

## *A uniform hieroglyphic: further shades of meaning in Go Down, Moses*

Paul SCOTT DERRICK  
Universitat de València

### ABSTRACT

This essay offers a new interpretation of the role of Rider, the protagonist of "Pantaloon in Black", within the context of Faulkner's novel, *Go Down, Moses*. Although this character seems to be one of the least important in the book, he may really provide a pattern for Faulkner's larger designs. Rider's obsession with his dead wife, Mannie, the appearance of her ghost, and his struggle, against his own vitality, to die and rejoin her can be read as a parallel to Isaac McCaslin's initiation into a dead Indian culture based on spiritual rather than materialistic values, and as a foreshadowing of Ike's eventual renunciation of his birthright, the McCaslin plantation. The final implication is that the relationship between the living and the dead pervades the whole novel and echoes the essentially Romantic theme of the tension between material and spiritual values which is one of Faulkner's and American literature's central concerns.

We seem to be in the process of deciding that the strength of *Go Down, Moses* lies precisely in what many of its earlier critics thought of as a weakness: the apparent structural and thematic looseness of the novel. It is, of course, very carefully structured, but not in a way that complies with our usual expectations for the genre. And as for its themes, the general opinion has been that Faulkner did not satisfactorily draw together his two major concerns: racial injustice in the South and the unavoidable American conflict between nature and civilization.

But if the novel's supposed lack of form (which is really nothing more than a lack of pre-conceived form) has made it seem chaotic, it has also made it

function effectively as a field of disorganized stimuli, like an abstract painting, from which the perceiver must actively construct a system of coherence or meaning. The richness of the book lies in its powerful lyrical ambiguity. Its wealth of detail and complexity can accommodate any number of alternative explanations.

In this sense, *Go Down, Moses* is another one of those magnificent cultural Rorschach tests that characterize the art of our century. Since artifacts like *The Waste Land*, or the paintings of Pollock or Rothko or DeKooning, or *Gravity's Rainbow* do not offer us a version of the world that we have been prepared to see and understand, we tend to project, at least initially, our own comprehensible version of the world onto them. Nothing is more comforting than the belief that one is right.

On the other hand though, it may be the real purpose of such works to show that we are wrong, to point out the inadequacy of our commonly-held systems of understanding, and encourage us to practice creating different models. Thus, as we gradually learn to appreciate the extended unity of a novel like *Go Down, Moses*, we are, at the same time, learning to revise our concept of what unity itself may be.

This kind of artwork induces us to question our basic assumptions about how we think our reality and, as a consequence, to re-evaluate and re-form our relationship with thinking itself. Alternative explanations of *Go Down, Moses* are not necessarily mutually exclusive, just as alternative ways of interpreting and interacting with the world can and do exist side by side—although such a co-existence is usually intolerable, and almost inevitably leads to some form of conflict and destruction. Maybe, however, the ultimate function of art (if it can be thought of as functional) is to give us the chance to discover, peacefully and creatively, the most advantageous way, or ways, to interpret and interact with the world.

I have been trying to argue that the phenomenon we know as Romanticism should be understood in these terms, as what Thomas Pynchon would probably call a historical switching-point. But human nature, history, are imprecise and messy. Because we are not machines, changes don't just happen neatly and instantaneously. Our culture is still on the cusp, and its momentum in the balance. In his criticism of the destructive forces inherent in Occidental civilization, William Faulkner follows a course initiated by the Romantics. I would propose that, in effect, the deepest theme of *Go Down, Moses* is the conflict between two orientations, between the tendency of a well-established cultural paradigm to continue and the essentially subversive drive to abandon it and discover a more promising alternative.

## 1.

We might begin the effort to make this theme more apprehensible by taking a closer look at “Pantaloen in Black”, a story which has generally been considered one of the weakest points in the book. Many critics choose simply to ignore it, while those who don’t do so usually attempt to justify its inclusion in the novel on either racial or emotional grounds<sup>1</sup>. I have previously argued that what appears to be this story’s principal problem, the fact that Rider does not belong to the McCaslin/Beauchamp family, can actually be used to explain its place in the book (Derrick 1995: 169-70).

“Pantaloen in Black” can be read as a counterpoint to the theme of tacit mutual understanding between the races —the code— that Faulkner examines in the relations among the descendants of L. Q. C. McCaslin. In contrast to the deep and complex sympathy we see between Lucas and Roth in “The Fire and the Hearth”, Rider’s story debouches into violence, an ever-present possibility in the South, *because* he is excluded from the family, and therefore from the code.

Faulkner even seems to vindicate this essentially negative role for Rider through the figure of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp in the story that gives the novel its name. There are interesting similarities between them. Both are parentless; Rider is brought up by his aunt and uncle, Samuel by his grandparents, Lucas and Molly. Both are rowdy and rebellious young men, early involved in gambling and fighting.

We never learn what family Rider belongs to, nor what his real name is. His aunt called him “Spoot” when he was a child, before his work mates began to call him “Rider”. But because he falls in love with Mannie, he wants only to be assimilated into the society that the “family” represents, as his emulation of Lucas and Molly’s fire on the hearth implies. Samuel, on the other hand, has a well-documented family history. Importantly however, he was living in Chicago under an alias. He abandons his identity, his accent, and the South itself, and emulates the lifestyle of a northern gangster.

*It must be significant that both of these characters are alienated. Although for different reasons, both of them lose their names. Both of them are cut off from their origins. And both of them meet only incomprehension from the whites they come in contact with. What a contrast with the ingrained consciousness of history that Lucas enjoys, the keen pride he takes in his genealogy, his sense of self, and his longevity.*

From this perspective, “Pantaloen in Black” would be negatively linked to the rest of the novel. Rider has his place in its scheme by contrast. Precisely because he is not a member —and, with Mannie’s death, cannot become a member of the problematic bi-racial family of the South, he becomes a victim of the most hateful and destructive potential of a racist society.

