions represent, then, is a fundamental commitment to order and to the spatialization of time such order entails.

Accordingly, we are confronted with a dilemma. Compelled to order our world, we necessarily impose patterns on it which provide meaning and allow us to survive, not only physically, but intellectually and even spiritually. Yet the very order we construct and the meaning we thereby create are inadequate because they limit our freedom and cut us off from the continuity, indeed the communality, of life. By imposing a plot on time, we are consoled because we know where we are going and from whence we came, but this knowledge also restricts our movement to a predetermined course. On the other hand, to live in pure duration, even with the consolations of freedom and continuity, is to deny our fundamental need for consonance. In Faulkner's world, this dilemma makes itself felt in the tension reflected in the order the novel struggles to create out of its disparate fragments and the pure duration its language attempts to sustain, the tension between the ceaseless motion its characters variously enact and the elusive meaning they try and fail to discover.

If we return now to Lena Grove watching the wagon approaching her, the tension I have been defining can be seen in operation. The paragraph as a whole defines an interval of duration in which Lena enacts the "attention to life" Bergson describes. The "slow and terrific" sound of the wagon moving vivifies our sense of ceaseless motion, slightly astonishing in its very "steady and unflagging" progress up the hill. Lena knows the wagon is coming closer because she hears "the sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal," even though "it seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever" (p. 7). The apparent contradiction of motion and stasis is resolved if we view the image of permanent suspen-

sion as Faulkner's means of creating the impression of constant change. The sound of the wagon assures us of its movement, while its appearance provides it with an aura of constancy. Faulkner is appealing to our predisposition to view immobility as permanence, but complicating our response by attributing that permanence to motion itself. Sound is consistently allied with motion in the novel, as we shall see, and it is with the sound of the wagon that Lena allies herself. The wagon as "shabby bead" fades into an image of the road as a "measured thread being rewound onto a spool," but both images give way "at last" to the sense that the "sound" of the wagon "seems to come slow and terrific and without meaning, as though it were a ghost travelling a half mile ahead of its own shape" (p. 7). The thread-spool image limits and determines the motion of life, while the auditory image evokes a world without beginning or end, a world in constant motion. Noting that the wagon's sound is a "half mile" ahead of its appearance, Lena envisions herself as already on the wagon, "thinking *then it will be as if I were riding for a half mile before I even got into the wagon*" (p. 7). Having incorporated the past into the present, she immediately stretches her attention span to include what we would normally call her future—her sense of being on the wagon and even of having been on it. Lena's present, in fact, is perpetual, for she can also think of other wagons in the past without any shift of attention. From 'now,' to being on and off the wagon, to questions she has asked strangers all along the road, and finally to her anticipated reunion with Lucas Burch, Lena's mind "goes idle and swift and smooth" because her attention to life, like the ceaseless motion around her, while minimal, is constant (p. 8).

Perhaps the most vivid image of Lena's temporal habitat comes with the description of her advancing

> in identical and anonymous and deliberate wagons as though through a succession of creakwheeled and limpeared avatars, like something moving forever and without progress across an urn. (P. 6)

The urn offers Faulkner, as it did Keats, an image of motion in stasis. The word *avatar* is used repeatedly to imply the successive versions of a person or object hypostatized into successive instants. Like the frames of a film, avatars constitute the static images we would see if the film ever stopped. But Lena is moving "through" these avatars. Accordingly, the wagons to which the term *avatars* refers are presented as only artificially distinct from each other and the road down which they move. Each is not only a version of all the others, "identical and anonymous and deliberate," but all are simply metaphors for the motion they embody (p. 6).

Lena Grove is ensconced in duration as no one else in the novel can be, for she is a woman fundamentally unconscious of the horror implicit in her world. The contingencies faced by Mrs. Armstid are totally alien to Lena,

because she does not regard the future as built up block by block out of the possibilities inhering in a problematic and distinct present, nor does she separate that present from the past as effect and cause. Lena's "tranquil and calm unreason and detachment" endow her with the capacity to exist in the extended interval of a perpetual present (p. 16). Her attention to life is never broken by the need to shift her interest from one concern to another, from the demands of the present moment to the encroaching problems of the next. Even when the baby inside her kicks, causing a spasm of pain, "time has not stopped," because Lena's time is continuous and indivisible into past, present, and future (p. 25).

