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# How the Myth Was Made: Time, Myth, and Narrative in the Work of William Faulkner

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**HOW THE MYTH WAS MADE:  
TIME, MYTH, AND NARRATIVE  
IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM FAULKNER**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR LIU  
PROFESSOR WALKER**

**APRIL 25, 2014**



**MYTH &  
NARRATIVE  
IN THE WORK OF  
WILLIAM FAULKNER**

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## SETTING THE STAGE

*Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present. The name for this denial is Golden Age thinking – the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one’s living in – it’s a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present.*

*MIDNIGHT IN PARIS*

It is impossible to begin a discussion of William Faulkner’s examination of myth without tracing the complex network of ideology and narrative from which he emerged. After the Civil War, as David Blight outlines in *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, a type of literature sprang up that “embraced the romance of the Lost Cause, the idyll of the Old South’s plantation world of orderly and happy race relations [...] The age of machines, rapid urbanization, and labor unrest produced a huge audience for a literature of escape into a pre-Civil War, exotic South that, all but ‘lost,’ was now the object of enormous nostalgia” (211). The myth of the Lost Cause, Blight continues, was that of “a glorious, organic civilization destroyed by an avaricious ‘industrial society’ determined to wipe out its cultural foes” (257), an agrarian utopia positioned in the mythical past of the vanished antebellum South.

In its original form, the myth constituted a reimagining of history. Groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, whose influence peaked in the early 1910s, participated actively in a process of mythmaking, through the “founding of monuments, efforts to control Southern textbooks,



lobbying of Congressmen, and their ubiquitous essay contests where Southern youth could exhibit the ‘truth’ of the Lost Cause,” forming a new brand of “‘history’ demanded by the Lost Cause” (Blight 292). As a general mood, but also as a carefully constructed myth, the Lost Cause took a deep hold on the consciousness of the South. Similarly, in *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*, Irving Howe argues for the antagonistic relationship between myth and history in the South: “The Southern myth, like any other, is less an attempt at historical description than a voicing of the collective imagination perhaps of the collective will” (28-9). It is an active “voicing” of an ideal past, a deliberate erasure of accepted history. It follows that this conception of myth is performing a sort of violence on history; the creation of myth is antagonistic to the idea of a universal, or ‘true,’ history. If history is the attempt at a linear, objective narrative, myth is its antithesis, a force that willfully works against the ordered progression of time. As Patricia Tobin writes in “The Time of Myth and History,” “Although myth refers to events alleged to have taken place in the past, its operational value is that the specific model which it describes is timeless. Time cannot affect [it]; it can only affect time” (255). Myth by its very nature operates counter to time; in its theoretical form, it participates actively in the erasure of time, operating utterly free of the constraints of historical narrative.

Out of this wave of nostalgic rewriting came a reactive generation of

thoughtful and resistant writers. By the 1920s, the Lost Cause had “made itself a ready target; it forced a confrontation with the past that bred a Faulkner, a Warren, a Flannery O’Connor, and many others in white Southern letters” (Blight 293). This “confrontation with the past” took the form of ambivalence, toward the South, toward history, toward nostalgia, and toward the marching forward of time. By the 1930s, Depression-era nostalgia meant that

an astonishing American appetite reemerged for the nostalgia and the Lost Cause of the Old South. Millions would flock to buy the story of Scarlett O’Hara’s struggle in *Gone with the Wind* (1935) to cope with the crushed but ennobled South in the aftermath of the war; not nearly as many would embrace so eagerly Thomas Sutpen’s fierce ambitions and the legacies his family coped with on the real and psychological landscapes of Mississippi in *Absalom, Absalom!* (Blight 393)

Part of the attraction of *Gone With the Wind* was that it omitted negative aspects of pre-war Southern society. Faulkner’s more ambivalent and nuanced portrayal of the South in *Absalom, Absalom!* and other works separated him from the *Gone with the Wind* sentimental vision, but as a child of the South himself, he could not quite escape the pervading power of the myth. Irving Howe argues against viewing Faulkner as “a traditional moralist drawing his creative strength from the Southern myth. The truth is that he writes in opposition to this myth as well as in acceptance of it, that he struggles with it even as he continues to acknowledge its power and charm” (26). Faulkner’s works do not simply demonize the morality of myth; instead, they explore the many facets of mythic creation and negotiation. This ambivalence is central to

Faulkner's works, as Howe continues:

[Faulkner] has set his pride in the past against his despair over the present, and from this counterpoint has come much of the tension in his work. He has investigated the myth itself; wondered about the relation between the Southern tradition he admires and that memory of Southern slavery to which he is compelled to return; tested not only the present by the past, but also the past by the myth, and finally the myth by that morality which has slowly emerged from this entire process of exploration. (Howe 29)

Faulkner's South is both the grand, nostalgic "Southern tradition" and the dark, deeply flawed "memory of Southern slavery," the noble beauty of a mythical past and the harsh historical narrative undercutting it. The knowledge of slavery acts as a dissonant element in the smooth unreality of the myths shaping the "Southern tradition"; these myths work to erase the memory of past horrors. And beyond their direct applications, Faulkner's works comment on the overall process of mythmaking, as it manifests in many aspects of human life.

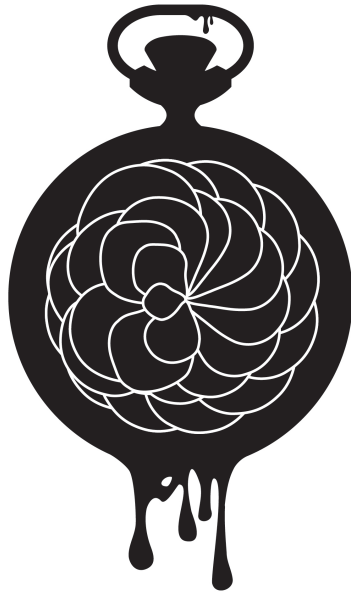
Faulkner's critical resistance to the erasure inherent in sentimental Lost Cause literature leads to his ironic and complicated representation of his heroes and their relationship to the myths that surround them. As Montserrat Ginés argues, "While showing understanding for those of his characters who have inherited the burden of the past, at the same time Faulkner regards with skepticism their retreat from the real world" (9). With an intimate understanding of the "immoderate worship of the past so deeply rooted in the Southern mind," Faulkner writes compassionately, and with an "acute

awareness of his own delusions,” of the “propensity of human beings to mythmaking” (Ginés 122-23). In this way, Faulkner’s works respond specifically to the South’s Lost Cause mythologizing of its own history, concerning directly with his oft-quoted “own little postage stamp of native soil” (Faulkner, 1956 *Paris Review* interview), but in a way that reveals the universal need of human beings for myth. Howe argues that Faulkner’s characters “are of the South, signifying its decay and its shame, but the decay is universal” (47), as is the myth that creates it. As Isaac’s father says in “The Bear” (1942), the writer “had to talk about something. [...] He was talking about truth” (Faulkner 514). The sense of myth presented by Faulkner is not one limited to the South, but is instead a productive “something” through which he can speak of human “truth.” Faulkner emerged into a culture that defined itself and its mythologies by its past. His works deal most directly with the mythologies and conflicts of the South, but his deeper meaning lies in the realm of the universal, and this study aims to follow suit. This study does not claim to explain the workings of the South or to seek out the specific flaws in its social structure or mythology. Instead, it proposes to use the particularity of myths, often but not always Southern, in Faulkner’s works to illustrate the structure of myth within narrative.

Each of Faulkner’s works contains some exploration of myth. This thesis strives to complicate Ginés’ “propensity” toward myth-making,

examining myth as it is created and recreated through narrative. Each of the following chapters works to illustrate a different aspect of myth in Faulkner, in the process drawing upon resonances between the texts to trace the development of the mythic form. Chapter One works to complicate the concept of time, examining 1930's "A Rose for Emily" in order to explore the conflict between history and myth in terms of narrative progression. Chapter Two looks more closely at the process of myth-making, taking 1936's brilliantly fractured *Absalom, Absalom!* to analyze the creative process of myth creation, propagation, and destruction. Finally, Chapter Three focuses on 1942's "The Bear," exploring the transformation of myth from seductive menace to valued container of deeply held truth, and observing the language of myth, the connection between myth and art, and ultimate value of mythic structures.

RETHINKING CHRONOLOGY IN  
“A ROSE FOR EMILY”



*I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was—only is.*

WILLIAM FAULKNER

*Paris Review*

*To Faulkner the escapement of wild time and place seemed one attribute of the thing he was writing about — the lost attribute, implicit in it... In letting time and place out of the box he was not, by any standards but our ordinary ones, being reckless.*

EUDORA WELTY

*Faulkner Memorial Tribute*

*Myth is much more important and true than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is.*

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

## I

Near the end of William Faulkner's 1930 short story "A Rose for Emily" is a brief description of time: after Emily's death, the old men gather to tell stories, in the process "confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years" (60). It seems a simple moment, a short meditation on the effects of age and the passing of time, but it also serves to establish two oppositional senses of time, as both myth and history. The image of the meadow lends the past a mythical power, as a space beyond the destroying touch of "winter" and the confusion of the present; in opposition to this runs the "mathematical progression" of time. The effect of the term "mathematical" is to set up an opposition: it suggests a contrast between the rational, ordered, and objective, and the organic, subjective, and true. "A Rose for Emily" is thus a useful place to delve into the relationship between Faulkner's characters and time, and ultimately his interpretation of time itself. In the story, Faulkner is inflating and deflating myth, empowering and undermining history, and ultimately offering narrative as a viable alternative in its subjectivity. From a narrative reworking of time, the story looks critically at the diametrically opposed models of myth and history, in the process demonstrating the deeply Southern struggle with the past. The

narrative tracks the contradictory human impulses for order and myth, nostalgia and truth, glory and horror.

The relationship between time and narrative structure quickly takes a central place in “A Rose for Emily.” Upon first reading, it seems that the temporal structure has been confusingly tampered with: there is no obvious rationale to the order of the narrative. It follows no clear sense of time, beginning and ending with its protagonist’s death and jumping disjointedly between non-consecutive events. On one level, it is ordered simply to deliver a surprise, to jar the reader, but on a more interesting level it is a deliberate rethinking of the significance of chronology. It is tempting to attempt a rearrangement of the story, as though it is an out of focus image, to be easily remedied. And indeed, readers and scholars alike have attempted this: Gene Moore expresses that it is “vitally important to establish [Emily’s] chronological place in the historical context of the passing generations,” and more specifically, exactly “what dates are carved on Miss Emily’s tombstone” (196). He recognizes “the importance of time to a proper understanding of the story” (195) yet persists in detailed chronological analysis:

Homer Barron must have died when Miss Emily was about 33 or 34 years old: at least 40 years before her own death (equal to the “at least ten years” since the last visit plus the 30 years since the smell) [...] a limit is thereby set to the range of time included in “at least”: her last visit had to occur “at least ten years” and at most 12 years before her death, since if it occurred more than 12



years earlier, she would have been under 30 when her father died. (200)

The analysis here is explicitly (and ironically, given the old men's "mathematical progression") mathematical ("equal to," "plus," "limit"), and as such it falls into the trap set by "A Rose for Emily," the willingness to perceive chronology as set and natural, a permanent set of rules that the universe abides by. Other critics have fallen into the same trap, critics cited by Moore himself: "Faulkner destroys chronological time in his story" (Magalaner and Volpe, cited in Moore 195); the story "twists chronology almost beyond recognition" (Sullivan, cited in Moore 195); it is "abandonment of chronology" (A. M. Wright, cited in Moore 195). Moore's concluding chronology of Emily's life is not only beside the point; it is actually antithetical to the story's relationship to time. Rearranging the story according to a strict framework of years cuts away its vitality and critical voice, ignoring the reciprocal influence of the past upon the present.

The way out of this trap is the acknowledgment of a more fluid conception of time. If time is subjective, it cannot be twisted or abandoned, but simply presented as it is experienced or understood. It is not simply a cheap trick, arbitrarily creating suspense out of an inevitable narrative. Ray B. West, Jr. discusses the problem of chronology in "A Rose for Emily":

When, as in "A Rose for Emily," the world depicted is a confusion between the past and the present, the atmosphere is

one of distortion of unreality. This unreal world results from the suspension of a natural time order. Normality consists in a decorous progression of the human being from birth, through youth, to age and finally death. Preciosity in children is as monstrous as idiocy in the adult, because both are *unnatural*. Monstrosity, however, is a sentimental subject for fiction unless it is the result of human action – the result of a willful attempt to circumvent time. When such circumvention produces acts of violence, as in “A Rose for Emily,” the atmosphere becomes one of horror. (66)

Distortions of time resonate throughout the story, affecting not simply the presentation of events but the characters themselves. Emily’s life has been one of stunted growth, time that simultaneously freezes and rushes on, a jumbled mixture of past and present that results ultimately in a type of monstrous “unreality.” The distorted progression of time is the source of Emily’s own distortion: what West terms the “willful attempt to circumvent time” could just as easily be termed mythmaking. The “horror” of the story’s finale is the discovery of how truly grotesque her inner world has become, a monstrosity that avoids becoming “sentimental” by implicating the destroyed in their own destruction. Jean-Paul Sartre takes the centrality of time further, arguing that even outside of Emily’s distortion, there cannot exist a “natural time order”: “if the technique Faulkner has adopted seems at first a negation of temporality, the reason is that we confuse temporality with chronology. It was man who invented dates and clocks” (88), and therefore there is nothing “natural” about linear chronology. Here Sartre is setting up an opposition

between *temporality*, which is the position in past, present, and future, and a traditional sense of *chronology* as more directly connected to the limitations of “dates and clocks.” This is the chronology described by Moore and his compatriots, a chronology that assumes an objectively true order, the center of the historical model of time. It is also the “mathematical progression” from the story, proceeding regimentally onward with all the unquestioning confidence of a ten year old reciting times tables. Yet time cannot be viewed so simply: there is a tension here between the concrete realm of seconds, hours, and years (Sartre’s “chronology”), and the more abstract past, present, and future (“temporality”). Is the essence of time in “a finite extent or stretch of continued existence,” such as an hour, or is it the more broad “period during which a person or thing lives” (OED, “time, n., int., and conj.”)? I propose to reappropriate Sartre’s “chronology”: if it is defined as “the science of computing and adjusting time or periods of time, and of recording and arranging events in order of time” (OED, “chronology, n.”), then it can be broadened to encapsulate the historical, mythical, *and* narrative structures of time. Chronology is the method of arrangement: letting go of the assumed superiority of linear time, it can take a variety of forms.