But I also find several drawbacks to this approach. In the first place, Rider is not a hardened criminal like Samuel Worsham Beauchamp. His love for Mannie has redeemed him, and makes him more sympathetic in our eyes. In the second place, although the whites in his environment do not understand him, we, the readers, certainly should, since we are given access to his thoughts and emotions. And in the third place, this reading has nothing to do with the book's other main theme of life in the wilderness.

The question to ask, then, is whether there could be a deeper sense of unity that would draw the story more intimately into the texture of Faulkner's intentions. Could there be another dimension to "Pantaloons in Black", one that would account for these drawbacks and, at the same time, cast it as a positive, rather than a negative element in the overall scheme of the book?

## 2.

"Over the Mountains  
Of the Moon,  
Down the Valley of the Shadow,  
Ride, boldly ride,"  
The shade replied,—  
"If you seek for Eldorado!"

Since we read the story through the same lenses we use to perceive the world, we tend to pass over what may be its most important component: the appearance of Mannie's ghost. Solidly rooted in our "Western (EuroAmerican ethnocentric) rationalism" (Wall 1991-2: 152), we have been subliminally trained either to explain away or to ignore all such paranormal phenomena. It must, we suppose, be an illusion, or, more vaguely, a materialized projection of Rider's deep desire to see his wife. The episode makes us feel uneasy, and we prefer to focus on other aspects of the narrative.

I propose, however, that the motive source (or the soul) of the story is precisely here, and that all of its other aspects stem from this central event. We will not properly apprehend its meaning unless we can take this apparition seriously. Our pre-determined response may be to doubt the existence of ghosts, but it seems quite clear that the reader is not intended to question whether this ghost is "real" or not. Certainly, the other members of the black community give credence to the idea that the dead return to walk the earth. And while it could be argued that the very warning they give him prepares Rider's mind for the projection of a fantasy, Faulkner dispels any doubt by providing us with a witness who is immune to the effects of suggestion: Rider's dog. As they stand in the dusk-filled cabin where Rider is hoping (and probably fearing) to find his wife again, the dog suddenly leaves him:

The light pressure went off his flank; he heard the click and hiss of its claws on the wooden floor as it surged away and he thought at first that it was fleeing. But it stopped just outside the front door, where he could see it now, and the upfling of its head as the howl began, and then he saw her too. (Faulkner 1973: 140)

In effect, the story is asking us to overcome our cultural biases and change our mind about ghosts. If we can alter our perspective, and understand “Pantaloon in Black” from the standpoint of a culture that accepts the existence of spirits, then it acquires both a deeper psychological richness and an additional layer of significance.

It is not simply that Rider is trying to escape from an overwhelming sense of grief and pain that he cannot rightly express. He does want to escape; but, *once he encounters Mannie’s ghost, he wants to escape from life in order to join her spirit in death* —or, as Faulkner would probably prefer for us to begin to think of it, in another dimension of existence. In this sense, the description of Rider’s reaction when she begins to fade should be taken literally:

“Wait,” he said, talking as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman: “Den lemme go wid you, honey.” But she was going. She was going fast now, he could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle, of the blood and bone and flesh too strong, invincible for life, having learned [. . .] how tough [. . .] the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive, actually was. (Faulkner 1973: 140-1)

Rider’s body, his exuberant physical strength, has now become an “insuperable barrier” between him and his wife. Her ghost has set him in motion, and the rest of the story details his attempts to go with her, the battle between his desire to die and “the will of that bone and flesh to remain alive”.

By bringing out this aspect of “Pantaloon in Black”, I think we can manage to locate it properly within the thematic scheme of *Go Down, Moses*. This reading places the story on the mysterious borderline between the world of the living and world of the dead —that is, between the material and spiritual worlds.

As if to acknowledge that “Pantaloon in Black” will inhabit that ambiguous region where life and death interpenetrate, Faulkner begins the narrative with Rider standing on the brink of Mannie’s grave. Does this brink announce the metaphysical borderline that he will precariously “ride” from this moment to the end? In any case, when he finishes his frenetic shoveling, the aspect of the grave, as the narrator describes it, acts as a memento of the constant pressure the dead exert on life: “[. . .] the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition, not built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself [. . .]” (Faulkner 1973: 135).

This single image points to the fundamental mystery of death and regeneration that the dominant rationalistic strain of Occidental culture simply cannot accommodate. For it not only prepares for the apparition, later, of Mannie's ghost, the image also, and more immediately, suggests the appearance of new life out of death. I would not claim that it was Faulkner's intention here, but the echoes of Whitman's epic song of the spiritual cycle of life and death are impossible to ignore at this point.

In a much more abstruse reading of the story, Richard C. Moreland focuses on the phrases that immediately follow in the same description, where the narrative voice says that the grave

resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. (Faulkner 1973: 135)

Moreland claims that, with these words, Faulkner "acknowledges his own writing's predicament", that he "will be writing at the edge of what a white man could see of recognizable order and meaning in Rider's attempts to articulate his loss in the available social forms" (Moreland 1990: 171-2). Faulkner is, indeed, writing on an edge of recognizable order and meaning, but I don't think it is precisely this one.

I hope I have shown, in the first place, that Rider is hardly attempting "to articulate his loss in the available social forms". His problem is not to express his grief. His dilemma is created by the depth of his emotional need, which sets his desire to join Mannie (i.e., to die) at war with his tremendous physical will to live. All of his following actions in the story are explainable in this light. He lifts the huge log at the lumber camp not to lose himself in work, but because he hopes that it will kill him—a possibility that is reflected in the comments of one of his fellow workers (Faulkner 1973: 146). He next gets drunk on corn whiskey because he believes it can help him to overcome his own "invincible" metabolism. This is why he mutters those apparently senseless words when he takes the first drink: "'Hah!' he said. 'Dat's right. Try me. Try me, big boy. Ah gots something hyar now dat kin whup you.'" (Faulkner 1973: 147). And he rails against God to his aunt with the same hope in mind.