Lena's immersion in duration is, however, a mixed blessing. She is endowed with the strength and health to persist against what appear as insurmountable odds. Born in abject poverty, orphaned at twelve, burdened early in life with the responsibilities of caring for her nieces and nephews, seduced and abandoned by a scoundrel at twenty, she sets out on a quest to find the father of the child she tirelessly carries inside her, a quest which takes her on foot across two states. The fact that she does catch up with him testifies to the very persistence and faith implicit in her undertaking. Lena's effort to find her unborn child's father and so to unify and solidify her family reflects her fundamental devotion to community. As a child riding to town in her father's wagon, she preferred to walk upon her arrival in town so as to feel herself part of the community. More important, Lena creates a community wherever she is by eliciting from everyone she meets a communal and humane response. Mrs. Armstid, outraged at Lena's naïveté, nonetheless gives her the small savings she has gleaned from her private egg enterprise. Mr. Armstid and countless others pick her up and meet her immediate needs. The sheriff refuses to evict her from Joe's cabin. And Byron, of course, does her the timely favor of falling in love with her. Lena's communality arises from her sense of continuity and relatedness with all people, her fundamental participation in the ongoing duration of life. Finally, Lena, carrying her heavy burden of potential life within her, serves as a principle of fecundity in the novel; she is the woman whose child raises in Gail Hightower's ears "the treble shouts of the generations" (p. 357). With her health and strength, her devotion to community, and her capacity to add to the earth's abundance, she is committed to life—not as a future possibility nor as a past potentiality—but as a perpetually present reality.

However, Lena's posture toward the world is not, finally, adequate to us as readers. Lena offers a severely limited response to the contingencies among which she moves. The fact that she and Joe Christmas never encounter one another serves to reflect Lena's fundamental unawareness of the tragic dimension he embodies. The one occasion on which she is exposed to Joe's world is also the one occasion on which she cannot cope with her experience—when Mrs. Hines confuses her newborn son with Joe. Lena can

endure Lucas Burch's final and pitiful performance without losing her balance in the least, but Mrs. Hines's odd behavior poses a threat to her stability. While Lena evokes humane responses from everyone she encounters (except Lucas Burch, from whom a humane response is probably impossible), her own humanity is limited by her unacknowledged demands on those around her; Lena's reliance on others may grow out of the catalytic effect by which her presence seems to create a community, but it takes only a slight shift of perspective to see that reliance as real dependence. The most compelling aspect of Lena's inadequacy as a full human being, however, is her virtual lack of intelligence. Lena functions as totally by intuition and without intelligence, in Bergson's sense of those terms, as it is possible to do and still be human. Almost bovine in her intellectual stance, Lena comes to us as a severely limited creature, whose health, communal impulses, and fertility seem available only at the cost of physical dependency and intellectual vacuity.

Like Lena Grove, Joe Christmas is constantly in motion, but with an obvious and decisive difference. Cut off from the pure duration in which Lena lives, Joe is the victim of compulsive motion. Alienated from both black and white societies, Joe can avail himself of neither the consolations of duration nor the consonance of a meaningfully ordered temporal structure. In the opening pages of the large central chunk of the novel which is devoted to his story, Joe comes to us as a man disengaged from the "myriad sounds" of "voices . . . trees, darkness, earth; people; his own voice; other voices evocative of names and times and places—which he had been conscious of all his life without knowing it, which were his life" (p. 91). The sounds of the earth beyond his door evoke Joe's response to a world constantly alive and "aloud . . . with crickets . . . fireflies . . . whippoorwills," a response filled with the pain of alienation: "thinking *God perhaps and me not knowing that too*" (pp. 139, 91). When Joe first approaches Joanna Burden's house he observes that "the crickets, which had ceased as he moved, keeping a little island of silence about him like thin yellow shadow of their small voices, began again, ceasing again when he moved with that tiny and alert suddenness" (p. 200). The sounds of these tiny creatures recur throughout the novel as an echo of the vital and sustaining duration of the earth itself, but Joe moves among them in an "island of silence."[8] His disgust at the complex fusion of female and Negro, the "womanshenegro," is fundamentally associated with his detachment from the sense of duration which renders Lena Grove a principle of fertility (p. 137). Joe prefers anything masculine to the mysterious presence of woman, a principle which by providing an "odor, an attenuation, and aftertaste" to his experience, tends to relate him to the continuous and abundant fertility by which the earth endures (p. 146). When Bobbie tells him that she's "sick tonight" and Joe runs away into the woods, his revulsion at the idea of the menstrual cycle is reflected in an image of "a

diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched . . . not one . . . perfect . . . each one . . . cracked" (pp. 163, 165). Symbols of fecundity, the womb-like urns issue "something liquid, deathcolored, and foul" (p. 165). Because of his childhood traumatic experience with the dietician, an experience which comes to be fused with his early associations with "nigger," Joe is repelled by what he unavoidably views as the foul fact of female sexuality. The whole notion of Female is intimately associated with blackness as Joe climbs frantically out of the "original quarry, abyss itself" of niggertown, where the "fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured" (pp. 102, 101).