The chronologies in “A Rose for Emily,” then, take two primary forms: the first, history, an attempt at a linear, objective narrative, deeply dependent upon the ordered shape of mathematical time; the second, myth, a narrative

force that works willfully against any progression of time. The historical model is vulnerable in its ignorance of the past, while the mythical model fails in its refusal of the present; the two thus become equally flawed opposites. As Paul A. Harris argues, “the story depicts two mutually exclusive but coexisting orders. These cultural orders mutually define one another in the story through the contrasting modes of time that characterize each of them” (176). For the town, this is what Harris terms “serial development: modernization [that] follows a linear train of events that impose a grid-like order” (176), an inherently *historical* mode of time characterized by linear progression. In contrast, “Emily’s enigmatic features belie the linear march of time along which the town scrutinizes her” (Harris 176-7). Emily, as antagonist to history, takes on the role of mythmaker, resisting development, progress, and the change inherent in time by clinging to a frozen, nostalgic myth. Irving Howe ties the antagonistic relationship between myth and history directly to the South: “The Southern myth, like any other, is less an attempt at historical description than a voicing of the collective imagination—perhaps of the collective will” (28-9). Similarly, as Patricia Tobin argues, “although myth refers to events alleged to have taken place in the past, its operational value is that the specific model which it describes is timeless. Time cannot affect [it]; it can only affect time” (255): myth is the active erasure of time; in its theoretical form, it operates utterly free of the constraints of historical narrative. In “A

Rose for Emily,” Faulkner creates his own version of chronology, a view of time that, as Faulkner himself wrote, “has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people.” Faulkner is establishing a sense of time utterly independent of the linear progression of the clock or the calendar: the chronology of the individual narrative. He is, in a sense, offering narrative as a substitute. Truth, in “A Rose for Emily,” “is tucked away in the interstices of the narrative, in a ‘past’ that is less a historical past than a temporal zone opened up by the narrative” (Harris 172), and thus narrative succeeds where history and myth fail, drawing the two together into a subjective space that is able to encapsulate time.

In this light, the pivotal passage about time in “A Rose for Emily” may be better understood. The narrator proclaims that the old are “confusing time with its mathematical progression” in viewing the past not linearly but as “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years” (60). John Irwin offers an interpretation of this meadow:

The price which the generative moment exacts for its displacement into the past is a castration of the present through memory. In tropes such as the “golden age,” “the lost world,” “the good old days,” the past convicts the present of inadequacy through lack of priority, lack of originality, since to be a copy is to be a diminution, because the running on of time is a running down, because to come after is to be fated to repeat the life of another rather than to live one’s own. (109)

The “huge meadow” is an image of “the good old days,” an image of the past that undermines the power of the present. In this view of the past, all that comes after such a golden period has the taint of repetition; the future is not to be anticipated, and the present, the “most recent decade of years,” carries with it a sense of inadequacy. This is the view of time presented by Faulkner as that of the old and of Emily; it is likewise the view of time embodied by the Lost Cause. The problem posed by the phrase “confusing time with its mathematical progression” is much more difficult to resolve, and has resulted in various scholarly debates. Edwin Vartany encapsulates the debate over the word “confusing,” arguing that:

The narrator tells us that it is the old who equate (confuse) time with its mathematical progression. [...] Thus, unlike what West and so many others after him have assumed, the “mathematical progression” is associated with the traditional view, not with the new. In order to dissociate it from the traditional view, one would have to do some violence to the text and assume that confuse here means ‘mix up,’ ‘jumble.’ (190)

Yet it is impossible to reconcile the image of the “huge meadow” with a (linear) “mathematical progression” (“A Rose for Emily,” 60). The trope of the untouchable meadow of the past is necessarily antithetical to an objective sense of time, as it is a mythical reordering of time, which is why, in the sense of time as narrative, Emily’s dancing and courtship days are indeed contemporaneous with those of the old men. The sense of objective time indicated by their “Confederate uniforms” (60) is insignificant next to the

narrative of their past, which places the glory days of youth above the realities of the present or the ambiguous period of the bottleneck. And this paralleling of their lives, with no regard to the exact years of life and death, continues to its logical conclusion. After her death, “Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson” (49), escaping finally into the meadow that no wintry touch of decay can reach.

## II

The multiple strands of time present in “A Rose for Emily” demonstrate a deep ambivalence on the part of Faulkner. As discussed in the introduction, Faulkner brings a critical eye to the illusions formed by Lost Cause literature, which informs his conception of the working of myth. In “A Rose for Emily,” myth interacts with history in the context of narrative in a manner that is critical and deflationary of both, and it is in this sense that Faulkner demonstrates ambivalence. Myth, in the story, is a seductive and appealing way of dealing with a disappointing present, yet also a fundamentally destructive approach to time. History constitutes a different type of erasure: the relentless drive forward subordinates the past.

Although Howe dismisses “A Rose for Emily” as a “generalized parable about the decay of human sensibility from false gentility to genteel perversions” (265), the story offers an interesting entrance to Faulkner’s earliest depictions of myth, history, and time. Notions of the supremacy of the past are represented in “A Rose for Emily” in multiple ways. Time exists on two planes in the story: the town embodies the historical model that places objective progression above all else, while Emily holds to a mythical view of time that attempts to undo progression and constitutes the worship of a vanished, and perhaps nonexistent, past. Both sides struggle to reconcile themselves and each other with time, and both ultimately fail. Emily’s struggle is to stop time, to hold herself in a past that represented no loss; in her retreat from time, she comes to embody the mythical view of chronology. The problem of the town lies with integrating Emily into modern ways of thinking, as in the universal human struggle of coming to terms with the inheritance of the past, as well as reconciling the visible signs of decay with her mythologized image. The failure in the story is thus one of reconciliation, as neither mode of time is able to incorporate the other. Within the story, Emily and her town remain at odds; true success comes only at a removed level, in the form of the overall narrative, which ultimately succeeds at bringing the two into conversation.



Emily and her town are continuously set up against each other. The town embodies a historical approach to time, moving ever forward in a linear progression that discards the past as it eternally seeks the future. For the townspeople, time moves only forward, a relentless replacing of the present. Phrasing such as “when the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen” (50) and “Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her” (59), suggests the wavelike forward movement of the generations, each overcoming and erasing its predecessor. Emily stands against this flow as a stubborn remnant of the past, a timeless, time-encompassing reminder of the fundamental inability to effectively move beyond the past. Her function, in abstract, is to deflate the power of the town’s attempt at linear, progressive time; likewise, the town functions to deflate Emily’s belief in a mythical past. Their opposition reflects the antithetical nature of myth and history: each attempts to erase the efforts of the other. In a telling example of antagonism, “The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father’s death they began the work” (54). The fact that work on “paving the sidewalks,” a clearly modernizing development, begins just after Emily’s father dies, a change that Emily refuses to accept, demonstrates the antagonistic

relationship. The town is literally paving over Emily's refusal of change, attempting to bury its past as it has buried her father.

Emily is explicitly defined in the terms of a burdensome inheritance for the town: "Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (50). Her house, which comes to be an extension of her body, is an emblem of the past, "a big, squarish frame house [...] decorated with cupolas and spires [...] in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies" (49), an imposing and timeless structure. The frozen house, "set on what had once been our most select street," is gradually surrounded by "garages and cotton gins," the immutable march of progress, which "had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood," leaving "only Miss Emily's house" (49). Yet this seeming timelessness is an illusion; the signs of decay belie the house's static nobility: it "had once been white," but implicitly is no longer, and though it alone remains, it is "lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and gasoline pumps an eyesore among eyesores" (49). Emily herself is similarly described with the appearance of stability: "we had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, [...] the two of them framed by the back-flung front door" (53). Positioning Emily as a "tableau" allows no room for movement, growth, or humanity, no room for time to progress. She is

variously described as “motionless as [...] an idol” (53), resembling “those angels in colored church windows – sort of tragic and serene” (54), and “like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, [...] impervious, tranquil” (59). This frozen state culminates in the description of her as a “fallen monument” (49) after her death, as though acknowledging that she was dead in their eyes long before her actual death; even as she continued to breathe, she had already calcified into a mythical symbol of the past.

Yet Emily’s mythic imperviousness is unstable as well. Just as the house appears frozen yet is still subject to the decaying effect of time, Emily’s reality is a grotesque demonstration of corrosion. The first physical description of Emily is far different from her image:

a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motion-less water, and of that pallid hue. (51)

This is seemingly in direct opposition to the tableau image of Emily: she is fat instead of thin and wears black instead of white. But it is not a normal brand of aging; as Milinda Schwab argues, Emily “has not aged gracefully into an aristocratic matron [...] The passage of time halts, of course, only in death, and thus Emily [...] appears here as a kind of living corpse” (216-7). She has changed and expanded, time has had its effect on her, but it is as though her

life force has been frozen in time while her body itself has continued of its own accord to expand. From the town's point of view, informed by a historical mode of time's progression, Miss Emily is an "eyesore among eyesores" (49), an inheritance inescapable, burdensome, and emblematic of the decay of the past. From the perspective of progress and the ideology that change brings improvement, Emily is an irreconcilable problem, as time, for her, is not improvement but decay. To return to Tobin's argument, if Emily were truly mythical, she would be "timeless," because "Time cannot affect [it]; it can only affect time" (255); instead, she is ultimately destroyed by, and powerless against, time. In this, Emily's susceptibility to the destructive force of time, Faulkner deflates her mythical model, returning her to the realm of humanity in the refusal to accord her the true power of myth, and seeming to lend credence to the historical model of time.

### III

Yet Faulkner's ambivalence does not permit such a decisive presentation of time. Even among the increasing symbols of decay, Emily as a figure of the past possesses a disarming power and nobility. Although she is not ultimately the pinnacle of mythic power that she believes she is, the town is also not accorded complete supremacy. Irwin's notions of the "castration of the present" (109) take form in the impotence of subsequent generations in

dealing with Emily. She responds to each of their attempts to control her with an obstinate imperviousness, serving as a site of resistance to the town's sense of order and progress. She resists because she cannot move forward; they reject her because they cannot stand still. The struggle is between preservation and progress; what Emily tries to maintain is not simply her own status, but an entire social structure, one that has value for her but to the town is merely antiquated. Colonel Sartoris, who "fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron" (50) is replaced by "the next generation, with its more modern ideas" (50). Immediately, they set about modernizing the town, attempting to eradicate Sartoris' dispensation that "only a man of [his] generation and thought could have invented" (50). All professional efficiency, this generation of "mayors and aldermen" sends Emily a "tax notice," followed by a "formal letter," and finally "the mayor wrote her himself" (50). When Emily responds with only "a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out," enclosing the tax notice "without comment" (50), the government, in a state of desperation, sends a "deputation" (50) to bring her into line.

This meeting is a study in contrast. Emily's mode of resistance is one for which the town is utterly unprepared. Entering through "the door through which no visitor had passed [...in] eight or ten years," the men see a "dim hall

from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse—a close, dank smell” (50). The only real motion in the house is “a faint dust [rising] sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray” (51). Imposingly, but idiosyncratically, “a crayon portrait of Miss Emily’s father” stands “on a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace” (51), powerful in abstract yet weakened by its childish “crayon” and decaying “tarnish.” Throughout this section, there is the sense that the townspeople are entering a world utterly apart from their own. In the dark and shadow of Emily’s home, the efficiency and enthusiasm of youth is impotent. Emily, not the governing board or the remnant of fatherly control, is in power here. As though in deference to a visiting queen, the board “rose when she entered”; imposingly, “she did not ask them to sit,” but simply waits until “the spokesman came to a stumbling halt” (51). In a sort of performative utterance, in the J. L. Austin definition of the term<sup>1</sup>, when Emily says “I have no taxes in Jefferson” (51), she is not simply stating a fact but making it true in the telling, recreating a state of affairs in the context of the new generation. On the defensive, the board attempts to reestablish control, exclaiming that “We are the city authorities” and that “there is nothing on the books to show” the remittance of her taxes (51). To this, Emily responds that while “Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff” (51), she certainly does not, denying them

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<sup>1</sup> See *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin.

authority, and utters the performative “I have no taxes in Jefferson” three more times. Ending the interview, Emily commands her servant to “show these gentlemen out” (52).