An argument such as Moreland's, which suggests that Rider is unable to come to terms with his grief because he has been excluded from the various (white) discourses of power, is not really satisfactory, and probably misses the mark. When the critics assume that Rider is inarticulate—implying, at the same time, that he is incapable of deep thought—aren't they really betraying some kind of hidden cultural bias of their own? When his aunt encourages him to pray to God for help, his answer frames in words the kind of reasonable

doubt that all of us have had about the dogma of religion, but that few of us would ever be able to express so succinctly: “Efn He God, Ah don’t needs to tole Him. Efn He God, He awready know hit. Awright. Hyar Ah is. Leff Him come down hyar and do me some good” (Faulkner 1973: 150).

No, Rider is not inarticulate. It’s just that articulate, rational language cannot adequately express what he *feels*. And what he feels has pushed him, literally, to the edge of the grave. He finally realizes that, with nothing more than the aid of moonshine whiskey, he cannot defeat his enemy, and kill himself. This is when he decides to murder Birdsong<sup>2</sup>.

Now it is interesting to notice that, in the matter of this crime, Rider is acting on the basis of his knowledge of the behavior of white society —as, in a less violent context, Tomey’s Turl does in “Was” and Lucas does in “The Fire and the Hearth”. He has known Birdsong for years, and undoubtedly known that he has been cheating the blacks for years. We can assume that he knows exactly what the response of Birdsong’s kinfolks will be, to accomplish what he cannot do himself and deliver him to freedom from the flesh and blood that had become much more of a constraint than the flimsy jail cell he escapes from at the end.

The edge of Mannie’s grave is really the same thing for Faulkner as it is for Rider, the limit that separates life from death. Or, in the context of the Romantic tradition that Faulkner adheres to, the limit that separates rational knowledge from the irrational. It is a borderline that Emily Dickinson, for one, was constantly probing with her words. Here again, it is not my intention to suggest a conscious parallel, but how interesting it is that the state of mind Dickinson describes, for example, in poem no. 280, coincides with the shock of grief and mourning that Rider also suffers:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners, to and fro  
Kept treading —treading— till it seemed  
That sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum—  
Kept beating —beating— till I thought  
My mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space —began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here—

We are all familiar with those excruciating times when we simply cannot stop the mind from rehearsing some painful event. The poem's obsessive rhythms, its repetition of the participles "treading" and "beating", its parallel structures, communicate that feeling of hopeless exhaustion. Sense begins to break through; the mind is going numb; one is cut off from help in a screaming, but wordless, distress.

Both the poem and the story are verbal evocations of private states of feeling, and both take language to the verge of reason and point consciousness beyond, into the silence that passes all understanding. Dickinson ends the poem with the ambiguous query as to whether we shall know, in death, what we cannot know in life:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down—  
And hit a World, at every Plunge,  
And finished knowing —then—

Then what?

One of the central concerns of 20th century art has been to discover how to continue the poem —that is, how to follow the Romantic impulse to take knowledge beyond the limits of logic and reason. And this implies, in the last analysis, taking consciousness beyond the limits of what we can possibly know *as ourselves*, beyond the borderline of individual death.

So, in spite of everything, Moreland was right —though not exactly as he intended. The language of the story goes at least to the brink, if not beyond, of what Western (EuroAmerican ethnocentric) rationalism is capable of recognizing as order and meaning. Beyond this boundary lies— what? Nothing at all? Monsters? Spirits? Mystical vision? Divine revelation? In the light of this reading, "Pantaloon in Black" can be taken as an emblem of the novel as a whole. For all of *Go Down, Moses* is inhabited, in one way or another, by ghosts and spirits. The story, like the novel, dwells on that mysterious frontier between life and death that should also be understood as the metaphysical line between matter and spirit. It is the final frontier that was inherent in the American dream from its birth. The ultimate aim of the book seems to be to facilitate our ability to use the mind to make the two-way traffic across that border more viable.

## 3.

Rider: They moved rapidly on between the close walls of impenetrable cane-stalks which gave a sort of blondness to the twilight and possessed something of that oppression, that lack of room to breathe in, which the walls of the house had had. (Faulkner 1973: 147)

Lucas: "That's right," he said. "It ain't none of your blood that's trying to break out and run." (Faulkner 1973: 50)

Isaac: He looked at McCaslin again. He could feel his breath coming shorter and shorter and shallower and shallower, as if there were not enough air in the kitchen for that many to breathe. (Faulkner 1973: 250)

Sam Fathers: "Like an old lion or a bear in a cage," McCaslin said. "He was born in the cage and has been in it all his life; he knows nothing else. Then he smells something. It might be anything [. . .]. But there for a second was the hot sand or the cane-brake that he never even saw himself [. . .]. But that's what he smells then. It was the cage he smelled. He hadn't smelled the cage until that minute. Then the hot sand or the brake blew into his nostrils and blew away, and all he could smell was the cage [. . .]. (Faulkner 1973: 167)

Clearly, as the lyrics of the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" indicate, one of the principal motifs of the novel is freedom<sup>3</sup>. But I would also suggest, in the light of quotations such as these, that Faulkner had more in mind than the freedom of the black race in the context of slavery and its aftermath. What Cass is describing, in the case of Sam Fathers, is much more than even the historical condition of racial oppression. He is talking about the constraints imposed on consciousness by civilization—or better, by a culture whose underlying tacit infrastructure of concepts and ideas strictly limits an individual to the cage of his or her own identity.