Joe's isolation is grounded in his inability to relate himself to the ongoing duration of the natural world, but it is tragically heightened by the inadequacy of the human structures on the periphery of which he is forced to exist. Alienated from both social and natural worlds, Joe exists in a state of sheer *chronos*, a state of constant motion marked only by the passing of minutes, hours, days. "Doomed with motion," Joe is totally dependent on the minimal structure provided by the clock: "He slept less than two hours. . . . At seven o'clock that evening he was in town . . . at nine o'clock he was standing outside the barbershop" (pp. 197, 95, 98). The prose style which Faulkner uses to present Joe's actions on the morning of the day he murders Joanna Burden reflects, in a manner reminiscent of Hemingway, the sheer successiveness of discrete and meaningless time segments which characterizes Joe's motion:

> When he left the cabin it was quite light. The birds were in full chorus. This time he turned his back on the house. He went on past the stable and entered the pasture beyond it. His shoes and his trouser legs were soon sopping with gray dew. He paused and rolled his trousers gingerly to his knees and went on. (P. 96)

Detached from pure duration, and painfully aware of the inadequacy of sheer *chronos*, Joe is alienated from his own motion, a fact which becomes particularly evident at those points when he is able to watch his own physical behavior from a distance in "motionless . . . utterly contemplative" moments (p. 106). Sitting in the dietician's closet as a child, Joe seems "to be turned in upon himself, watching himself sweating, watching himself smear another worm of paste into his mouth which his stomach did not want" (p. 106). When McEachern beats him, Joe's body is described as "wood or stone; a post or tower upon which the sentient part of him mused like a hermit, contemplative and remote with ecstasy and self-crucifixion" (pp. 139-140). Sometimes his detachment is accentuated by a difference in velocity between his mind's and his body's movement, as in the scene in Bobbie's room after everyone but Joe has departed. Before the "wireends of volition and sentience" connect, Joe lies watching the events above him unfolding in a kind of pure succession, flowing without punctuation until, as the "wireends" approach each other, Faulkner begins to intersperse the events with the connective "then" (p. 194). As the prose moves out of italics, "thens" pile up, reflecting Joe's increasing ability to distinguish between one moment

and the next. Even after volition and sentience reconnect, Joe's mind still suffers, moving slower than his body so that "he was in the hall without having remembered passing through the door" (p. 194). Finally, after gulping down the whiskey, his mind moves faster than his body, which he has to "coax . . . along the hall, sliding it along one wall" (p. 194). Whether body or mind moves faster, Joe watches himself move without cessation. The point is that he is always moving, cannot stop moving, but also cannot relate that motion coherently to any purpose other than escape until the final stages of his flight, when he realizes that he has lived "for thirty years . . . inside an orderly parade of named and numbered days like fence pickets" (pp. 289-290).

Eventually, the road runs "so fast that accepting . . . take[s] the place of knowing and believing" (p. 155). It runs so fast that Joe no sooner sees a future possibility—"Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something"—than it has virtually become a past fact—"Maybe I have already done it" (pp. 91, 97). For Joe, the present constitutes something possible, "waiting to be done" because he views the present as already past (p. 97). Bergson asserts that viewing the present as a system of possibles which anticipate a future reality entails a false determinism in which the present is spuriously imprinted with the pattern of a future whose outline is unforeseeable, and Joe's predicament embodies precisely that fatalism which derives from the act of structuring the present as if it were past. According to Bergson, the possible is a concept applicable only to the past wherein we try to find the causes for the present and so posit sources for that present. But when we apply this operation to the relationship between present and future, we necessarily fail because the present can only become possible from the vantage point of the future. Joe really has no present here, because he has already imposed on it the pattern which will define the future. The contrast between Joe's and Lena's modes of anticipating the future is instructive. Lena's future and past are enfolded in a perpetual present, out of which she anticipates the future and recalls the past not as distinct states, each one causing the next, but as the indistinguishable phases of a continuous flow. Thus the feeling of being on the wagon, even of having been on the wagon, does not disrupt the present, but seems to flow out of it without a break in time. Joe's present, however, is here defined by a pattern imposed on it as if it were past, so that he does not, cannot really, anticipate the future, except as the reality already possible in, and therefore determined by, the present. The only pattern Lena can impose on her past is that expressed in the simpleminded generalization, "My, my. A body does get around" (p. 26). But Joe exists in and is doomed by a pattern imposed before it is ever actualized. If for Lena the world is open-ended and creatively evolving, for Joe "his own flesh as well as all space" is a "cage," even though it takes him most of his life to realize this fact (p. 140).