A further incident that solidifies the threat that Emily poses to the town is her purchase of arsenic. Echoing the repetitive performative statements of the first scene, Emily enters with the statement “I want some poison” (56). Immediately afterwards, she repeats: “I want some poison” (56). When the druggist attempts to interject, with the town’s voice of authority, expertise, and control, Emily simply overrules him:

“What kind? For rats and such? I’d recom   ”  
 “I want the best you have. I don’t care what kind.”  
 The druggist named several. “They’ll kill anything [...] But what you want is   ”  
 “Arsenic,” Miss Emily said. “Is that a good one?”  
 “Is...arsenic? Yes, ma’am. But what you want   ”  
 “I want arsenic.” (56)

The repetitions of Emily’s “I want” statements serve to undermine the druggist’s authority, literally interrupting his recommendations and supplanting them with her own. She cuts off each of his attempts to prescribe her desires (“I’d recom   ”, “what you want is   ”, “But what you want   ”) with a steadfast knowledge of her own plan. The druggist, already conceding to her victory, echoes the desperate plea of the deputation, telling her “Why, of course. [...] If that’s what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for” (56). Refusing his attempt to “look [...] down on her,”

she simply “stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic” (56). When she returns home, the narrator imagines, she finds “written on the box, under the skull and bones: ‘for rats’” (56), the druggist’s final concession. Faulkner allows Emily nobility here: the flesh of her face is “strained across the temples and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse keeper’s face ought to look,” and she holds her head “erect, her face like a strained flag” (56), both suggestive of the strains of responsibility and fortitude, and the second a sort of play on the ‘unflagging’ nature of her spirit, as well as an ironic moment: it is the druggist, not Emily, who flies the white flag of surrender. And once again, the narrator notes, “she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before” (52), suggesting an eternal struggle between Emily and the town, a battle that occurs once every generation, and which Emily has always won.

#### IV

Emily’s resistant power, however, is not absolute. Each of her actions functions as a desperate attempt to return to a vanished past, a vain striving for the impossibility of true myth. It is not quite, as Frank Littler argues, that “Time for Emily stands still” (82), but that Emily wishes it to. The static face that Emily presents to the town is the result of her attempts to halt time’s



progression; she does so because, as Milinda Schwab argues, “for her change will always involve loss. She must prevent time from passing if she is to hold on to what matters to her” (215). Her struggle takes the form of denial, denial that time has passed, that the town around her has changed, and that she herself has changed. This denial is a source of power for Emily: it undermines the town’s authority, which is based on the degree to which it *has* changed. As a figure trying desperately to hold onto the past, Emily correlates well with Minnie Cooper in Faulkner’s “Dry September” (1931), who, when young, “had a slender nervous body and a sort of hard vivacity which had enabled her for a time to ride upon the crest of the town’s social life” (“Dry September,” 67), but who was also “the last to realize that she was losing ground; that those among whom she had been a little brighter and louder flame than any other were beginning to learn the pleasure of snobbery male and retaliation female” (“Dry September,” 67).

Minnie’s attempt to return to a position of envy takes the decidedly dark and deeply Southern form of accusing a black man of raping her; she sacrifices his life for a questionable return to respectability. Emily, similarly clinging to a questionable past, maintains the illusion of being impervious to time only by retreating utterly from the company of others. In this way, both Minnie and Emily function in much the way the proponents of the Lost Cause were: striving to hold onto a past that perhaps never was, trading existence in

the realm of *is* for an illusory *was*. Emily's position as fading nobility seems tenuous as well: the narrator's assertion that "people in our town [...] believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were" (53) suggests a jealous desire to destroy superiority, but also introduces a hint of doubt about the family's actual noble past. Nostalgia has a blurring effect on the past: but in the end, in Faulkner's presentation, the falsity of Emily's conception of the past is not the locus of failure; instead, it is her sacrifice of the present on the gilded altar of the past that brings defeat.

Emily's attempt to control time is symbolized by the watch she wears when she is first introduced: she has "a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt," which the visiting men later identify as an "invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain" (51). To her manner of thinking, she has time, as Schwab notes, literally in her pocket (216). Yet its loud, intrusive ticking from within her pocket demonstrates time's unending ability to overpower attempts to control it. Just as Quentin's destruction of the watch fails to eradicate the past in *The Sound and the Fury*, Emily's chain fails to control the progression of time. Yet her desperate attempt is lent empathy by the violence of her father's success at driving away suitors: "her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip" (53), "as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and furious to die" (58).

After his death, she works to turn back the clock to her thwarted days of courtship. Just after her father's death, the town's ladies come to call; Miss Emily appears, "dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead" (54). She stoically ignores this indication of change for three days, after which "she broke down" (54), allowing her father's burial. But this instance of acquiescence is not final: her father remains an abiding presence, as on a "tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father" (51), even outlasting Emily herself, as at her funeral there is the "crayon face of her father musing profoundly over the bier" (60). Clearly, the past is not quite as buried as the town believes.

After her father's death, Emily seems to have managed to turn the clock back to her courtship days. Emily next appears with her hair "cut short, making her look like a girl" (54), and begins courting the only man, presumably, who has not been driven away by her father: Homer Barron, a Northerner, with whom Emily begins "driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays" (55). But the town quickly begins to gossip, attempting in its ambivalent way to both tear down and build up her mythical status: "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner" and "even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige*" (55), demonstrating a need to hold her up as nobility, even as "the whispering

began” (55). With shocked glee, the townspeople whisper: “Do you suppose it’s really so?” [...] ‘Of course it is. What else could...’” (55), suggesting Emily’s impropriety while also elliptically demonstrating an unwillingness to actually discuss it, foreshadowing the hesitation present at the story’s final unveiling.

Aware of the gossiping, Emily takes an active role in her own narrative. In purchasing the “man’s toilet set in silver” and the “complete outfit of men’s clothing” (57), which leads the town to conclude that “She is married” (57), Emily attempts to reconcile herself with what might have been, returning to courtship as though she can actually rewrite the story of her life. As Schwab argues, her murder of Homer is the desperate attempt to hold on to a narrative that is slipping away from her, an “extreme example of her need to control change” and “the only way [...] to arrest his activity and to suspend his vitality” (216). With “nothing left,” she, as the narrator perceptively states, is forced “to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (54), the past that is both her lifeblood and her death. The effort, of course, fails: her carefully constructed world betrays her in its decay. Her hair grows “grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray” (58), her servant becomes “grayer and more stooped” (59), and her house, that “had once been white,” lifts “its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps” (49). Eventually, Emily dies in “the house filled with dust and shadows” (59), “gray head propped on a pillow yellow and

moldy with age” (60). And time comes to collect on its debt, in the form of the “long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, [that] had cuckolded him” (61), and not only him but Emily as well, in her attempt to control time as well as the narrative that makes up her myth. The passage of time, which betrays Emily into the humility and deflation that is death, serves to puncture the mythical image that she and the town have built up. When Emily, the town’s “tradition,” “duty,” and “hereditary obligation” (50), dies as a “fallen monument” (49), Faulkner has effectively deflated the myth of the South: the monuments of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the essays perpetrating Southern myths, the collective sentimentalizing of a dark past have been proven false. At the heart of the myth of Emily, and indeed of the South, lies only a monstrous truth.

Emily’s apparent success in resisting the impositions of time undermines the town’s obsession with progress and the future. Accordingly, the narrator and his community constantly seek to destroy Emily’s status and division from them, obsessively driven to pull away the mask of her myth, and yet when they finally succeed, the revelation of filth and humanity is as much on them as on her, and it is not a moment of victory but of utter defeat. When Emily’s house begins to smell, the town takes delight in “another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons” (52). Her family’s claims to aristocracy are jealously regarded as having “held

themselves a little too high for what they really were” (53), and her failure to marry leaves the town “not pleased exactly, but vindicated” (54) in their belief of her fallen status. But these small victories do not seem to bring her down to their level, but instead raise her higher: “She carried her head high enough even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness” (55-6). She is consciously the last Grierson, an immovable and irreconcilable marker of the past, enduring in both glory and horror. For the town, she is an obstinate signpost of the past, a letter in faded ink that resists all modern attempts at erasure.

As Emily becomes more reticently mythical, her house becomes the only tangible proof of her existence in the town. After her father’s death, “her front door remained closed,” except for the lessons, which are mere gestures of respect towards an institution, as students are sent “with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent to church on Sundays” (59). When even this empty gesture ends, “the front door closed upon the last [student] and remained closed for good” (59), and likewise Emily herself is never again seen by the town, passing as the house does “from generation to generation – dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil” (59).

## V

The story's final section is the key to meaning-making within the rest of the story: its ultimate discoveries illuminate and undermine the mythical elements of Emily's life, as well as draw together past, present, and future. Emily only becomes vulnerable after her death, when her house, and the secret life she has carried on within it, becomes accessible to the town. Where the first section ends with Emily's servant showing the Board of Aldermen out, the fifth and final section begins with the opposite: "The Negro met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in" (60), after which he disappears forever out the back door. The home that has been her site of resistance and retreat from the world is invaded by the prying eyes of the town. Emily's house is gradually overrun, first by the ladies, who come "hushed [and] sibilant" but with "quick, curious glances," and then by the cousins and the entire town, who come to "look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers" (60). Finally, the upper room is introduced: "Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced" (60). The "already" implies an awareness on the part of the town of a grand, hidden secret; the "region [...] no one had seen" which "would have to be forced" is suggestive of rape, in the metaphorical sense of the intrusion of the narrator, the town, the author, and the reader into the private sphere of Emily's self. There is a

hesitation here, a simultaneous desire to satisfy curiosity and breach the inner sanctum of Emily's life and an unwillingness to pull back the mask, a premonition of the horror that awaits. But this hesitation passes: once "Miss Emily was decently in the ground," the room is reached through the "violence of breaking down the door" (60). Inside awaits the abrupt deflation of myth. The scene is taken in with the unwillingness of shock: first the "acrid pall as of the tomb" that is "furnished as for a bridal," a marriage of love and death; then the dead man, the culmination of the symbols of decay, in the "long sleep that outlasts love, [...] rotted [...] inextricable from the bed in which he lay"; and finally, and most importantly, the presence of Emily herself, in the "long strand of iron-gray hair" on the pillow next to him (60-1). The importance of the chronology of narrative emerges here, ending as it does in this climactic moment: there can be no interpretation or reaction on the part of the narrator that would adequately respond to the discovery; instead, the reader is asked to return to the story, to review Emily's life in the context of this shattering information. This is a moment of epiphany and deflation: in an instant, the signs of decay throughout the story join with the images of mythical immortality, destroying the illusion, pondering the nature of appearance and myth, and implicating the town in the horror of distortion.

The narrative ultimately emerges as a viable mode of chronology, offering a more subjective structure, formed not around the generalized rules



of either history or myth. Where history has to follow a straight line, moving unstoppably and eternally from past to present to future, and its antithesis, myth, has to present a static front, appearing and reappearing unchanged in all parts of time, narrative has the freedom to move, as Faulkner said, “not only in space but in time too,” as the subject requires. This can be seen in all parts of the story’s structure, overriding both the linear progression of the town and the static freezing of Emily. The story begins with the statement “When Miss Emily died” (49); on the next page it skips back: “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition” (50). Describing Emily’s defeat of the Board of Aldermen, the narrative establishes the pattern of challenge and defeat, skipping abruptly back to her defeat of “their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (52), which was “two years after her father’s death and a short time after her sweetheart [...] had deserted her” (52). Despite these indications of linear time (“before,” “after,” “before”), the structure works intentionally to disrupt linearity, lending credence to Sartre’s dismissal of “chronology.” The story of the smell comes later in Emily’s life, as it is clearly the result of Homer Barron’s murder, yet it comes at this early stage in the story in order to demonstrate not the fact of the murder, which as of yet has no significance, but instead the nature of the relationship between Emily and her town.

Further, the narrator discusses the way in which Emily “demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had

wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness,” and immediately afterward transitions to the anecdote of Emily’s poison purchase: “Like when she bought the rat poison,” which also includes an indication of time: “That was over a year after they had begun to say ‘Poor Emily,’ and while the two female cousins were visiting her” (55-6). These discursive shifts indicate a move in time but in a way that subordinates it to narrative: the objective order of events is less important than the portent they hold for Emily’s character and development. Milinda Schwab argues that this “rearrangement of the sequence of events reinforces the imagery of the watch that ticks repeatedly but does not move forward, for what is new to us, we soon learn, is not new to Emily” (217), and is likewise not new to the town. We therefore come to understand Emily in the context of a narrative arc that explicitly separates itself from the chronology of clocks or the anti-chronology of myth. Narrative is always a reordering, but it is often set up in a way that defers to linear time as the superior structure of reality. The work Faulkner does in “A Rose for Emily,” however, is to demonstrate how the deliberate shaping of a story is fundamentally distinct from both myth and history.