If the cage that he is talking about ultimately becomes the material fact of the human body (as is the case with Rider), it is because the way our culture has taught itself to think has separated body from world, and mind from body, and suppressed the unifying dimension of *spirit*, leaving the world in fragments<sup>4</sup>.

The source of the book's title then, can be seen as a deep and adroit pun. The Negro spiritual points toward slavery. But in the historical context of the novel, the slave-system is viewed as only one aspect of a larger phenomenon, the drive of a materialistic culture to de-spiritualize the world. For once we lose our reverence for living nature, the way is open to convert it into parcels of property, objects to be bought and sold, raw materials to be consumed. And, having done so, it is only one more step to converting other human beings into property, as well.

So we return, inevitably, to that schism between matter and spirit (or between ways of thinking the world that give precedence to one or the other) that characterizes Romanticism. As Coleridge perceived, a cultural orientation that depends primarily on rationality will ultimately lead to death. If, however, we can learn how to restore some kind of mysterious (i.e., spiritual) sense of union between ourselves and the rest of the world, then we are, almost certainly, on the way to restoring it to wholeness and therefore countering the implicit nihilism of Western culture.

I have tried to situate Isaac McCaslin's renunciation of his inheritance in this larger context. Certainly, it is the *intimate union* between the spirits of individual beings and the one larger unifying spirit of a living world that is celebrated and protected in the ritual of hunting that Sam Fathers teaches him. This kind of spiritual union, the result of an imaginative perception of experience, offers one form of escape from the empirical prison of the self, a way to transcend the barrier of individual death.

Our inability to appreciate its spiritual dimension is responsible for many of the more important misunderstandings of the book. For example, as early as 1953, William Van O'Connor acutely pointed out what he perceived to be the central thematic weakness of the novel—the apparent disparity between its two major themes of racial injustice and the spiritual grandeur of life in harmony with the wilderness. In the concluding sentences of his article he states that

The treatment of the spirit of the wilderness has no real relevance beyond acknowledging a former and continuing wrong. It relates to a world not merely prior to slavery but prior to civilization. It is a kind of neurotic dream—an escape from, rather than an attempt to solve, the present injustice. (O'Connor 1953: 330)

Any number of later critics have echoed this observation. And all of them would perhaps be right, if it were completely legitimate to assert that Faulkner's purpose in writing the book must have been to "attempt to solve the present injustice". But, as I have argued before, why should it be? Faulkner was a novelist, not a politician or a civil rights activist. He was interested, as he so often pointed out, not in ideas but in feelings, not in the head but in the heart—in writing down "the heart's truth out of the heart's driving complexity" (Faulkner 1973: 260).

On the other hand, I hope that my extended consideration of *Go Down, Moses* will have served to show that Faulkner did perceive a very deep connection between these two themes. Is it really necessary by now to point out the obvious cultural blind spot in O'Connor's argument? When he says, "[. . .] a world not only prior to slavery but prior to civilization", he is, of course, subtly

linking them together. His syntax unwittingly reveals what Isaac learns through his comparative education in the two very different schools of the Indigenous and European cultures. Like almost all of us, O'Connor unquestioningly associates Western rationalism and materialism with civilization. The alternative culture, however, represented by Sam Fathers, did indeed protect the spiritual continuity between humanity and nature. But of course, that civilization has been destroyed by the voracious greed of the encroaching white race.

At this point, the testimony of many representatives of those indigenous cultures, who have generally been denied a voice by their victors, comes to mind. It would be illustrative to recall the candid phrasing of Black Elk when, for example, he describes the first incursions of the "Wasichus", a word that refers to the non-indigenous interlopers, into the territory of the Black Hills:

Afterward I learned that it was Pahuska [Gen. Custer] who had led his soldiers into the Black Hills that summer, to see what he could find. He had no right to go in there, because all that country was ours. Also the Wasichus had made a treaty with Red Cloud (1868) that said it would be ours as long as grass should grow and water flow. Later I learned too that Pahuska had found there much of the yellow metal that makes the Wasichus crazy; and that is what made the bad trouble [. . .].

Our people knew there was yellow metal in little chunks up there; but they did not bother with it, because it was not good for anything. (Neihardt 1972: 65-6)

It might just as well be gold, silver, land, lumber, oil, uranium—or even human beings<sup>5</sup>. Any fragment of a de-spiritualized world is liable to conversion into property. How better to illustrate the clash between spiritual and materialistic orientations that has been so central in the history of America?

But of course, if, like Isaac, we can manage to become cultural relativists, and to step over the line that constricts us within the limits of our materialistic value system, then everything looks different. This is why, at the climactic moment of his debate with Cass, Isaac can claim with such assured tranquillity that "Sam Fathers set me free." O'Connor speaks of Isaac's dedication to the spirituality inherent in the wilderness—that is, his dedication to the values of a different culture—as a neurotic dream. But how would Sam Fathers, or Black Elk, or Crazy Horse, or Sitting Bull describe the nightmare of the incursion of the barbaric white destroyers into their ancient and sacred domains?

Being what we are, and thinking the way we do, we tend to demand a logical and utilitarian connection between the novel's major themes. But the real solution to the problem lies in thinking about it differently. As Isaac understands, the problem is the culture itself. The two apparently divergent themes of slavery and wilderness are resolved on the deeper level of the oppression of the spiritual potential of the human being.

“Let my people go”: the refrain of the song, as it is appropriated here by Faulkner, refers to the need to free the spirit from the cage of the identity and enable ourselves to cross more freely between the physical and the metaphysical, an enterprise which our previous strategies of thinking have virtually prohibited us. If it is true, as Isaac comes to perceive, that the inherent nihilism of our culture is a symptom of the choice to de-spiritualize nature, then the choice to reject the fundamental tenets of the culture should constitute a remedy.