Joe's final flight from Jefferson's panting dogs and outraged citizens constitutes his most compelling endeavor to comprehend his own fatality. And the resolution for which he struggles is reflected in his partially modified relation to time. At first he tries "to keep up with the days, after the old habit," but before long, "time . . . had . . . lost orderliness," so that the effort "to calculate the day of the week" becomes "an actual urgent need" (pp. 290, 293). Joe imposes a pattern on pure duration by transforming the "flat pattern, going . . . on, myriad, familiar, since all that had ever been was the same as all that was to be," into the figure of a "circle" (pp. 246, 296). That is, having lost his sense of chronological time, Joe recognizes the shape of the "flat pattern" as a circle, which he understands to be "the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (p. 296). Having understood that he can never outrun his fate because the relentless succession of day and night is already confined and determined by the flat, circular pattern of his life, Joe is able to enjoy momentarily "the looking and seeing—which gives him peace and unhaste and quiet," the limited repose reflected in his recognition that he no longer feels the necessity to eat. It is not the rewarding satisfaction of natural hunger which Lena's sardines provide, "not with food," but "with the necessity to eat," previously accommodated frantically by "rotting and wormriddled fruit" from which Joe is now free (p. 292). No longer, then, compelled to support his survival with food, and reconciled momentarily to the unrelenting progression of time, Joe is "hurrying" no more, but "is like a man who knows where he is and where he wants to go and how much time to the exact minute he has to get there in" (p. 295). Joe has finally imposed a plot on time, a plot which, though it entails doom, yet provides the consolation of order and a limited meaning. By connecting the road with time's ceaseless progression, and by re-ordering that progression into a circular pattern, Joe has endowed his movement with a directedness which his previous flight has not had for him. The meaning he thus discovers allows him to relate himself to his world for the first time. For by building a more adequate structure for appropriating time's flow, Joe is allowed a fuller understanding of duration and an accordingly deeper sense of his inescapable immersion in it. If, as Kermode says, "we perceive a duration only when it is organized," then we must form a more comprehensive organization in order to perceive a more comprehensible duration (p. 45). Joe's circle goes beyond pure *chronos* but does not redeem it; and his sense of time "going on" reveals a partial penetration of duration, but not a total reconciliation with it. These are tasks left to the larger structure of the novel, in which Joe's final apotheosis is tested as *kairos* in the light of Gail Hightower's final vision.

In contrast to both Joe and Lena, Gail Hightower comes to us as a static and drooping figure behind a window from which he rarely moves. Repeatedly, our attention is called to the fact that he "has not moved" (pp. 77, 80, 277, 339). When Byron begins to make demands on him, Hightower's

sweat, his expression of "shrinking and denial," reflects his reluctance to move, to act, to participate in the human struggle which Byron's predicament represents (pp. 87, 72). Hightower listens to Byron in brooding silence, "not offering to help," refusing to accept the obligations and risks entailed in Byron's dilemma (p. 264). Hightower's withdrawal, in fact, constitutes his own peculiar version of flight; he is fleeing the entanglements of life itself. He sees the church as a refuge from the world enduring beyond his window, from the "harsh gale of living and dying" (p. 419). As a youth the "hot still rich maculate smell of the earth" had both attracted and terrified him, but the terror overruled the love and he decided to "flee from it, to walls, to [the] artificial light" of the church (p. 278). Hightower's refusal to leave Jefferson is paradoxically a kind of flight as well, grounded as it is not only in the reasons Byron deduces in a revery echoing Hamlet, that a man will "cling to trouble he's used to before he'll risk a change," but also in the masochistic self-crucifixion in which Hightower masks his refusal to live (p. 65). In the face of the grotesque madness of Old Doc Hines, Hightower sits stunned "like an awkward beast tricked and befooled of the need for flight," filled really with terror and pity at the sight of what is happening in "this terrible place," but not yet ready to add himself to that picture (pp. 338, 275). As Hightower gradually allows himself to be drawn into the drama Byron has been recounting, we see the tension between structured and durational time playing a significant role in defining his dilemma and his failed attempts to resolve it.