Emily can neither be encapsulated by the town’s historical view of her gradual decay, nor by her mythical view of the eternal nature of herself and the past, as existing in, as the story says, “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches” (60). The town in “A Rose for Emily” represents a

structured sense of progress, one that moves unstoppably forward, while Emily herself is the embodiment of a mythical sense of time, one in which progression is halting and static, moving slowly and then leaping forward erratically. The power of narration, Faulkner's alternative to both history and myth, lies in its ability to reconcile the two, to draw them together into an entirely different discourse, a subjective progression of time. The final section of the story is neither the victory of myth nor of history, but is instead a joining of both through narrative: it is the final moment in the narrative arc of Emily and the town, the climactic reconciliation and destruction of two modes of thought and time. Through the freed structure of narrative, Faulkner mediates the tension between myth and history, establishing a conception of chronology that centers on subjective, rather than objective, time. Emily is the obvious mythmaker in the story, and yet the town's attempts to redefine her narrative bring it solidly into the realm of myth, for all its historical, progressive focus. Both Emily and the town ultimately fail to bring their modes of progression into fruition; what dominates instead is a sense of time centered on the individual yet simultaneously universal, incarnations of which appear in Faulkner's later works. Faulkner's time is simply movement, and thus can only be measured through the subjective progression of self, independent from calendars and ticking second hands.

## NEGOTIATING MYTH IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*



*Together on the stoop they hammered together a myth. Because it wasn't born from fear of thunder, dreams, astonishment at how the crops kept dying after harvest and coming up again every spring, or anything else very permanent, only a temporary interest, a spur-of-the-moment tumescence, it was a myth rickety and transient as the bandstands and the sausage-pepper booths of Mulberry Street.*

THOMAS PYNCHON  
V.

*One describes a tale best by telling the tale. You see? The way one describes a story, to oneself or to the world, is by telling the story. It is a balancing act and it is a dream. The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless. The tale is the map that is the territory.*

NEIL GAIMAN  
*American Gods*

*It was the last that remained of a past whose annihilation had not taken place because it was still in a process of annihilation, consuming itself from within, ending at every moment but never ending its ending.*

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ  
*One Hundred Years of Solitude*

## I

Considering the prominent role of chronology in William Faulkner's works as a whole, it is surprising how little has been written on the Chronology and Genealogy he appended to the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Among those critics who have taken particular note of them, there is a division in the view of their literary value. Lyn Gartrell Levins argues that by including the listed information, "the author makes it evident that the Sutpen story did 'happen,' that the events of his life have behind them the firm foundation of fact" (35). As in "A Rose for Emily," the temptation remains to reorganize and clarify the novel's events; making such an attempt requires the belief that there is a 'correct' order that can be founded in 'fact.' In this light may be seen one of the more interesting editorial choices made on a 1986 edition of *Absalom, Absalom!*, to correct the Chronology and Genealogy to align more fully with the dates and facts of the novel. This is in itself an act of interpretation: it requires, as Joseph Urgo argues, the belief that "the evidence suggests that these pieces should be treated as aids to the reader of a very complex novel" (198). Only interpreting Faulkner's intention in appending these as utterly nonliterary would allow such a deliberate reworking of the novel's material. This kind of authorial hand-holding seems unlikely for Faulkner, who once responded to a complaint that his writing could not be understood even if read two or three times with the unsympathetic advice:

“Read it four times” (Art of Fiction No. 12).

There are more literary interpretations of the appended information, however, which open interesting spaces in the novel’s discussion. One such interpretation is that it constitutes another strand of the narrative, a final narrator. Urgo offers this suggestion:

That is, in a novel full of contending narrative voices that create and discard ‘fact’ according to the needs of their narrative, do the Chronology and Genealogy provide yet another voice, a putatively factual one (because in a form, a list that at least presents itself as factual because it seems to have no crosses to bear, no interpretive agenda to advance) against which readers can and should measure the complications of the preceding pages?<sup>9</sup> (197)

Had it appeared at the novel’s beginning, the Chronology might have functioned more pointedly as a guide. Freed from the burden of interpretation and comfortable in the knowledge of how it will end, a reader would be left free to spectate. But the diligent reader will come to it only after weaving through an increasingly complex set of narratives, only after forming his or her own idea of the chronology. Coming upon the proffered chronology thus with one already shaped would seem to undermine the absolute authority. Having worked hard to form an idea of what is going on, this reader has become too much an author to concede full authority, even to the man whose name is on the cover. The novel’s pages are littered with failed authors, people whose narrative contributions ultimately fall flat. Why, then, should the reader assume that Faulkner has greater authority? The end materials call

into question the ability of an author to claim full authority, as Robert Dale Parker argues: “Thus on the one hand the appended materials seem to stake claim to some superior because authorial authority, yet on the other hand they wave a comically ironic banner of fallibility, of the author’s susceptibility to the same barriers of circumstance and medium that make all authority suspect in *Absalom, Absalom!*” (192). In granting full authority to the information at the end, a reader will discover unaccountable errors and contradictions, which Parker argues demonstrate that the “part of the book that claims greater authority actually has less. [...] If this ostensibly more reliable part of the book is indeed less reliable, then maybe such an irony is a deliberate or even an accidental, coincidence, but for all that still telling part of the overall implication of the book” (193). There is much to consider in a novel about novels that questions the authorial role, emphasizes its frequent failures, and undermines each of its own assertions. However, the uncertainty that is so emphatically present in the novel’s end material does not begin there; instead, it serves to illuminate and reinforce ideas already spanning not only *Absalom, Absalom!*, but also the broader body of Faulkner’s works.

Faulkner’s works are often characterized by a deliberate working across time and space. It is difficult to look at a single piece of Faulkner’s work without taking into account the whole of it. His texts consciously ignore the constraints of chronology by continuously referring to and commenting upon

each other, operating not simply within the same fictional county, but also within the same mindset, the same timeless universe of fiction. Through this continual cross-commenting and reordering, Faulkner willfully discredits the chronological tyranny of time. For instance, when Wash Jones builds a coffin for Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the scene draws upon the relentless, unsentimental pragmatism of Cash, building his dying mother's coffin outside her window in *As I Lay Dying*, chronologically later but published earlier. And, more significantly, Quentin's suicide in 1929's *The Sound and the Fury* casts a shadow over his entire existence in *Absalom, Absalom!* It is, in a literal sense, the struggle that precedes and explains his suicide, but in another sense it is the aftermath, the struggle to come to terms with a culture that has already been destroyed, a void that has already swallowed him. Many critics have noted the focus on failure in Faulkner's works; applied to *Absalom, Absalom!*, this becomes a biting criticism of the South that unflinchingly illuminates its foundational failings, within a framework of inevitable collapse. The novel is predicated upon failure, big and small: Millie's failure to bear a son, Sutpen's failure to found a dynasty, the South's failure to win the war. And beyond that, each of the narratives ends in failure, from Miss Rosa's wild fantasies to Shreve's Northerner incomprehension, and of course culminating in doomed Quentin. The failures here are pointed: the myth-making process can never be completed or resolved, but is instead a continuous and eternal,



and therefore no character can be permitted total success. If myth is something that works against time, as I claimed in the previous chapter, then it follows that the narrative disordering of chronology is a function of its reliance on myth. The mythic structures within the novel preclude the possibility of a straightforward progression of time; the disordering thus becomes a symptom of mythic focus and structure, as well as a piece of the failure that characterizes the novel as a whole.

## II

Before looking more closely at *Absalom, Absalom!*, a more extensive analysis of myth is warranted. The framework of myth is a complex one. The word itself has no unified meaning: as William Marderness notes, popular culture defines it as a widely held conception that is inherently false, while an academic definition would be a socially constructed narrative used to explain origins and natural events, as well as enforce social rules, as in classical Greek or Roman tales or tribal origin myths (15). A final incarnation, Marderness continues, is living myth, the set of perspectives and values that delimit culture and “represent the mythic horizons that define reality for us” (15). All of these conceptions of myth are variations on the same theme: myth is the creation and substantiation of a cultural belief, founded not in the concrete realm of fact or figure, nor historically corroborated, but instead verified by

mass cultural acceptance and belief. These beliefs function to create a narrative of the past that justifies, corroborates, and controls the present. Part of the OED definition of “true” is “consistent with fact; agreeing with reality” (OED “True, *adj.*” 3a). What is false is simply inconsistent with fact, therefore, in that they are historically unfounded, and only subjectively “true.” Myth might, in fact, be termed “fictional”; a description made all the more appropriate by its connection to its narrative structure. The role of narrative within this framework is more directly noted by Paul Valéry, who broadly defines myth as “the term for everything which exists and subsists only on the basis of language” (199).

Examining the role of myth within Faulkner’s works is by no means an untapped field. Simply perusing the titles of Faulkner criticism will yield a broad range of myth conception, from Caroline Garnier’s “Temple Drake’s Rape and the Myth of the Willing Victim” to Scott Chancellor’s “William Faulkner’s Hebrew Bible: Empire and the Myths of Origin.” Yet much of the critical work surrounding the use of myth in *Absalom, Absalom!* overemphasizes the roles of already formed mythologies. Observe, for instance, a statement in Joseph Reed’s criticism that concisely illustrates the limited manner in which many critics look at myth: “As myth [the novel] is certainly a version of the American Dream. Sutpen is too heroic and too American not to fall into the shapes and dimensions of that rutted category”

(146). Viewing myths as a “ruttled category” undermines any true analysis of the form, focusing the attention on the particular ideology, instead of the larger structure. George O’Donnell’s essay “Faulkner’s Mythology” starts out promisingly: “his novels are, primarily, a series of related myths (or aspects of a single myth),” but then limits those myths to having *all* been “built around the conflict between traditionalism and the antitraditional modern world in which it is immersed” (49). Likewise, Lennart Bjork’s “Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” imposes a classical framework of Greek, Christian, and Hebrew myths, claiming that “Faulkner invites the reader to see nearly all the protagonists of the story in roles that are applicable to both the Greek and the Hebrew cultures,” calling upon ancient mythic archetypes in order to “enlarge the moral framework of the novel” (Bjork 197-8). The essay concludes sentimentally that “As a true tragic hero [Sutpen] evokes pity rather than hatred” (Bjork 203). Bjork thus implies that Faulkner’s works rely upon mythic structures as a shortcut, a readymade moral framework couched in recognizable ancient archetypes. Such an approach ignores the irony and criticism inherent within the work, as well as the creative process of mythmaking and its attendant authorial anxiety.

Jeanne Follansbee emphasizes the creative process of myth-making, introducing the concept of negotiation and bringing the criticism into the realm of social criticism. She argues:

by structuring the novel as a series of conversations that reveal Sutpen's enduring appeal as they transmit Sutpen's story to successive generations of white Southerners, *Absalom* depicts the constitutive role of storytelling in constructing a national myth. (Follansbee)

Follansbee describes the novel's narrative as a serialized dialogue, a set of discursive moments that reestablish Sutpen's myths and allow them to survive for "successive generations." *Absalom*'s fractured narrative structure makes evident the role of narrative in myth-making, in the process demonstrating the seductive social power of myth. Similarly, Reed's essay ultimately dismisses the particulars of myths to focus on their complicated position within the narrative, thus offering a much more persuasive argument about Faulkner's use of myth:

Myth is less important here than failures to realize myth: the distance between the intention and the realization of myth, the distance between the organic myth which all the characters develop together and the private myth of each, the distance between the substance of myth and the process of making it. (146-7)

Reed, unlike the other critics, notes the multiplicity of myths within the novel that makes attempting to prove the dominance of one an exercise in futility. He therefore subordinates these individual myths to the process of mythmaking, creating the possibility of a myth's failure. Myths are successful, according to this model, when they become what he terms the "organic myth" (which in fact seems anything but organic, given the complicated process by which it defines itself). An individual can create "private myth," but it has no

value until it is corroborated; just as history is verified by historical evidence, a narrated myth is verified when it is read, understood, and perpetuated by others. In this light, *Absalom, Absalom!* consists of a continual process of individual creation and group acceptance or rejection of myths. Whereas “A Rose for Emily” leaves its narrative more unified in order to focus on internal chronology, *Absalom, Absalom!* turns its full attention to the complicated process of narrative creation.

This process of negotiation is evident early in the novel. Quentin ponders why Miss Rosa has called him over: “*Its because she wants it told, he thought, so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War*” (11). Such a statement might be taken to represent the drive of each of the novel’s narrators, and perhaps even of the novel as a whole. Miss Rosa wants Quentin to carry *her view* of the South’s failure in the Civil War, which focuses on the demon-vision of Sutpen, into the general mythology. The Civil War, that focal point of Southern history and lamentation, is the most definitive proof of the failure of the Southern structure; the stories in *Absalom, Absalom!* set out to explain to those who were not there to see it “why God let us lose the War.” Flipping the traditional origin narrative, these attempt to explain a culture’s destruction. They undermine a conception of objective truth, but also destroy the illusion of

unity and organic development in the grand Southern myth, the mirage of a glorious past of peaceful class, race, and gender relations, so that such deceptive nostalgia might not draw in another generation of backward-looking Southerners. And the power of this act extends beyond the South, beyond the Lost Cause, and beyond Sutpen: it is most resoundingly a stark examination of the process by which myths are made and destroyed.