This is why it is important for us to take Mannie’s ghost, and Rider’s desire to be united with it, seriously. This is why we should also take seriously Isaac’s communion with the spirits of the Old People and his vision of the mystical buck after his first kill. And this explains the significance of his conversation with Cass at the end of that same story.

In this scene Cass confirms the knowledge that Isaac still cannot permit himself to assimilate, that ghosts and spirits do exist. But even more, he completes the picture of the dynamic unity between the material world of nature, where life takes the form of flesh and blood, and the immaterial world of living spirits:

[. . .] you always wear out life long before you have exhausted the possibilities of living. And all that must be somewhere; all that could not have been invented and created just to be thrown away. [. . .] And the earth doesn’t want to keep things, hoard them; it wants to use them again. [. . .] Besides, what would it [the spirit] want, itself, knocking around out there [among the stars] when it never had enough time about the earth as it was, when there is plenty of room about the earth, plenty of places still unchanged from what they were when the blood used and pleased in them while it was still blood? (Faulkner 1973: 186-7)

He is talking about the same frontier that Rider so desperately wants to cross. But here there is an odd balance; the direction is changed, and the spirits yearn to take on physical form again. In Cass’s understanding (and this is before he opts for what I have called Freneau’s choice), the earth—nature, or the wilderness—is the nexus of exchange between the two complementary phases that compose the continuing process of life. Is this really so different from the image that Faulkner gives us of Mannie’s grave as a “mound [that] seemed to be rising of its own volition, not built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself [. . .]”?

This approach to *Go Down, Moses* offers several interesting advantages. In the first place, it situates the book, as we have seen, in the context of the 20th century’s endeavor to break out of the constraints of the old orientation and to project an alternative system of thinking that will be more adequate to the needs of a successful continuation of the human race. Secondly, it helps to locate that drive within the even larger historical context of the Romantic

revolution in thought. And thirdly, it constitutes another step in clarifying the Romantic fascination with death.

## 4.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

The enterprise of mystical perception leads the mind to the borderline between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible or, at least metaphorically, the borderline between life and death. If mystical insight fosters a belief in the existence, as *something*, of the inexplicable, it also suggests that death, the limit of what we can know, is not an absolute end of experience, but a transformation, a change of conditions. The impulse of Romanticism's rejection of the empirical philosophy of mechanism has led us to a paradoxical state in which we must learn how to use the mind differently, to accommodate (rather than to explain or understand) that which cannot be explained or understood. I have proposed that this may be the most coherent way to read the general movement of Western art and thinking in the 20th century (Derrick 1994). And it seems to me that *Go Down, Moses* also forms a part of that movement.

For some reason, which undoubtedly has something to do with our ingrained cultural biases, we automatically assume that Rider's reticence is due to a limited intelligence, or a lack of verbal skills. He can however, when he chooses, express himself quite effectively in the language of his own dialect. The point is that he is filled with overwhelming emotions in the story, not with logical concepts. And while the proper verbal language of the emotions is poetry (the nonverbal one is action), Rider is not a poet, nor is he in the psychological state to sit down and write a poem. He has stared directly into death's other kingdom, and is wavering on that final frontier. What can we expect him to say that would be commensurate with his pain, or his vision, or his need?

At the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, after Wittgenstein has painstakingly mapped out the limits of the domain of human experience that can be framed in rational discourse, he finds himself on the brink of the inexpressible: "Es gibt allerdings Unausprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist

das Mystische.” And, two propositions later, he reaches what is, essentially, the same conclusion: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen” (Wittgenstein 1961: 150)<sup>6</sup>.

This is not merely a gratuitous comparison. As unlikely as it may seem, both Faulkner and Wittgenstein were engaged in the same mission: to investigate the ultimate implications of the historical schism discovered by Romanticism. Both of them follow the path marked out for consciousness by that Romantic awe that Dickinson, among others, understood so well:

I've seen a Dying Eye  
 Run round and round a Room—  
 In search of something—as it seemed—  
 Then Cloudier become  
 And then —obscure with Fog—  
 And then —be soldered down  
 Without disclosing what it be  
 'Twere blessed to have seen—

In this poem, too, language and consciousness are balancing on the border of the mystical. As she does so frequently, Dickinson puns between “Eye” and “I”, so that vision becomes a metaphor of all modes of perception, sensory and intuitive, that inform the self. How can the eye disclose what lies beyond merely physical vision? How can language disclose what words were not designed to express?

Whitman and Dickinson were the great American precursors in this enterprise<sup>7</sup>. Each one of them forced consciousness to the limit of personal identity —while at the same time, significantly, breaking down the traditional forms of poetic containment. Why shouldn't we view Faulkner's narrative excesses in the same light, and consider that he was undertaking a similar kind of creative de-structuring of the vehicle of prose containment?

Forcing consciousness to the limit —and beyond. Whitman got there first. His self opens out into a universal consciousness that transcends time and space. Dickinson was much more hesitant, and coy —less certain in the face of an ever-present doubt that is more consonant with our own contemporary sensibility. Yet she too was capable, at times, of essaying a language that transports consciousness into paradox: “Because I could not stop for Death — /He kindly stopped for me—”, “I died for Beauty —but was scarce/Adjusted in the Tomb”, “I heard a Fly buzz —when I died—”, “I've dropped my Brain —My Soul is numb—”.

Faulkner also creates a verbal structure that faces the problem of “crossing the line” in *Go Down, Moses*. If the “sense” of its language, as well as the presentation of its “story”, border on the incoherent, it may well be because the book itself —and it shares this quality with Emerson's writing— inhabits

that problematic borderland where rational understanding crosses over into intuitive comprehension.