Hightower's life, once he is "Done Damned in Jefferson," is really divided between those moments of "green suspension" between twilight and dark in which he relives the instant of his grandfather's death, and the careless disorder of his daily existence in which he seems to "eat like an animal," emitting the "smell of unwashed flesh" and moving amidst crumbs and dirt (pp. 52, 410, 56, 261). This duality is reflected in a face "at once gaunt and flabby . . . as though there were two faces, one imposed on the other," the soft flabby flesh reflecting the decay of waning years and passing time, the "gaunt" alertness reinforcing our sense of a mind still functioning, still struggling for order and meaning (p. 77). Later Byron recognizes this same duality in Hightower's appearance, making it look "as though the whole man were fleeing away from the nose which holds invincibly to something yet of pride and courage above the sluttishness of vanquishment like a forgotten flag above a ruined fortress" (p. 318). But the terms which constitute that "pride and courage," and the form which that meaning and order take, are indeed curious.

The temporal structure which Hightower has imposed on his life is essentially a series of *kairoi* whose significance is fundamentally inadequate because basically unrelated to the present. Psychologically, Hightower's sacred hypostatization of the galloping horses and clashing guns derives

from the "phantoms" of his childhood, both living and dead (p. 415). Enchanted by Cinthy's tales of his grandfather, a lively and robust man whose gleeful and harmless irreverence is coupled with a "delicacy of behavior and thought,"[9] and morbidly fascinated with the possibilities implicit in the blue patch on his father's old Confederate jacket, Hightower fuses and heightens the heroic dimensions of both men into the absurdly heroic incident, the famous chicken-coop disaster, which he sees as an emblem of "that fine shape of eternal youth and virginal desire which makes heroes" (pp. 413, 423). Faulkner is here alluding again to Keats's "virginal pant," but in a rather complex way. Hightower's temporal ordering, indeed fixation, is rooted in the assumption that the present represents a falling off from the past. This notion is reflected not only in the content of Hightower's repeatedly enacted instant with its Keatsian emphasis on "eternal youth" as opposed to consummated passion, but in its relation to the present world of approaching Fall as well. And yet both the content and relation to the present of Hightower's instant are absurd; his grandfather is shot with a "fowling piece" for chicken theft—an utterly meaningless event in the context of the war itself. Despite Hightower's concerted endeavor to raise the incident to a heroic level, he can only make it more absurd, thinking "any soldier can be killed by the enemy in the heat of battle, by a weapon approved by the arbiters and rulemakers of warfare. . . . But not with a shotgun, a fowling piece, in a henhouse" (p. 425). Of course, it is hard to believe there is no irony here, to believe that Hightower is not at least minimally aware of this absurdity. If he were not, he would resemble Doc Hines, whose structure has swallowed him up into a state of sheer madness. But until Hightower recognizes the futility of living in this instant, he re-enacts it every evening at twilight, not only because it punctuates and informs his existence with its own meaning, but also because it must continually be relived if it is to offer even that limited significance to his life. Acting to halt change, to catch and preserve a single moment from the ceaseless progression of time, Hightower's *kairos* must keep on halting it because change persists. Fundamentally severed by its very meaning from the flow of duration, Hightower's *kairos* cannot disperse its meaning beyond itself, and so must be repeated indefinitely.

However, the moment and setting in which Hightower chooses to perform this almost sacred ritual relates it tenuously to the world of change. From beyond his window, Hightower constantly hears the "myriad" sounds of insects, the same echo of life persisting that we noted in relation to Joe Christmas (p. 79). And while the instant functions as a kind of momentary stay against the confusion of night, it nonetheless interpolates itself into the natural world of duration in which dark and light follow each other, changing continuously and imperceptibly. While Hightower is not as unaware of change and process as is Joe, he still views it with real horror as the endless

duration in which "man performs, engenders, so much more than he can or should have to bear" (p. 262). It is only after delivering Lena's baby that Hightower is able to relate himself positively to the earth's duration: "the intermittent sun, the heat, . . . the savage and fecund odor of the earth, the woods. . . . the treble shouts of the generations" (pp. 356, 357). Unable to repress his own exuberance, Hightower sees Lena as an emblem of "the good stock peopling in tranquil obedience to it the good earth" (p. 356). Hightower feels, apparently for the first time, the perpetual boon of duration, the exfoliating and self-renewing fecundity of life, just as Joe was able momentarily to sense the "shape and feel" of the land across which he had been running (p. 295).