### III

At the center of the novel's myths are the intertwined histories of Sutpen and the South. Their stories run in parallel throughout, and the telling and retelling of the failure of Sutpen's family serves to explain, interpret and describe the failure of the South. At the center of this is a passage that parallels the two histories:

Because the time now approached (it was 1860, even Mr Coldfield probably admitted that war was unavoidable) when the destiny of Sutpen's family which for twenty years now had been like a lake welling from quiet springs into a quiet valley and spreading, rising almost imperceptibly and in which the four members of it floated in sunny suspension, felt the first subterranean movement toward the outlet, the gorge which would be the land's catastrophe too, and the four peaceful swimmers turning suddenly to face one another, not yet with alarm or distrust but just alert, feeling the dark set, none of them yet at that point where man looks about at his companions in disaster and thinks *When will I stop trying to save them and save only myself?* and not even aware that that point was approaching.  
(74)

The parallel between Sutpen's family and the South is here explicit: in 1860,

both war and familial disaster approach, inevitably and welling up from the cracks in the foundation of both structures. There is a clear connection to Sutpen's original family, descending into the valley to live right next to a river, a quiet valley where disastrous destiny has been welling for twenty years or, more likely, longer. The "gorge" which will destroy the family will also be "the land's catastrophe," rising and spreading from the "quiet springs" that exist deep in the valley's foundation. Here is the necessary culmination of the novel's various myths, each of which function to explain the inevitability of the South's fall.

Not all critics agree on the value of aligning Sutpen with the South. Richard Poirier is notable among these: he argues that, although Faulkner "clearly recognizes the evil tendencies of the plantation system," "Sutpen acts as a wholly 'modern' element" who simply "abstracts those evil tendencies from the controlling fiber of the community and its traditions" for his own ambitious purposes (18-9). According to Poirier, the cause of Sutpen's excess and failure lies in his disconnect with the traditions and ideologies of the community that might have limited him. And yet this seems a rather sympathetic view of the Southern community that Faulkner is so often critical of. Sutpen is 'modern' only in the sense that he enters as an outsider: without the benefit of a familial fortune or illustrious ancestry, he is forced to use whatever tools he can. He seeks to enter Southern society fully formed, a

member of an ‘ancient’ planter aristocracy; his failure is bound up with the failure of the planter class as a whole, founded as it is on fundamental flaws. Poirier goes on to argue that a connection between “the character of Sutpen and that of the social system he exploits” (19) is “factitious,” reaffirming the interpretation of Sutpen as an ambitious and driven man who seeks only to “exploit” the system. This seems at odds with Sutpen’s desperate grasps at respectability and legacy, in his construction of Sutpen’s Hundred, marriage to Ellen, and attempts at sons. There are easier avenues to wealth, and it therefore seems clear enough that Sutpen’s design is a lasting and remembered place within the Southern aristocracy.

Sutpen’s earliest connection to the South comes quite late in the novel. In Sutpen’s tale, told through General Compson, he begins in a sort of Eden, a land without wealth, racism, and inequality. He is blissfully unaware of the ideology that will come to make up the social structure of the South: “he didn’t even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (221). The narrative aptly describes the beginnings of a myth:

When he was a child he didn’t listen to the vague and cloudy tales of Tidewater splendor that penetrated even his mountains because then he could not understand what the people who told about it meant, and when he became a boy he didn’t listen to them because there was nothing in sight to compare and gauge



the tales by and so give the words life and meaning, and no chance that he ever would understand what they meant because he was too busy doing the things that boys do; and when he got to be a youth and curiosity itself exhumed the tales which he did not know he had heard and speculated on, he was interested and would have liked to see the places once, but without envy or regret. (222)

The myths of Tidewater begin as “vague and cloudy tales,” lacking reality, “life and meaning,” dead enough to permit being “exhumed” by sheer youthful interest. And yet they possess a strange, unsettling power. Sutpen does not even realize that “he had heard and speculated on” the stories, and yet they lodge themselves deep in his mind: he cannot understand or apply them without coming into contact with them, and yet they possess a kind of dormant power that enthralls and interests long before it comes to actually exist. The passage concludes that “he had hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it” (222), and yet it is clearly that the workings of this world have already ingrained themselves into his mind. Sutpen is not creating a myth, but is instead slowly buying into it; a myth is merely a falsity without corroboration.

The family’s journey is thus appropriately described as a fall: it is a fall from the innocence of the rural highlands into the complex moral corruption and cooperation of the lowlands that likewise parallels Sutpen’s maturation.

And now the whole passel of them from the father through the grown daughters down to one that couldn’t even walk yet, slid back down out of the mountains and skating in a kind of

accelerating and sloven and inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam on a flooded river moving by some perverse automotivation such as inanimate objects sometimes show, backward against the very current of the stream. (223)

But there is also a perversity to this fall, a fall that is both “accelerating” and “inert,” that moves “down out of the mountains” but also “backward against the very current.” These contradictions allow for a complex view of the effect of this fall: the family is moving forward, moving into a space where Sutpen might have the opportunity to grow beyond the limitations of the high, impoverished mountains, and yet it is not entirely a step forward. Instead, there is a sense that it is a moral regression, a corruption of the innocent purity of Sutpen’s childhood.

The final stage of Sutpen’s acceptance of Southern ideology comes as the family enters society. Once again it is the environment, not its inhabitants, that acts,

bringing into and then removing from their sober static country astonishment the strange faces and places, both faces and places—doggeries and taverns now become hamlets, hamlets now become villages, villages now towns and the country flattened out now with good roads and fields and niggers working in the fields while white men sat fine horses and watched them, and more fine horses and men in fine clothes. (225)

And so, in the midst of the beautiful travel imagery, the structures of civilization begin to form. General Compson continues, “That’s the way he got it. He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones,

but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men” (226) — a difference that will haunt and drive the remainder of his life. His design originates from the full assimilation of this distinction: he accepts the myth of laborless gentility to the point of wanting to embody it.

Interestingly, this fall also unmoors Sutpen’s character from time, distancing him as well as the narrative from the simple structure of chronology. With no point of origin, Sutpen’s life can no longer proceed in a straightforward manner: “He was now weeks and months, maybe a year, since he became confused about his age and was never able to straighten it out again” (227). The phrase “straighten it out” is an idiom, but it also further emphasizes the looping, crooked structure of Sutpen’s narrated life and the novel as a whole. This stuttering confusion will recall Milinda Schwab’s description of “the watch that ticks repeatedly but does not move forward” (217). Along the same lines, it becomes unclear “whether it was that winter and then spring and then summer overtook and passed them on the road or whether they overtook and passed in slow succession the seasons as they descended or whether it was the descent itself that did it and they not progressing parallel in time but descending perpendicularly through temperature and climate” (224). The seasons seem to exist independently of the family’s progress, as though spring and summer were merely objects along the road, pushing past them or standing still, but moving in no discernible

pattern or pace. As in the whole of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the working of time becomes “confused,” and no one is ever “able to straighten it out again.”

The time in which the family travels, the narrative continues, is:

an attenuation from a kind of furious inertness and patient immobility while they sat in the cart outside the doors of doggeries and taverns and waited for the father to drink himself insensible, to a sort of dreamy and destinationless locomotion [...] during which they did not seem to progress at all but just to hang suspended while the earth itself altered, flattened and broadened out of the mountain cove where they had all been born, mounting, rising about them like a tide. (224-5)

Here again is that oddity: the state of immobility seems somehow more active, being both “furious” and “patient,” while the act of moving is “dreamy and destinationless,” a sort of inaction that is supplanted by the movement of the earth around them. They “did not seem to progress at all”; it is instead the “earth itself” that “altered, flattened and broadened,” and, reminiscent of the earlier lake imagery, “rising about them like a tide.” The true progress is not in time or topography, though, but instead in the gradual awareness of social structures.

This section of narrative offers a necessary lead-in to the crucial story of Sutpen’s origin, which is not of his birth or family but the moment at which he comes to understand the full workings of Southern society. It is an almost allegorical, impressionistic description of the discovery of corruption in the world, the moments at which Sutpen learns that those “vague and cloudy tales” (222) have substance and appeal. The myths become real for Sutpen in a

way that allows him to so fully take on his undying quest: he is the character who most fully swallows Southern mythology, and who most fully works to fit into it. Sutpen is an outsider, entering a society already developed, being first confused, then repudiated, and finally wooed by its rules, contracts, and implicit understandings. Sutpen, as General Compson says, “discovered his innocence” (226), by discovering the corruption of the Southern world. What Compson terms “innocence” is Sutpen’s separation from the society, his ignorance of its customs and distance from its complex codes of immorality. Using this terminology clearly refers to a religious sense of morality, subtly indicting the society Sutpen enters. Simply being able to *understand* the Southern hierarchy requires moral compromise and corruption. The tragedy, therefore, of Sutpen’s lifelong mission to insert himself into and triumph over that society, is that doing so corrupts him. Sutpen has swallowed Southern mythology whole; in doing so, he dooms himself to failure.

Flaws in the process of myth-establishment can be seen in a series of narrative moments scattered through the novel. The period of Ellen’s flowering demonstrates an aspect of Faulkner’s social criticism of the South, but also serves both literally and thematically to bring Judith’s complexities to light. Just as Sutpen’s family comes to stand for the whole of the South, Ellen’s desperation can be a microcosm for Southern womanhood.<sup>2</sup> This is

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<sup>2</sup> See Lillian Smith’s discussion of “Sacred Womanhood” in *Killers of the Dream*.

the sphere into which Ellen gives herself; she becomes a grotesquely hyperbolic vision of this ideal. Ellen has removed herself from the world's burdens, embracing her role completely as a wealthy planter's wife. It is "as though she had succeeded at last in evacuating not only the puritan heritage but reality itself; [...] escaped at last into a world of pure illusion in which, safe from any harm, she moved, lived, from attitude to attitude against her background of chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate" (69). She has soaked up the idea of being a lady: when she shops, she is "gracious and assured and talking the most complete nonsense, speaking her bright set meaningless phrases out of the part which she had written for herself" (69). Out of the ashes of a failed reality, she rises "like the swamp-hatched butterfly, unimpeded by weight of stomach and all the heavy organs of suffering and experience, into a perennial bright vacuum of arrested sun" (69-70). Having lost all connection to the past and to reality, she has "escaped reality into a bland region people by dolls" (70). Passive and doll-like, Ellen becomes dependent upon her status: she is "not contemptuous, not even patronizing exactly, but with a bland and even childlike imposition upon the sufferance or good manners or sheer helplessness of the men" (73), content to rely on the structures of chivalry.

The illusion cannot last. Her false summer is always doomed to end: her sudden brilliance is "a forced blooming" (72), a scene upon which "the

stage manager [...] was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one” (73). Like Sutpen, it is her embrace of the role set out by myth that dooms her; she offers a tragic example of the futility characterizing Southern womanhood. Ellen’s glittering failures serve to illustrate the dangers of accepting flawed social myths, shifting from acceptance to perpetuation. Ellen works to pass on the narrative of Southern gentility, with uneven results: “It sounded like a fairy tale when Ellen told it later to your grandmother, only it was a fairy tale written for and acted by a fashionable ladies’ club. But to Miss Rosa it must have been authentic, not only plausible but justified” (76). To Quentin’s grandmother, as to Quentin, Ellen’s myth is simple delusion. But to Miss Rosa it is, for the moment, an “authentic,” if temporary, success of myth, a “fairy tale” brought to life through Ellen’s narrative efforts.

#### IV

If the preceding narrative moments have pointed to flaws and failures in both the Southern social structure and the mythmaking process, Charles Bon’s last letter to Judith brings these issues to a head, capturing the moments just after the Civil War, the South’s first shuddering breaths in the wake of defeat. The paper, he writes, is “*salvaged (stolen if you will) from the gutted mansion of a ruined aristocrat; and written upon in the best of stove polish*

*manufactured not twelve months ago in a New England factory*” (129). This letter therefore encapsulates the end of the Civil War: the ruin of the South and the broken victory of the North. The “guttled mansion” necessarily evokes the remains of Sutpen’s own plantation, and the plantation system of the old South; the stove polish, northern industry. Bon describes coming upon the “*ten plump defenseless sutlers’ wagons*” with “*box after beautiful box after beautiful box stenciled each with that U. and that S. which for four years now has been to us the symbol of the spoils which belong to the vanquished*” (130). This is an interesting concept, of war spoils belonging not to the *vanquisher* but to the “vanquished,” an odd moment in which failure is simultaneously success. This “box after beautiful box after beautiful box” becomes a stand-in for a piece of paper or a book, a container for myth and memory. Jehlen argues that the letter becomes proof of the historical reality behind Miss Rosa and General Compson’s tales; Bon’s “writing made the oral legend tangible” (72). But the letter acts as more than simply another piece of evidence: through it, Bon enters the narrative process, creating his own version of the legend. Inside these beautiful boxes, on these thin pages, lies stove polish, which becomes his ink, his narrative voice, and his final message to Judith. The tools of his narrative hold heavy literary and cultural significance. The act of writing is a form of containment; beautiful and lyrical certainly, but with a specified purpose of control.