In “Pantaloon in Black”, when Rider is on his way home from the burial, the narrative voice notes that he is following in Mannie’s footsteps, since the marks of her passing there must still be present in the dusty lane, beneath the intervening footprints of others. As he walks, Rider’s body is “breasting the air her body had vacated [. . .], his eyes touching the objects —post and tree and field and house and hill— her eyes had lost” (Faulkner 1973: 241). On the basis of this description, John T. Matthews has pointed out that “Rider literally pursues a course in which Mannie appears as a trace” (Matthews 1982: 241). While my reading of its significance is different from his, this is a valuable observation to make.

On the one hand, it indicates that Rider is, already, even before the apparition, following her ghost. In a certain sense, of course, all we have are traces. We are always following the dead through life. On the other hand, this passage also locates the story squarely in the tradition of American mysticism. Through his elevated sensitivity, Rider is beginning to perceive the physical world as an expression of the spiritual. It is, essentially, the same trajectory that Emerson takes in “Nature”, beginning with direct sensory experience and ending with the intuitive perception of the spirit.

The more we consider “Pantaloon in Black”, the deeper we find its links with the rest of the book to be. If we choose to think of Rider in this way, then he also becomes an emblem for Isaac McCaslin, the principal visionary of *Go Down, Moses*. The difference between them is that Isaac learns in a much more positive way to approach the spiritual realm on the other side of death, in hunting, and peer into it. Remember the wording of the first paragraph of “The Old People”, which immediately juxtaposes Rider’s death:

Then the buck was there. He did not come into sight; he was just there, looking not like a ghost but as if all of light were condensed in him and he were the source of it, not only moving in it but disseminating it, already running [. . .]. (Faulkner 1973: 163)

Certainly, the same animal would not have looked this way in someone else’s eyes. Isaac has acquired a higher perception of the spiritual force that suffuses all of nature and has learned the ritual procedures that protect and cultivate the fertile balance between matter and spirit and insure the continuation of life. The purity and joy of that experience are so strong that he finally decides to dedicate himself to the kind of culture that makes it possible.

I think we are intended to capture the subtle resonance between Rider and Ike. It is a good example of the kind of lyrical resources Faulkner uses to structure his fiction. And in this sense it is interesting to note that Isaac resonates

most tellingly with Rider in his old age, as we see him in "Delta Autumn". Here, Uncle Ike is also approaching the frontier of his own death. In the second half of the story, he also speaks very little, though the narrative voice, as in "Pantaloon in Black", illuminates his silence. And maybe most importantly, what we learn from his eloquent silence is that he is also in the presence of ghosts. If, as a young man, he had communed with the spirits of the dead members of Sam Fathers' tribe, as an old man he communes with the dead friends of his own past, and with the dying spirit of the Big Woods.

As his ruminations reveal, Isaac knows that what we refer to as civilization will never be able to completely destroy the nature on which the continuing cycle of life and death depends. Instead, he intuitively comprehends that the nihilism of Western civilization will inevitably turn against it, and bring about its own destruction: "No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge" (Faulkner 1973: 364).

As we have already seen, William Van O'Connor, like many of the characters in the novel, thought of Isaac's renunciation as an escape from responsibility into a kind of neurotic dream. This is a constant critical response, which has its source precisely in the materialistic value system that Isaac rejects. The height of this response comes with opinions such as that of Arthur F. Kinney, who describes Ike's "narrow and jealous desire to maintain the big woods as his own private refuge" as an act of pride and arrogance (Kinney 1989: 9). Perhaps they miss the point; but even Faulkner, on at least one occasion, opined that repudiation in itself is not enough and that Ike "should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people" (Meriweather 1980: 225).

Given Ike's premises, though, the only valid action he could take, in the sense of being more affirmative, is the kind that Emerson describes in "The American Scholar" —that is, to externalize his wisdom by living out his commitments as honestly and fully as possible<sup>8</sup>. And this is what he does in modestly accepting all of the sacrifices his decision entails. Still, the ultimate implication of Emerson's thinking, as the "The Poet" demonstrates, is that the "scholar" finally becomes an artist. His mode of action is to create new forms of language through which the spiritual dimension of nature can be re-cycled into human awareness.

I have already proposed that if Isaac is to be thought of as a failure, it should be because he does not manage to translate his sacrifice into art. But my further conclusion was that Faulkner himself *does*, meaning that Isaac can be read as a kind of fictional representative of the artist's consciousness.

Now though, I am beginning to suspect that Uncle Ike may even be more of a fictional projection of the artist's consciousness than I originally believed. That final image of him in "Delta Autumn", childless and widowed, calmly and gracefully approaching his own death and communing with the ghosts of

the past —that moving image of an old man in a cot in the midst of the dwindling woods that had defined his identity stays in the mind like a ghost. He has seen and done so much; he is the repository of so much history, so much wisdom. Isn't it really in this context, the context of Uncle Ike's memory, that we should read the first story of the book?

The short prologue Faulkner added to "Was" when he decided to use it to open *Go Down Moses* begins like this: "Isaac McCaslin, 'Uncle Ike', past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one" (Faulkner 1973: 3). Some critics have had difficulty in relating this introduction to the rest of the story<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, Carl L. Anderson even goes so far as to say that "Faulkner leaves it [the story] in a kind of historical limbo". He does, though, modify the apparent severity of this assertion when he concludes that "the story is left to the reader to draw upon as it is given in the text of 'Was' and to bring into relationship, as may be possible, with those that follow. Inevitably, that process will be governed by what one understands finally to have become Isaac McCaslin's achieved view of himself and his forebears." (Anderson 1989: 414 & 415).