But it is not until Hightower's final revery that the full force of the tension between the world of duration and the structure by which it is patterned and controlled is felt. Here, Hightower comes to see that the "shelter" which he sought in the church was really the shelter of a tomb (p. 419). Keats's "classic and serene vase" is brought forth one last time for redefinition, this time to reinforce our sense that Hightower's appropriation of a defunct meaning is a refuge from the passing of time, forming for him "safe walls within which the hampered and garmentworried spirit could learn anew serenity to contemplate without horror or alarm its own nakedness" (p. 419). The urge for order is so strong that Hightower clings to his vision of the galloping horses at the same time that he admits it may be Cinthy's invention: "And if Cinthy did [invent the incident], I still believe," he says, "Because even fact cannot stand with it" (p. 424). As he leans forward in rapt attentiveness at the realizations about to unfold before him in a kind of epiphany, Hightower recognizes the division in his life reflected in "the two instants about to touch: the one which is the sum of his life, which renews itself between each dark and dusk, and the suspended instant out of which the *soon* will presently begin," the discrepancy between the constant process which sustains all life in pure duration and the inadequate pattern imposed on that duration by the re-enacted instant, whose approach is heralded each evening by the whispered "Now, soon . . . soon, now" (pp. 426, 52).

Hightower's vision constitutes the novel's most concerted attempt to create a meaning adequate to man's needs. The "wheel of thinking" which becomes a "halo" is the complex vehicle for a metaphor whose tenor includes "all the faces which he has ever seen" (pp. 428, 430). As wheel, the vehicle moves incessantly; as halo it appears to be static. The metaphor forms the culmination of all the novel's images of motion and stasis—Lena on the urn, the numerous "corridors" through which people move, the "equestrian statue" formed by Joe and his stumbling horse, McEachern poised for the kill, the trains and wagons seen in the distance.[10] Having realized that he has been "a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed," and therefore has been totally enthralled by a radically limited

structure his commitment to which has severed him from the constant change which sustains life itself so that he has "not even been clay," Hightower enacts the novel's most ambitious single effort for a structure which will accommodate man's need for meaning without ignoring or defiling duration itself (p. 430). Yet the faces of Joe Christmas and Percy Grimm still "seem to strive" with one another, "not of themselves striving or desiring it . . . but because of the motion and desire of the wheel itself" (p. 430). So the wheel turns relentlessly, oblivious to man's needs and desires, never fully affording the peace for which he struggles. So the wheel too, and the vision embodying it, fail to inform duration with meaning, to redeem man by imposing a comprehensive structure on time. Defeated, Hightower hears "the lost and unheeded crying of all the living who ever lived, wailing still like lost children among the cold and terrible stars" (p. 431). He understands that duration implies continuity, that the living and the dead are indissolubly linked by their immersion in the flow of time, but he fails to impose a plot on that flow which will redeem their suffering and stop their crying, changing the alien and "terrible" heavens into an image not of incomprehensible duration but of comprehensive order (p. 431). Accordingly, Hightower is left with only his phantoms, "the wild bugles and the clashing sabres and the dying thunder of hooves," and we are left with an image of his figure still in the window brooding in profound despair at the sight of "poor man, poor mankind" caught as it is between its longing for peace and its search for meaning (pp. 432, 87).

Hightower's vision symbolizes the larger task of the novel as a whole, which struggles to fulfill the need for a structure sufficiently resilient to appropriate the ceaseless flow of time into an ordered "fiction" within which man can find meaning. The most obvious feature of this struggle is implicit in the relationship the novel creates between past and present. That is, from the moment we encounter Lena sitting in the ditch to the final moment in which the furniture salesman relates his comic story to his wife, time pushes forward, seeming never to stop despite the lengthy flashbacks into the past. Faulkner's technique is something like montage, the cinematographical insertion of flashbacks into the progression of the frames which creates a sense of a perpetual present. But montage only suggests the way in which Faulkner sustains our feeling of time's uninterrupted motion. For Faulkner's medium is language, not film, and while montage describes his technique, it does not explain it. More helpful to an understanding of Faulkner's means of modulating into the past without violating the flow of the present is Bergson's notion of memory as automatically preservative. The paragraph leading into Joe's history, which constitutes the longest foray into the past if not the deepest penetration of it, works primarily on the principle that memory is not a system of pigeonholes, but simply a part of the flow of our consciousness, our "attention to life" from which we are artificially alienated