All of this build up balances equally with the actual meat of Bon's narrative, the second and final paragraph of his letter. In order to survive, he goes on,

*I must stop. Stop what? you will say. Why, thinking, remembering — remark that I do not say, hoping —; to become once more for a period without boundaries or location in time, mindless and irrational companion and inmate of a body which [...] is still immersed and obviously bemused in recollections of old peace and contentment.*  
(131)

Like Sutpen, Bon, who until now has existed only as a creation of the other narrators, takes control and unmoors himself from time and memory, letting go of the past and its illusions, letting go of any “location in time” to become “mindless.” He is able to do this “*Because what WAS is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861, and therefore what IS — [...] I cannot say when to expect me. Because what IS is something else again because it was not even alive then*” (131). The death of what WAS, the past, has somehow unmoored what IS, the present. The Civil War, for the South, has constituted an act of violence so extreme as to undermine all of the century's built-up mythologies. To move forward, Bon must let go of what WAS, but as the past makes up most of the present, there is no IS without WAS. As Faulkner wrote, “time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as *was* — only *is*.” Bon therefore touches on a struggle central to the human experience: letting go of the past is an impossible necessity. He concludes the letter by returning to his rhetorical

beginning: “*within this sheet of paper you now hold the best of the old South which is dead, and the words you read were written upon it with the best (each box said, the very best) of the new North which has conquered and which therefore, whether it likes it or not, will have to survive*” (131-2). The IS will have to survive, “whether it likes it or not,” trapped though it is in the stultifying eddies of past and present, myth and time.

As the novel progresses, Judith takes on an increasingly central role. She is a strong, willful character, the true inheritor of Sutpen’s indomitable will, trapped and overlooked by the limitations of her gender. She is perceptive, resigned, and realistic in much of the novel, but in the act of giving over the letter, her last link to Bon, Judith performs the desperate narrative action of so many of the novel’s other characters. There is a deceptive serenity to Judith’s narrative that belies a deep authorial anxiety: she begins “absolutely serene,” by telling her to “Read it if you like or dont read it if you like. Because you make so little impression, you see” (127). Echoing the nihilistic pessimism of the letter, Judith describes living as a desperate and purposeless struggle, “like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are all in one another’s way” (127). There is the same sense of purposelessness throughout the narratives: where in Judith’s arrangement people are marionettes, moving “arms and legs with strings,” in Bon’s they are “homogeneous scarecrows” (129), in Ellen’s “dolls”

(70), and in Sutpen's "a useless collection of flotsam" (223). And at the end of this mad struggle, she continues, "all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, [...] and after a while they don't even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter" (127). This "block of stone with scratches on it" cannot hold any real part of the past. Judith's solution to this is a narrative one: "maybe if you go to someone [...] and give them something—a scrap of paper [...] at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another" (127). The only real existence, for Judith, is in memory, a memory that can be passed from generation to generation through narratives; for Judith, it is meaningful "for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone can't be *is* because it never can become *was* because it can't ever die" (127-8). Judith defines *is* by the fact that it can become *was*; for her, the act of dying is a connection to the working of the human world. The human existence is, for her, defined by the fact that it can die, because something that can die must be *alive*. The idea of living memory thus takes on new significance: only memory that lives and mutates through successive generations can have true meaning. For Judith, myth is a deeply human, deeply necessary creation; only through the constant reinterpretation of the past can civilization move forward. Judith refines

Charles Bon's philosophical views on IS and WAS, distilling his nihilistic argument that WAS is dead and therefore so is IS into the more forward-thinking view that *is* must continually die and become *was* in order to make room for the new *is*.

It is this realization on the part of Judith that raises her to the stature of a heroine. Her short speech gives meaning to the failure that characterizes the narratives throughout the novel. The constant interpretive attempts are what keeps *is* alive, and each ends in a failure that simply makes room for another attempt. As civilizations rise and fall, leaving space for subsequent futures, so do myths. But Faulkner does not grant ultimate authority to Judith. Taken together, the narratives form an overarching mythic narrative, Reed's "organic myth which all the characters develop together," but that myth is shadowed by its status as a degenerating cycle, a seemingly endless repetition that does not move upward but is simply forced to go on, losing bits of itself at every turn. The structures repeat, generation after generation, doomed, like Bon's new North, to survive even as they disintegrate. As in "A Rose for Emily," generations wash forward continuously, but each successive wave not only erases but actually erodes the beach beneath it. The master myth is constantly being renegotiated and reformed, and yet with each recreation it falls apart just a bit more. Henry's obsession with Judith and Bon repeats in Quentin's with Shreve and Caddy; the true heroism is stopping the terrible cycle.

*Absalom, Absalom!* ends with Quentin because he is its only hope: it is a study in desperate repetition, downward spirals, disintegration, and he is the only one able to put an end to it, destroying the cycles of time, obsession, and myth through his suicide.

## V

Judith's narrative brings the idea of myth back to the appended Chronology. We need not make a large intuitive leap to view the Chronology as a series of grave markers, Judith's "block of stone". Its second half is a stark illustration of Sutpen's failure, as it contains far more deaths than births:

1862 Ellen Coldfield dies.  
 1864 Goodhue Coldfield dies.  
 1865 Henry kills Bon at gates. (380)

These dry, cold, and possibly false facts are meaningless without the context and explanation of memory. Other people are the only true containers of memory and the past, as Judith argues, and the scratches on a page or a stone are equally meaningless without the corresponding mythology. Here enters the author's burden, which lies in carrying the past into the present, and while each new narrative may seem a small eddy, circling backward, it is still a new act, a new motion that will carry on. The medium by which memory is passed is of course narrative; narrative thus creates meaning. Myth is an agreement to corroborate a single narrative, while history is the conjoining and distilling of many narratives. Quentin may be a failed narrator, a failed

historian and a failed mythmaker. But he does succeed at his most basic of tasks: he passes the narrative memory of the South, of Sutpen and race and class and womanhood, on to his readers, merging at the last with a true authorial role.

And what of the Genealogy? There is a thread of ancestry running through the novel as a whole. Sutpen's design clearly centers on originating a lasting line of descendants; similar to or perhaps because of his severance from chronology and origin, he is doomed to failure. Important to note is the interpretive act of organization within it: it is ordered not by date of birth or death, as one might expect for a traditionally linear chronological tree. Instead, it is ordered by a more subjective time, not of years but of relationship to Sutpen's narrative. It begins with Sutpen himself, then moves to his first wife (Eulalia Bon) and son (Charles Bon), after which (reenacting the repudiation already discovered within the novel) it switches to Jefferson, beginning with Goodhue Coldfield and his daughter Ellen. Interestingly, Rosa appears before Henry and Judith, despite the fact that both were born, and thus existed in Sutpen's world, before Rosa. The Genealogy progresses all the way downward, from the degenerate final Sutpen descendent, Jim Bond ("Whereabouts unknown"), to the story's inheritor and young suicide, Quentin ("Died, Cambridge, Mass., 1910"), and finally to Shreve, the uncomprehending Canadian, who is the only character left alive and known.

Given its cross-generational scope and obsessive familial focus, in a novel like *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Genealogy essentially *is* the Chronology. The most significant difference between the two is their order: the Chronology is bound to the external framework of progression, the historical mode, whereas the Genealogy operates on the more complex framework of relationships and the subjective perception of time. The novel's final pages thus return us to the conflict between myth and history. The novel ultimately leaves the creative burden on its readers: having read and interpreted the multiplicity of narratives in the novel, the reader comes finally upon an uninterpreted list of 'facts.' Left only with the bare scratchings of the Genealogy and Chronology, Faulkner's readers must determine which myths will survive to enter the broad mythology of future generations, and which will die in private infancy.

## FINDING TRUTH IN “THE BEAR”



*Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth — penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words... Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told.*

JOSEPH CAMPBELL  
*The Power of Myth*

*If you take myth and folklore, and these things that speak in symbols, they can be interpreted in so many ways that although the actual image is clear enough, the interpretation is infinitely blurred, a sort of enormous rainbow of every possible colour you could imagine.*

DIANA WYNN JONES

*Artistic symbols and myths speak out of the primordial, preconscious realm of the mind which is powerful and chaotic. Both symbol and myth are ways of bringing order and form into this chaos.*

ROLLO MAY  
*My Quest for Beauty*



## I

Faulkner's 1942 story "The Bear" ends with Isaac's father reading the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn." "Listen," he commands, reading the five stanzas, "his voice quiet and deliberate" (77). "Listen," he repeats, this time reading only the second stanza: "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, for ever wilt thou love, and she be fair" (77). The poem's presence is not inherently surprising; it appears in several of Faulkner's other works, and the biographically-oriented will recall Faulkner's much quoted line: "Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies." But the interpretive work it does within the structure of the story is more complicated than a simple authorial nostalgia. In the same *Paris Review* interview, Faulkner said that "the aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life." The goal of art, therefore, is to create something timeless that will encapsulate all time, that will survive, timeless, noble, and true, into eternity; essentially, to create myth. Blanche Gelfant argues that, to Faulkner, "timelessness implied the existence of a Platonic world where the pure and inviolate form of truth endured immune to the vagarious demands of ordinary life" (45). Working from this, Richard Adams argues that the ode's contribution is "the contrast it contains between an aspect of speed or intense effort, representing motion, and an opposing aspect of impediment or

countering force that stops the motion or slows it so much that it seems to stop” (12). Encapsulated in this are the modes of progression: the rushing on of the historical and the stasis of the mythical. As in “A Rose for Emily,” narrative emerges to reconcile the two; the use of Keats in “The Bear” connects narrative to other art forms, implicitly defining art as a myth-making process.

In another sense, the ode represents a version of the discovery at the end of “A Rose for Emily” or the Chronology and Genealogy at the end of *Absalom*, *Absalom!*: an interpretive key capable of illuminating, or at least altering, the story that precedes it. This is a structure that exists at various levels in Faulkner’s works: the reader is thrown headfirst into a confusing swirl of seemingly meaningless information and opinion; just when he has begun to believe that he has made sense of it, something new is thrown in, sending him eddying back, bewildered once more. Joseph Milichap describes the stages of the original poem: “the poetic persona first engages the ancient artwork with creative anxiety, then turns the urn’s visual images to his own literary purposes, and finally translates its silent if universal lessons for his audience” (100). “The Bear” is structured in much the same way: Isaac probingly engages with Old Ben as an author engages with his characters, which allows his image to take on a mythic, literary form. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” acts, finally, as a tool with which to guide interpretation of the preceding story. Faulkner’s use of ekphrasis thus layers meaning in a way that actually simplifies it: he uses his art form

(the short story) to describe another art form (the poem) which in turn describes yet another art form (the urn). By paralleling all of these works of art, Faulkner suggests a continuity of meaning that traces an artistic genealogy. It suggests that the same ‘truth’ underlies the fictional urn and its literary existence, and the fictional bear and his literary shape.

Like light refracted through shattered glass, the story of Old Ben exists in many forms: 1935’s “Lion,” 1942’s “The Bear,” and finally the novella-length section of 1942’s *Go Down, Moses*. The version contained within *Go Down, Moses* has necessarily received the most critical attention, as the most fully developed and conclusive depiction of Isaac and the bear. Yet I propose to examine the version that appeared earlier the same year in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Each of the three covers essentially the same story, but with a different focus: “Lion” presents a straight hunting narrative, deeply rooted in reality, and the *Go Down, Moses* version veers off into an extended social commentary on the South. It is in the middle version that Faulkner’s critical view of myth takes its fullest, purest shape, coming fully to demonstrate the depth made possible by mythic rhetoric. The story traces the gradual shaping of a myth, through the interactions between Old Ben and Isaac. Coming between the other published versions, its brief events are weighted with the events of the others. In this version, he does not actually die, but the progress of his actual death in the preceding “Lion” and the succeeding *Go Down,*

*Moses* haunts the story much as Quentin's suicide haunts his existence in *Absalom, Absalom!* Isaac's view of the bear parallels the narrative's view of myth; Old Ben is a mythic figure to Isaac but also a stand-in for a more universal concept of myth, and the story's final acceptance of myth as a container of truth thus takes on broader significance.

In contrast with *Absalom's* focus on the creation of myth, "The Bear" explores the individual's struggle with and reconciliation to myth. Joseph Campbell provides a useful definition of the purpose of mythology in three ways: to reconcile the conscious mind to the mysterious workings of the universe, to interpret those workings, and to do so in a manner that enforces a social order, molding the individual, perhaps through a violent break, to abandon his natural workings in favor of membership and unity with the larger cultural body (4). As the body is marked with membership, through a tattoo, scar, or circumcision, so is the mind imprinted with an accompanying mythology (4-5). Myths, which emerge, survive, and self-propagate in the form of narrative, bring into being the social structures which create cultures. This view of myths focuses on the individual's relationship to an already-formed collective myth. The narrative of "The Bear" traces a progression from critical mistrust to conditional acceptance of myth, following Isaac's growth from innocent and accepting child to critical and rebellious youth, and finally

reaching a state of wisdom that comes from a deeper understanding of the value of myth.