If we read it as a content of Isaac's memory, the story's existence in the book seems to be a final vindication of the education that he had received as a boy from Sam Fathers. Notice, again, the similarities. Isaac didn't experience these events, he had heard the story from his other important teacher, Cass, just as he had heard the stories of the Old People from Sam. But remember the description of Isaac's "alternative" education. As Sam talked to him about the old times, gradually they would

cease to be old times and become a part of the boy's present, not only as if they had happened yesterday but as if they were still happening, the men who walked through them actually walking in breath and air and casting an actual shadow on the earth they had not quitted. And more: as if some of them had not happened yet but would occur tomorrow, until at last it would seem to the boy that he himself had not come into existence yet, none of his race nor the other subject race which his people had brought with them into the land had come here yet [. . .]. (Faulkner 1973: 171)

This process is a transformation of consciousness. He has learned a form of magic. By escaping from the limitations of his own identity, Isaac manages to escape from the rigid progress of history, to enter an atemporal present and, at least in his own imagination, to bring the dead back to life.

The same thing happens in "Was". The story's title tells us that it is, literally, the past, a time before he was born. In other words, it is history filtered through memory into story. Through the ritual of hunting, Isaac learns to participate in a communion of the living with the dead. "Was" extends the significance of this communion to the act of creating fiction.

We might think in terms of an emblematic continuity in *Go Down Moses*. Rider's revelation, his vision of Mannie's ghost, can be seen as an emblem of Isaac's much more complex visionary experience. But Isaac's character, and especially his Romantic mysticism, can be seen as an emblem of the author's consciousness. The real climax of the novel must certainly be what is also the climax of Isaac's life: that moment of complete mystical revelation he has at the end of "The Bear". He has returned, two years after the deaths of Old Ben, Lion and Sam, to the heart of the woods, to Sam's burial place, to bring his small offering of tobacco and bandanna handkerchief and peppermint candy to the spirit of the man who had been his spirit's father and guide. In the lushness of summer, he perceives that the woods are a "place where dissolution itself was a seething turmoil of ejaculation tumescence conception and birth, and death did not even exist" (Faulkner 1973: 327). He senses that Sam, now outside of time, knew he was there before he arrived. And as he leaves his offerings, he realizes how quickly these objects, like all individual lives, will be accepted, taken up, subsumed into a much larger ongoing force:

[. . .] not vanished but merely translated into the myriad life which printed the dark mold of these secret and sunken places with delicate fairy tracks, which, breathing and biding and immobile, watched him from beyond every twig and leaf until he moved [. . .]. (Faulkner 1973: 328)

It is only now, at this moment, that Isaac's alternative education is finally completed. The mystical insight that follows this perception sets the course of the rest of his life:

[. . .] he had not stopped, he had only paused, quitting the knoll which was no abode of the dead because there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one: [. . .]. (Faulkner 1973: 328-9)

This vision is the fruition of the *other* American dream. Faulkner too, works magic. He too manages to overcome the linear direction of Occidental history by recycling the past, through memory and imagination, into a dimension of language that transcends time and death.

*Go Down Moses* teaches us how deeply Faulkner understood his own inheritance of the Romantic "return to nature". This concept of the dynamics of fiction is not really that different from Martin Heidegger's striking sense of the equivalence between human creative activity (*poiēsis*) and natural processes (*physis*) (Heidegger 1977: 10-11). Isaac's immersion in a "primitive" culture

constitutes a model for the use of the mind that complies with the natural cycle of the *regeneration* of death into life.

\* \* \*

Therefore am I still  
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
 And mountains; and of all that we behold  
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
 Of eye, and ear, —both what they half create,  
 And what perceive [. . .].

Faulkner's work —and *Go Down Moses* is an intriguing example— can be viewed as one of many culminations of the Romantic rejection of a belief, fostered by the success of the empirical method, in the absolute reality of an objective material world. As such, it is part of a “countermovement” that is searching for a feasible way to bridge the gap between subject and object through a more flexible use of the mind. The common denominator in all of these efforts is the recognition that thought does not merely *reflect* what is already there, but, to a certain degree (which may never be defined or quantified) also *projects* what it perceives.

The century that is now drawing to a close might be characterized by our growing awareness of the mutual interdependence between the act itself of thinking and what is thought, out of which is constantly arising what we know as reality. The general inquiry into this complex process constitutes the movement we like to call Modernism (and its Manneristic extension, Post-modernism).