by virtue of lost interest. Accordingly, "memory believes before knowing remembers," because memory represents that intuitive awareness, that "attention to life," which never wanes but is only interrupted, so that "knowing," intelligence, must "remember," must search for and select those moments from the past which it deems relevant to the present (p. 104). "Memory . . . believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders," and so represents a sustained subterranean flow, fundamentally unaffected by the interruptions imposed from above by the contingencies of survival (p. 104). Accordingly, Faulkner modulates into the past without interrupting the flow of the present by referring his shift to a dimension which includes both past and present within the ceaseless flux of duration. He not only introduces the shift in this way, but repeats his appeal to memory as an enduring aspect of the present like a refrain throughout the following chapters, reinforcing our sense of the fundamental continuity of time.[11] Consequently, as the present of the novel flows on, we move simultaneously deeper and deeper into the past until, with Hightower's revery, we reach a point before the Civil War with Hightower's grandfather. Moving further into the past, the novel appropriates larger and larger chunks of time into a structure which is constantly struggling to enfold them in its accumulating meaning. The effort to circumscribe more and more of time's flow within an increasing interval is founded on the principle that we can come to terms with duration only as it is ordered within an interval.

The novel not only operates on this structural principle but calls attention to it by deliberately biting off more than it seems able to chew. By imposing not one but three plots on an interval of duration which accordingly spreads out laterally in the present and vertically into the past, the novel sets itself an enormous task of assimilation which forms, however, the necessary structural base for its larger thematic concerns. As the structure informs more and more of duration with meaning by circumscribing it within an ordered whole, that order is continually revealing itself as inadequate to the larger demands for meaning posed by the continually expanding duration against which it is set. Thus there is a constant tension in the novel between time's ceaseless motion and man's attempts to impose a structure large enough to give that motion a meaning, to humanize it. The repeated allusion to Keats and the cumulative refinements and redefinitions of the urn reflect the constantly renewed attempt to create meaning which just as constantly fails, but seems to fail in increasingly important, because progressively more energetic ways.

I have tried to provide evidence of this tension as it makes itself felt in the novel's major characters, whose predicaments are reflected at least partially by their inability to define a satisfactorily meaningful relationship to pure duration. But the individual attempts to accommodate ceaseless change punctuate the larger struggle which the novel as a whole enacts. *Light in*

August is thematically informed by the vision of a radically diminished world, a vision cumulatively reinforced by that recurring moment of lambency "when all light has failed out of the sky and it would be night save for that faint light which daygranaried leaf and grass blade reluctant suspire, making still a little light on earth though night itself has come" (pp. 51-52). This world is diminished not because it has ceased to grow and change, as the constant buzz of the insects always associated with this lambent moment remind us, but because of the lack of ordered meaning available to its inhabitants. The townspeople of Jefferson form a community devoted not to life, but to death, by virtue of their commitment to the rigid distinctions, both literal and figurative, of black and white.[12] The church's meaning has been relegated to a realm analogous to the Platonic Ideal, severed from the pulsing flow of life and consequently emptied of human relevance. For the church is a failure not because of the "outward groping of those within it nor the inward groping of those without," but because of the barriers which make that groping necessary, the walls it has erected against change in its dogmatic hardening and consequent distortion of the "truth" (pp. 426, 427). Those within are unsatisfied with the limited meaning afforded by the church's rigid structure, but those without lack even that structure, and so exist in the uncertain contingencies of duration. "The professionals who control" the church have "removed the bells from its steeples," severing its relations with the real world of durational time, and thus rendering inadequate the structure of meaning, the "truth," whose vitality depends on its capacity to inform pure duration, the sheer ongoing process of meaningless change with "that peace in which to sin and be forgiven . . . is the life of man" (pp. 426-427). The church's "truth" is the paradigmatic fiction, constituting an organization of time in which a *kairos* allegedly fills all time before and since with meaning and thus redeems history by providing man with a place in it. But the church, having defiled that organization by severing it from the duration which it was its purpose to order and redeem, now emerges as itself "without order," simply another feature of the "endless . . . empty . . . bleak" terrain of unstructured duration, an institution now "symbolical" not of the "ecstasy or passion" it was designed to offer, but of "adjuration, threat, and doom" (p. 426).