## II

Many critics have noted the prominence of myth in “The Bear.” As with *Absalom, Absalom!*, much of the critical work focuses on the application of an already-formed myth. Kenneth LaBudde’s essay on cultural primitivism describes how “among more primitive peoples the important stages of life are expressed in ritualistic customs which have certain marked characteristics,” and that “In ‘The Bear’ one finds much which resembles the[se] prevailing characteristics” (229), aligning the narrative of tribal “ritualistic customs” (myths) with the narrative of “The Bear.” John Lydenberg aligns the story with the structure of nature myth: “it is the mythical quality of the bear hunt proper that gives the story its haunting power. Beneath its other meanings and symbolisms lies the magical tale enacted by superhuman characters. Here religion and magic are combined in a ritual demonstration of the eternal struggle between Man and Nature” (282). And Raymond Nelson connects the story to the classical mythic form, arguing that Old Ben is “linked in his solitariness with one of the greatest myths of all time, the story of Priam and his destruction” (202).

A more interesting point made by Lydenberg is that “The Bear” demonstrates a type of “dual myth-making,” which he defines as man acting as both “creator and protagonist of myth” (281). The myth thus works on multiple levels: like many of Faulkner’s characters, the bear is both mythic and patterned as myth. These processes are intrinsically connected, as he is mythic within the story only because he is couched in the rhetoric of myth. The realistic style of 1935’s “Lion” offers an interesting antithesis to the rising rhetoric of myth in “The Bear.” Comparing the parallel introductions of Old Ben makes eminently obvious the difference in form of a mythically oriented narrative. Old Ben does not appear until the fourth page of “Lion”:

Old Ben was a bear and we were going to run him to-morrow as we did once every year, every time in camp. He was known through the country as well as Lion was. I don’t know why they called him Old Ben nor who named him except that it was a long time ago. He was known well for the shoats he had stolen and the corn cribs he had broken into and the dogs he had killed and the number of times he had been bayed and the lead which he carried (it was said that he had been shot at least two dozen times, with buckshot and even rifles). Old Ben had lost three toes from his nigh hind foot in a steel trap, and every man in the country knew his track, even discounting the size, and so he should have been called Two-Toe. That is, that’s what they had been calling two-toed bears in this country for a hundred years. Maybe it was because Old Ben was an extra bear – the head bear, Uncle Ike McCaslin called him – and everyone knew that he deserved a better name. (136)

Whereas in “The Bear,” Old Ben is thus introduced:

He had already inherited it then, without ever having seen it, the tremendous bear with one trap-ruined foot which, in an area almost a hundred miles deep, had earned for itself a name, a

definite designation like a living man. He had listened to it for years: the long legend of corncribs rifled, of shotes and grown pigs and even calves carried bodily into the woods and devoured, of traps and deadfalls overthrown and dogs mangled and slain, and shotgun and even rifle charges delivered at point-blank range and with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a boy — a corridor of wreckage and destruction beginning back before he was born, through which sped, not fast but rather with the ruthless and irresistible deliberation of a locomotive, the shaggy tremendous shape. (30)

The passages have many obvious similarities; their differences become significant in examining the rhetoric that creates myth. The overall impact of the bear's transformation is the creation of a myth outside the traditional hunting narrative. Through the weighted rhetoric of myth, Old Ben becomes more than simply a "head bear," taking on the added import of a god-like, almost allegorical stature. When "He was known well for" becomes "the long legend," the narrative makes more explicit its process of myth-making. When "Old Ben had lost three toes from his nigh hind foot in a steel trap" becomes "with one trap-ruined foot," the bear turns from a human-injured animal to a more mysterious figure, seeming to have sprung forth fully (de)formed. And when the parenthetical "it was said that he had been shot at least two dozen times" transforms into the heroic "shotgun and even rifle charges delivered at point-blank range and with no more effect than so many peas blown through a tube by a boy," the bear demonstrates not just a thick skin but a sort of lyrical immortality. The diction of the first is flat and straightforward in comparison with the second, less lyrical and mythical. Between the two can be

seen the effect a mythical form has on essentially the same story: the myth-infused diction in “The Bear” is willfully pedestrian in “Lion.” Likewise, there is a sense of inheritance and genealogy in the “Lion” passage (“it was a long time ago,” “a hundred years”), but that notion takes true form in “The Bear,” where the “inherited” Old Ben is comes through “a corridor of wreckage and destruction beginning back before he was born,” a much more timeless figure. This rhetoric transforms the hunting narrative into a higher form of art, a form closer to Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and simultaneously makes Old Ben into a mythical figure, aligned with the fictional urn. The importance of this change in rhetorical structure, therefore, lies in the universalizing shape of art: the myths of masculinity in “Lion” become less particular and therefore more significant in “The Bear.”

### III

“The Bear” seems at first glance to follow a straightforward chronology. It begins temporally positioned and constrained: “He was ten” (30). There is no fractured time, no whiplashing switchbacks or rearranged life events. This is because it follows only one character, tracing the experience of one boy, without the complicating factor of outside narrators or overlapping narratives. Imposed, mechanical time is replaced entirely by subjectivity: time in the story is measured by the year’s of Isaac’s existence, a victory of the subjective time



that “A Rose for Emily” works towards. His ages continue to anchor the story to a qualified outer reality. Each of his three encounters with Old Ben is directly tied to an age. At the time of the second encounter, “It was in June of the next year. He was eleven” (74). After seeing Old Ben, he thinks, “*It will be next fall*. But it was not next fall, nor the next nor the next. He was fourteen then” (76). Age is paradoxically a subjective constant, a clock begun at the moment of birth that ticks through the years the same way for each person, and yet does not tick in unison with any other. Isaac’s tenth year aligns with the tenth year of all those around him, and yet occurs separately from theirs. Each individual’s clock may tick in the same way, but there is no larger framework unifying them, no Greenwich Mean Time imposing itself mechanically, no objective measurement of reality. In addition, Old Ben, whose name recalls England’s Big Ben clock tower, is described as “an anachronism, indomitable and invincible, out of an old dead time” (30). He is a symbol of time, but a time (a *was*) that perversely persists outside of the past, running “indomitable” and “absolved of mortality” (150) from past to present and presumably to future.

At the story’s beginning, everything that Isaac, and therefore the narrative, knows of the bear is his myth, which pervades the manly hunter’s world into which Isaac has been born. The first line of the bear’s entrance into the story offers yet another example of Faulkner’s looping structures: “He

had already inherited it then, without ever having seen it, the tremendous bear” (30). The sentence tantalizingly dangles an inscrutable “it,” refusing its reader a definition until the third clause. Finally, Faulkner gives form to shadow, defining *it* as “the tremendous bear” and forcing his reader to return, better informed, to the sentence’s beginning. The shadowy obfuscation on this minute level repeats in the larger story, as the bear begins as a shadow and gradually grows into something more definable, more capable of being seen. Something that can be seen has a physical reality, an objective, rather than mythic, form; what is seen need not be inherited, it simply is. The bear exists for Isaac outside of the realm of reality:

It ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. [...] It looked and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print. [...] He seemed to see it entire with a child’s complete divination before he ever laid eyes on either.  
(30)

In Isaac’s childhood, the bear is couched entirely in the rhetoric of myth, presented as a being of no tangible substance that cannot be *seen* but simply imagined, dreamed, felt. Yet it somehow exists within Isaac’s “knowledge”; he knows it long before he lays eyes on it. Like Sutpen, he knows of the myth long before he knows of the tangible reality underlying it. The hesitation contained in “seemed to see” suggests that he sees the bear through a sort of mythic imagination, with “divination” as an oracle might ‘see’ the future.

Isaac's first encounter with the bear is defined in equally sensory terms.

In the wake of the bear's passing, the dogs' barking is:

a moiling yapping an octave too high, with something more than indecision and even abjectness to it, not even moving very fast, taking a long time to pass completely out of hearing, leaving even then somewhere in the air that echo, thin, slightly hysterical, abject, almost grieving, with no sense of a fleeing, unseen, smoke-colored, grass-eating shape ahead of it. (31)

The passing of the bear is marked by rippling and complex emotion, not the simple masculinity of a chase but instead marked by "indecision" and "abjectness," and echoing a "thin, slightly hysterical, abject, almost grieving" lament. The bear's presence touches the narrative only through the sensory image of the dogs, as though, like a myth, it lives only in the mouths and minds of living beings. The barking dogs thus become narrators, their voices performatively bringing into being an ephemeral idea. The bear enters the story as an intangible yet noble being of a much greater stature than the deer, a "fleeing," "grass-eating" presence. This is Isaac's first encounter with the bear; it is defined by the presence of the dogs, who act throughout the story as complementary authorial voices. When Sam and Isaac return to the camp, they find the dogs shrouded in the "effluvium of something more than dog, stronger than dog and not just animal, just beast, because still there had been nothing in front of that abject and almost painful yapping save the solitude, the wilderness" (31). The magical qualities of this myth, for Isaac, cling to those who come into contact with its source. Even when the final dog returns

with “tattered ear” and “raked shoulder,” Isaac sees not the effect of a real bear’s claws but instead “the wilderness which, leaning for the moment down, had patted lightly once the hound’s temerity” (31). To this point, “to the boy it was still no living creature” (31); it continues to exist solely in the form of intangible myth.

Soon after comes a significant shift. Looking down at the “print of the enormous warped two-toed foot,” Isaac has an epiphany:

He realized for the first time that the bear which had run in his listening and loomed in his dreams since before he could remember to the contrary, and which, therefore, must have existed in the listening and dreams of his father and Major de Spain and even old General Compson, too, before they began to remember in their turn, was a mortal animal, and that if they had departed for the camp each November without any actual hope of bringing its trophy back, it was not because it could not be slain, but because so far they had had no actual hope to. (31)

There is here an acknowledgment of the genealogy of myth, the way in which it is passed generationally down. Like the ticking clock of age, the dreams in which the bear becomes myth have occurred over and over, simultaneously in the subjective sense of time, yet separated temporally between the generations of Isaac, his father, and “old General Compson,” and endlessly backward from there. Discovering the reality behind the myth appears to be a natural occurrence, a part of the process of growing up. But there is a curious structure to this process of losing innocence. In the act of giving in to the myth, each of the men has forgotten what he previously knew. The act of

discovery is actually an act of *remembering*, of rediscovering what they had once known, the fact that the bear “was a mortal animal.” Yet they continue to return to the camp even after this memory of mortality returns, coming home without killing the bear in an attempt at denial, “not because it could not be slain, but because so far they had had no actual hope to” (31). Within this rhetoric of repetition, there is foreshadowing that the cycle will come to an end. There is a circularity to the genealogical nature of myth: a child puts away the myths of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, yet resurrects them for her own children, because despite their literal falsity, there is a type of truth and beauty underlying them. The child must recognize what she already knows, that myth has an objective falsity, yet cannot ignore the inherent, subjective value within. The myths in “The Bear,” however, are set within a degenerating cycle, and so, while “so far” the men have not desired to actually kill the bear, implicit in the phrase is the understanding that a time approaches when one of them will want to, or need to, kill the bear.

The difference between knowing and remembering has resonances in many of Faulkner’s works. In “Some Notes on Time in Fiction,” Eudora Welty argues that Faulkner destroys chronology with in order to “make way for memory and the life of the past” (59). The act of remembering, she continues,

is so basic and vital a part of staying alive that it takes on the strength of an instinct of survival, and acquires the power of an art. Remembering is done through the blood, it is a bequeathment, it takes account of what happens before a man is

born as if he were there taking part. It is a physical absorption through the living body, it is a spiritual heritage. (Welty 59)

This argument goes a long way toward explaining the complex structure of remembering something one has never before known: the individual absorbs these memories through the long line of genealogy, taking in as a “bequeathment” the accumulated knowledge of those events which have occurred before his birth. John Irwin’s study of doubling and repetition takes this concept into the realm of time: what exists in Faulkner’s work is an “awareness that the memory of what has occurred in the past is at the same time the foreknowledge of what will be repeated in the future, the debilitating sense that time is a circular street and that recollection is prophecy” (70). Isaac “remembers” the actions and dreams of his predecessors only when he comes of age; the loop of knowledge is his inheritance. But his inheritance is also his doom, as it controls and limits him. Isaac, like Quentin, cannot accept this inheritance, cannot withstand the trap that is circular time, once again returning to that “watch that ticks repeatedly but does not move forward” (Schwab 217).