The many themes of *Go Down Moses* are brilliantly subsumed into the conflict between white and non-white cultures, a conflict that reflects the growing dominance, in the West, of an orientation based on empiricism, and the tension created by the subsequent resistance to the nihilism inherent in such a way of using the world. Because our ideas do, over the course of time, become our physical realities, we must be careful in choosing those ideas we will believe in and act upon. The writer in the Romantic tradition, like Rider (is there a hidden pun in his name?), like Isaac McCaslin, like Emerson's poet, or like the Shaman in a so-called primitive society, constantly occupies that shifting frontier between concrete fact and misty fantasy, material bodies and immaterial ghosts. Maybe the most important thing for us to understand, at this point in time, is that this is also the borderline between two alternative ways of taking part in the world: one, which tells us that all life ends in death, and leaves the world in fragments; another, which tells us that all death opens out into life, and makes the world a symbiotic unity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In either case, the tactic has been to read the story as a variation on one of the two themes of black-white relations or the question of sacrifice and renunciation exemplified in the figure of Isaac. Apart from early critics such as Stanley Tick (1962) or Marvin Klotz (1965), who simply find the story irrelevant to the overall scheme of the novel, John Pilkington takes a preliminary step toward a conciliation with "Pantaloons in Black". While he, too, believes that "Faulkner made no real effort to fit it into the other stories", he does point out that it is "a powerful treatment of the failure of understanding between the two races in the community" (Pilkington 1981: 259). Following in this general line are writers such as Walter Taylor and Richard C. Moreland. Taylor argues that Mannie's death drives Rider into a state of racial hysteria. With no apparent basis in the facts of the story, he concludes that "Rider could account for [her death] only as an act of God, and that pointed directly at the roots of his hysteria: in his heart, Rider believed all black tragedies came from whites. Those were his deep, permanent feelings, and they ignored the logic of the situation, denying him rest, until they found a racial outlet in his killing of Birdsong" (Taylor 1983: 140). Moreland, on the other hand, diffuses the overwhelming force of Rider's grief by explaining it away as a problem of discourse. He calls the story "a crisis in interracial literacy" (Moreland 1990: 171) and suggests that Rider is lynched because of his inability to "articulate his grief [. . .] in accordance with the three historically dominant discourses in his society " (172), religion, work and dissipation, that is, whiskey and gambling —what Moreland calls "Rider's hysterical carnivalesque" (173). Similarly, but somewhat more sympathetic to the story's human dimension, and to the human dimension of language, John T. Matthews claims that a "crisis of grief stands at the heart of this story, as in the others: Rider desires to speak to the death of Mannie [. . .] but he can find no words for his agony, just as he can neither deny her loss nor calm his memory." Further, he proposes that Rider's attempt to deal with his loss through ritual connects this story to the wilderness theme in the novel, as it "prepares for the hunters' wiser acceptance of loss as they mourn [. . .]" (Matthews 1982: 238). And finally, in what seems to me to be the most humane of these readings of the story, Daniel Hoffman focuses on the strength of Rider's love. It is, he says, "on the quality of his love, rather than on his dialect or his diet, that our attention should be fixed" (Hoffman 1989: 134). Hoffman states that "the main relevance of Rider's story to the rest of *Go Down, Moses* has to do with his all-but-superhuman devotion to Mannie", which should be understood as a point of reference for other relationships in the book, such as those between Lucas and Molly, George and Nat, or Roth and his mistress.

<sup>2</sup> Of those critics whose work I am familiar with, Daniel Hoffman's reading of "Pantaloons in Black" is closest to my own. He also thinks that the appearance of the ghost motivates Rider to try "to rejoin his dead wife's spirit" and that his murder of Birdsong is a calculated act of self-destruction: "In what appears to be a gambling brawl but in fact is his willful committing of an act he knows will bring about his own death. Rider exposes Birdsong's cheating and, as the white man reaches for a pistol, he slashes Birdsong with his razor" (Hoffman 1989: 135).

<sup>3</sup> The complete text can be found in James Early (1972: 112-3).

<sup>4</sup> Maybe it would be well to recall that Eliot, too, found that the course of Western history had led to a dead-end, and dedicated himself to finding a way out. He also suggests that the isolation of the self is one of the sources of our ruin. His first recipe for a remedy to the waste of modern culture was to Give, Sympathize and Control. And if the idea of sympathy harks back to the Romantic concept of a harmonious fellow-feeling not only with others, but more fundamentally with the spiritual forces that suffuse all of nature, then the lines of *The Waste Land* at this point are especially pertinent:

*Dayadhvam*: I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only

*We think of the key, each in his prison*

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison (ll. 412-5).

The note that Eliot appends to these lines should also be considered in this context.

<sup>5</sup> Or bison, for that matter. I cannot resist including, as well, Black Elk's reflexion on the virtual extermination of this species. It is a telling alternative perspective on what we have often called our Manifest Destiny.

I can remember when the bison were so many that they could not be counted, but more and more Wasichus came to kill them until there were only heaps of bones scattered where they used to be. The Wasichus did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy, and they took the hides to sell. Sometimes, they did not even take the hides, only the tongues; and I have heard that fire-boats came down the Missouri River loaded with dried bison tongues. You can see that the men who did this were crazy. Sometimes they did not even take the tongues; they just killed and killed because they liked to do that. When we hunted bison, we killed only what we needed. And when there was nothing left but heaps of bones, the Wasichus came and gathered up even the bones and sold them. (Neihardt 1972: 181)

<sup>6</sup> Proposition 6.522: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical." Proposition 7: "What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence."

<sup>7</sup> Although, as usual, it was Emerson who set the precedent. One of the reasons why we have so much difficulty in coming to terms with his work is that his lovely prose is constantly flirting with incoherence. He certainly must have realized that if his purpose was to instill the mind with an appreciation of the irrational, his language shouldn't be perfectly consistent, nor completely transparent and comprehensible. His writing almost always yields up deep sense to deep excavation, but we inevitably stumble over sentences that seem to collapse under the excessive strain. This one, for example, from "The American Scholar": "But for the evidence thence afforded to the philosophical doctrine of the identity of all minds, we should suppose some preëstablished harmony, some foresight of souls that were to be, and some preparation of stores for their future wants, like the fact observed in insects, who lay up food before death for the young grub they shall never see." In spite of its complexity, in spite of what seems, after careful thought, to be an inherent contradiction, we know what this sentence wants to say. The intuition of abiding sense glimmers through a screen of confusing signals. Sooner or later, one realizes that the experience of reading Emerson's prose mimics the experience of mystical insight he was describing.

<sup>8</sup> "Character is higher than intellect," Emerson writes. "Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. Does he lack organ or medium to impart his truth? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them. This is a total act. Thinking is a partial act."

<sup>9</sup> John Pilkington gives a brief summary of the changes Faulkner made in the unpublished story "Almost" to make it what we know today as "Was". He says, "The novelist also added the rather unusual introductory, almost fragmentary paragraphs relating to Isaac McCaslin that seem wholly unconnected to the remainder of "Was"" (Pilkington 1981: 246).

Universitat de València  
Facultad de Filología  
Depto. de Filología Inglesa

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