The novel enacts a struggle for a form which will compensate for the lack of coherent meaning that constitutes its diminishment. And while it fails to find that form, fails adequately to impose a plot on duration which will humanize it, the struggle itself emerges as an exercise in redemption. That is, if Lena Grove's tranquil obedience to the earth fails to offer a meaning for the horror embodied in a diminished world, and Joe Christmas's circumscription of his life within the coherent pattern of fatalism fails to redeem that life, and if Gail Hightower's tragic vision of the human community as continuous and whole fails to provide a *kairos* sufficiently ample compre-

hensively to order the sheer *chronos* of life, the cumulative effort which each and all represent reflects the ongoing struggle for meaningful form which the novel itself enacts. Finally, the tension between endless duration and the human endeavor to impose a plot, a redemptive order on that flux, persists unresolved and unalleviated. The novel as a whole seeks to redeem a diminished world by making of Joe Christmas's death a *kairos* for which Hightower's vision can supply a context and reference, but fails ultimately because that world keeps on moving. The distancing effected by telling the final episode in Lena's story and the final chapter of the novel through a new character, the furniture salesman, serves to reinforce the sense of time's incessant onward progression. Lena Grove's story acts as both bracket and ellipsis, to enclose and relieve the tragedy of Joe Christmas, and to extend and heighten its intensity. By virtue of her health, her fundamental communality, and the sheer humor of her simple responses to life, she acts as comic relief to an intensely horrifying drama. But by virtue of the persistent and endless motion she comes to embody, her story extends and amplifies the tragedy it circumscribes. For, as Hightower realizes, it is the very endlessness of time itself, its unrelenting onward movement, which forces man to keep on bearing the pain of living without being able to find redemption.

NOTES

1. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 7. All references in the text are to this edition.

2. For classic statements of intelligent praise and less intelligent damnation, see, respectively, Conrad Aiken, "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), pp. 135-141; and Clifton Fadiman, "Faulkner, Extra-Special, Double-Distilled," *The New Yorker*, October 31, 1936, 62-64.

More recent examples of the same critical approaches are Robert H. Zoellner's "Faulkner's Prose Style in *Absalom, Absalom!*" *American Literature*, **30** (Jan. 1959), 486-502, which analyzes Faulkner's language with care and success; and Martin Green's "Faulkner: The Triumph of Rhetoric," *Re-Appraisals: Some Commonsense Readings in American Literature* (New York, 1965), which reveals the limitations of a Leavisite approach to Faulkner.

3. See Walter J. Slatoff, *Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), especially pp. 7-26, 88-106, 135-144.

4. Representative of the arguments for continuity is Peter Swiggart's *The Art of Faulkner's Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962); while Donald Sutherland's "Time on Our Hands," *Yale French Studies*, **10** (1953), argues for discontinuity.

5. Darrel Abel has dealt with some of the Bergsonian aspects of Faulknerian time which concern me, but as I try to show, his treatment stops short of developing what I consider to be the full significance of Bergsonian duration as it functions in *Light in August*. See Darrel Abel, "Frozen Movement in *Light in August*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of* Light in August, ed. David L. Minter (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 42-54.

6. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 39. All references in the text are to this edition.

7. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 17. All references in the text are to this edition.

8. See especially pp. 207, 228, 246, 289.

9. Indeed, Hightower's grandfather is presented as the most attractive character in the novel. With his "swagger, his bluff and simple adherence to a simple code," he is presented in terms which make him hard to resist, as the anecdote about his invasion of a revival meeting makes clear: "he invaded a protracted al fresco church revival being held in a nearby grove and turned it into a week of amateur horse racing while to a dwindling congregation gaunt, fanatic-faced country preachers thundered anathema from the rustic pulpit at his oblivious and unregenerate head" (p. 413). Such a character, lurking in the background of the novel, serves to reinforce the sense of a diminished world.

10. See especially pp. 6, 7, 104, 178, 183, 5, and 386.

11. See pp. 123, 128, 153, 192, and 201.

12. Hightower comes to understand this devotion to death as he listens to the hymns being sung in the church, noting that "the music has still a quality stern and implacable, deliberate and without passion so much as immolation, pleading, asking, for not love, not life, forbidding it to others, demanding in sonorous tones death as though death were the boon, like all Protestant music" (pp. 321-322). Death comes to be allied with form in the novel, just as life comes to be allied with formlessness.