Escaping this circular doom becomes Isaac’s primary motivation. Isaac and Old Ben are increasingly twinned as the story progresses, and Isaac paradoxically becomes both destroyer and savior of the bear and the world in which he exists. As the story continues, Isaac takes on this role more and more forcefully:

*So I must see him, he thought. I must look at him.* Otherwise, it seemed to him that it would go on like this forever, as it had gone on with his father and Major de Spain, who was older than his father, and even with old General Compson, who had been old enough to be a brigade commander in 1865. Otherwise, it would go on so forever, next time and next time, after and after and after. It seemed to him that he could see the two of them, himself and the bear, shadowy in the limbo from which time emerged, becoming time; the old bear absolved of morality and himself partaking, sharing a little of it, enough of it. (74)

The idea that “it would go on like this forever” is appalling to Isaac. The myth growing out of and around the bear, which for Isaac begins with the Civil War, represented by General Compson, “a brigade commander in 1865,” will continue to expand and infect “forever, next time and next time, after and after and after” (74), eternally. As long as the myth survives, Isaac and his descendants are doomed by it. The only way to stop this degenerating cycle is to “look at him” and see him for what he really is, not what they have dreamed him to be. If he fails to stop it, Isaac believes “he could see the two of them, himself and the bear, shadowy in the limbo from which time emerged, becoming time; the old bear absolved of morality and himself partaking, sharing a little of it, enough of it” (74). Once again, the idea of seeing enters the picture: the act of seeing here appears as a performative working of imagination; his dreams threaten to bring these mythical shapes into an eternal reality. “*So I will have to see him,*” concludes Isaac, “without dread or even hope. *I will have to look at him*” (74). It is not hatred or bloodthirst; he is neither eager nor unwilling, but simply imbued with a deep sense of duty. He

must end the cycle, for himself, for his descendants, and even for the bear. Isaac, like Quentin, feels this burden more than his ancestors because he is the most receptive to the authorial duty. He is the artist of his family, imbued with the perception and understanding necessary to truly see the mythic cycle.

Here the relative structure of time emerges once again. “He was eleven,” and all have returned to camp to celebrate, with that notion of simultaneity, the birthdays of both General Compson and Major de Spain, “although the one had been born in September and the other in the depth of winter and in another decade” (74). He begins his first lone forays into the woods, “teaching himself to be a better-than-fair woodsman without even knowing he was doing it” (74), repeating that sense of ennui and knowledge that hovers on the edge of acknowledgement and oblivion. He comes upon the footprint that effected such a serious shift; time seems to have passed with an odd rapidity: “It was almost completely crumbled now, healing with unbelievable speed, a passionate and almost visible relinquishment, back into the earth from which the tree had grown” (74). It is once again a mystical moment, as though the wilderness has put forth a sign of mortality specifically for Isaac, and withdrawn it hastily and nearly completely. But he cannot find the bear, not, according to Sam, as long as he carries his gun to fend off the terror of the wilderness. “You will have to choose” (74), Sam tells him, and he does, leaving his gun behind “of his own will and relinquishment,” as “a



condition in which not only the bear's heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the old rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated" (74). The climactic moment of encounter approaches; that "heretofore inviolable anonymity" is soon to be "abrogated" along with the traditionally defined roles of "hunter and hunted."

#### IV

There is one final battle with the objective sense of time. Isaac is "traveling now not only by the compass but by the old, heavy, biscuit-thick silver watch which had belonged to his grandfather" (74), clinging to the watch as he had to the gun. The watch is weighted by the past, possessing a sense of ancestry in that it had "belonged to his grandfather." He is aware that outside time has passed, in the quick math of: "He had left the camp nine hours ago; nine hours from now, dark would have already been an hour old" (74). But he ignores the importance of these hours and the tyranny of the passage of time, realizing instead that: "It was the watch, the compass, the stick — the three lifeless mechanicals with which for nine hours he had fended the wilderness off; he hung the watch and compass carefully on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and relinquished completely to it" (74). Isaac leaves the watch behind, along with compass and stick, in a deeply symbolic moment that accomplishes what Emily, chained to her watch, could not in "A

Rose for Emily,” and what Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* can accomplish only through suicide. It is also a symbol of mechanical, absolute time that occurs outside and imposes on the individual; leaving it behind, Isaac frees himself to proceed at the pace of his internal, subjective sense of time. Having left behind from these defensive elements, Isaac is open at last to embrace and destroy the bear, myth and all.

Without his aids, the wilderness becomes a maze. He enters a mythic, confusing land in which everything appears to be shifting, intangible: “he was trying to keep a bearing on the tree [...] but the tree was not there, [...] finding the tree at last, but in the wrong place — no bush, no compass, no watch and the tree not even the tree” (76). As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the story’s hero becomes unmoored from objective reality, having left behind the watch and compass that had served as anchors. There, as though by design, appears first another crooked footprint, and then the bear itself:

As he looked up, the wilderness coalesced, solidified — the glade, the tree he sought, the bush, the watch and the compass glinting where a ray of sunlight touched them. Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear; it was just there, immobile, solid, fixed in the hot dappling of the green and windless noon, not as big as he had dreamed it, but as big as he had expected it, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him where he sat quietly on the log and looked back at it. (76)

Having found the footprint, that prior source of epiphany, Isaac is suddenly given back his tree, watch, and compass. Finally, he “saw the bear,” appearing still, “immobile, solid, fixed” before him. It is “not as big as he had dreamed

it,” no longer filling its original mythic grandeur, but is instead “as big as he had expected it,” which is in fact both “bigger” and “dimensionless.” It is as though each constitutes the nameless void for the other; staring at each other, they are staring into the void, and the void is staring back. Eventually, this tableau is disrupted: “Then it moved. It made no sound. It did not hurry” (76). This stilted sentence structure repeats itself: “Then it was gone. It didn’t walk into the woods, the undergrowth. It faded, sank back into the wilderness as he had watched a fish, a huge old bass, sink and vanish back into the dark depths” (76). And the moment is over; Isaac has at last *seen* Old Ben.

The structuring of age returns once more, to set the stage for the final encounters. Isaac thinks “*It will be next fall*. But it was not next fall, nor the next nor the next. He was fourteen then” (76). Now a man, he has blossomed into full hunting abilities, having fully learned the land. He considers the wilderness his education: “If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels at home his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college, the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater” (76). This description of the bear is genealogically interesting: he has existed “so long unwifed and childless” that he has become his own “ungendered progenitor.” In essence, then, he has given birth to himself; he is his own ancestor and descendent. Genealogy has thus been looped: if Old

Ben is both father and son, what should be the straight line of inheritance has become incestuously circled, doomed to repetition. Here again is the degenerating cycle: just like Bon's new North, doomed to a diminishing survival, the bear is trapped in an eternity of solitude.

In the climactic final interaction, the balance of power has shifted. The bear takes on such human-like equality that "It was not a stalk; it was an ambush. He timed the meeting almost as if it were an appointment with a human being" (76). They sneak up on him, coming "so close that the bear turned without even running, as if in surprised amazement at the shrill and frantic uproar of the released fyce, turning at bay against the trunk of a tree, on its hind feet; it seemed to the boy that it would never stop rising, taller and taller" (76). The bear is cornered against a tree, the victim of an ambush instead of the calm observer of past times. And yet it maintains a nobility even in defeat, rising upward as though becoming a part of the tree overhanging it. Isaac lunges to save his dog, ending up beneath the bear. Looking up, "it loomed and towered over him like a cloudburst and colored like a thunderclap, quite familiar, peacefully and even lucidly familiar, until he remembered: This was the way he had used to dream about it" (76). It is as though the bear takes on his full mythic shape only when threatened; he towers like a "cloudburst" and is, synesthetically, "colored like a thunderclap." There is also a return to the idea of remembered knowledge: he

has dreamed this truth, this shape of the bear that he has never before *seen*. Moyra Jehlen argues that “paradoxically, given its pre-historic status,” the bear “embodies history itself” (5). And further, that “the past which the bear embodies is not only terrifying but awesomely majestic and towers over a diminished present” (Jehlen 5). This antagonistic portrayal ignores the relationship between past and present, Isaac and bear: the past *is* the present, *defines* the present. In a moment reminiscent of the end of *Absalom*, Isaac cannot shoot: when Sam accuses him “You’ve done seed him twice now with a gun in your hands [...] This time you couldn’t have missed him,” Isaac responds “Neither could you! [...] You had the gun! Neither did you!” (76). The switch from “could” to “did” seems important, as Isaac acknowledges that while they both *could* have shot him, neither *did*, or actually wanted to.

## V

The story’s final section works to interpret and justify Isaac’s failure, ultimately recreating it as an epiphanic triumph. Through the reference to Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Faulkner calls on a long lineage of art as meaning-maker. Like the bear, the carved urn is both ancient and ageless, eternally old yet undying. The urn, like the beautiful boxes in *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, is a static container of truth, giving the illusion of life like just as a short story does. What Isaac’s father seems to be suggesting, shrouded in the

Keats rhetoric, is that even if the physical bear is shot, his stature and significance will continue through his myth, and its creator, the narrative. It is a matter of truth: when Isaac simplistically interprets the poem (“He’s talking about a girl”), his father responds “He had to talk about something. [...] He was talking about truth. Truth doesn’t change” (77). He therefore connects art, truth, and myth: Keats’ art creates a myth that illustrates a deeper truth.

Faulkner uses another piece of art to create a meta-commentary on his own art: the poem within the short story echoes and illuminates; both function *because* they create a myth. Thus, in the story’s final exchange, Isaac begins to see himself taking on the authorial, myth-making role:

“Courage, and honor, and pride, [...] and pity, and love of justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know truth. Do you see now?”  
*Sam, and Old Ben, and Nip*, he thought. And himself too. He had been all right too. His father had said so. “Yes, sir,” he said. (77)

Isaac parallels his father’s speech, aligning Sam, Old Ben, Nip, and himself with the ideals of courage, honor, pride, and pity. He makes his own story into an allegory, aligning its actors with Keats’ literary themes, hence actively joining the myth-making process. With that final “Yes, sir,” Isaac claims as his inheritance the power and responsibility of narration; he is far more prepared than Quentin, who cannot make it past “I dont hate it!” to an equivalent epiphany. Isaac’s final revelation is the discovery of a type of subjective truth

that underlies art and myth, a revelation that permits him to overcome his awed fear and fully face the degenerating cycle.

As he comes of age, Isaac approaches myth with a deep mistrust, viewing its timelessness and repetition entirely as a limiting and damaging doom. It is the prerogative of the young to mistrust what is old, to attempt to shake off the shackles of tradition in favor of the revolutionary. But what emerges through the story, both for Isaac and the narrative as a whole, is an awareness that, though myth may be both seductive and destructive, it also contains a deeper kind of truth. The repetition that once seemed like a burden is actually the continuity of truth over generations. By rejecting the inheritance of the plantation in the *Go Down, Moses* version of the story, Isaac is participating in the same negotiation process so hyperbolically undertaken in *Absalom, Absalom!*: curating those myths that will survive to the next generation, by choosing the nobility and truth of the bear as his true inheritance. The urn thus becomes simply another version of Old Ben or Bon's beautiful boxes: a container for myth, the past, and a sense of universal truth. "The Bear" draws much from its predecessors: a sense of subjective time present in "A Rose for Emily," the process of inheriting and propagating myths in *Absalom, Absalom!* But its illustration of myth, which is refracted and interpreted through reference to other art forms, is all its own, coming to

acknowledge a subjective truth underlying all art, and hence finding a positive aspect of the myth-making that so plagued Faulkner's world.



## DROPPING THE CURTAIN

*Endings to be useful must be inconclusive.*

SAMUEL R. DELANY

These three chapters trace an arc of myth within Faulkner's canon. Faulkner's works approach myth with a healthy skepticism, only gradually coming to find value in a process that is often destructive; his works demand of their readers the same perceptive criticism. The non-linear ordering of "A Rose for Emily" begins a discussion of the subjectivity of time, while *Absalom, Absalom!* hyperbolically demonstrates a world in flux, lost in the maze of its own fragmentary myths, in a constant and chaotic state of mythic negotiation. And "The Bear" examines the individual process of coming to terms with myth, a complex undertaking that goes beyond simple rejection and acceptance, combining a growing understanding of subjective progression and the necessity of negotiation toward the acknowledgment of deeply held truths. An image from Quentin encapsulates this sense of truth's continuous presence:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool

which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm.  
(*Absalom* 261)

The “old ineradicable rhythm,” truth, moves endlessly onward through time and space, propelled by the ripples of a pebble “whose fall it did not even see,” a beginning no longer remembered yet still eminently present. The past reverberates into the future, brought forward again and again through the continuously recreated narrative ripples of myth and history. There may not be an objective order to the universe, but there is a kind of underlying truth that transcends the individual.

It is all too easy to dismiss myth as belonging to the realm of the abstract and theoretical, too removed from reality to constitute anything pragmatic. And yet myth makes up the very fabric of society, informing the way history is understood and the way people and things are remembered. Judith's dark musings, that “maybe if you go to someone [...] and give them something — a scrap of paper [...] at least it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another” (*Absalom* 167), are eerily reminiscent of the notes buried underneath the Warsaw Ghetto by its dwindling Jewish population, or of the letters to loved ones thrown from trains en route to Auschwitz or Treblinka.

These individual narratives have since been woven into the greater narrative of the Holocaust, taking part in the universal process of negotiation and interpretation that brings cultural memory of the past to future generations. The quote at the entrance of the National Holocaust Museum, “You are my witnesses” from Isaiah 43:10, is a call to carry the narrative forward, to bear witness to the narratives contained within its walls, and in doing so, to repeat its myths for the benefit of future generations. Faulkner’s works constitute a similar call, demanding readers to bear witness by thinking critically about the process of myth-making, not only in the realm of literature but in the world as a whole.

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