

William H. RUECKERT : *Faulkner from Within. Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner*, 2003.

*From Within*: The book is “exclusively devoted to the internal evidence of Faulkner’s novels.”

Though my focus throughout is upon the selves that Faulkner created, and the extent to which they are destructive or generative, destroyed or victimized, redemptive or redeemed, I have not proceeded from self to self, or thematically, by groups of novels, but novel by novel; invariably, as a result of this, I have much to say about the way Faulkner constructed novels — about the way he tended to center every novel around a major character, such as Joe Christmas (*Light in August*) or Thomas Sutpen (*Absalom, Absalom*) or Ike McCaslin (*Go Down, Moses*), how novel after novel conducted a searching action, a movement inward toward knowledge about that character and why each was the way he or she was. WR XVII

I wanted to find out why there were so many destructive and destroyed beings—selves—in the novels before *Go Down, Moses*; what was different about Ike McCaslin that saved him from destruction and made him non-destructive (though not generative for others), and what the sources of generative being were in the selves with which Faulkner peopled his later novels. XVI

I began with the perception—the sure sense—that in *Go Down, Moses* and Ike McCaslin we had the turning point in Faulkner’s career and development, and that there was a clear before and after *Go Down, Moses*, with everything after being essentially different in some way from everything before. So I set out to write a book which would itself turn, as this one does, upon a long, detailed analysis of *Go Down, Moses* and Ike McCaslin as a special or privileged Faulknerian self. In general terms, I saw this turn in Faulkner as one that went from destructive to generative being, from tragedy to comedy, from pollution to purification and redemption. [...]

« Nature is an interacting process, a seamless web, nature is responsive to laws, it constitutes a value system with intrinsic opportunities and constraints upon human use. » (RUECKERT, *Literature and Ecology*, 82)

Caroline Barr is a matrix of high *human* value and is as much a part of this book and fiction as the title and opening words are. At the center of Faulkner’s vision is a point where black, white and red lose their color; where male and female lose their sex; where young and old lose their age and all become merely—or should it be purely—human: there *on that fictional ground* one encounters the all-color, ageless, androgynous allself. The extraordinary human dignity and significance given to Caroline Barr by the dedication can hardly be overestimated. It makes one think of Sam Fathers and the other old ones in this fiction. Caroline Barr is in that company. WR 163

« Lorsque Sam parlait de cet ancien temps et de ces gens, morts et disparus, d’une race différente des deux seules que connaissait le garçon, peu à peu cet autrefois cessait d’être autrefois et devenait son présent à lui, [...] les hommes qui l’avaient traversé continuaient de marcher, de respirer dans l’air, de projeter une ombre réelle sur la terre qu’ils n’avaient pas quittée. » GDM 132

« Alors que les hommes qui détruisent la forêt à coups de hache sont anonymes, l’ours a obtenu un nom qui ne désigne pas seulement une bête mortelle mais un anachronisme indomptable et invincible venu de temps perdu et révolu, un fantôme, symbole et apothéose de l’ancienne vie sauvage à laquelle des humains chétifs s’attaquent, haineux et peureux, comme des pygmées aux chevilles d’un éléphant somnolent — le vieil ours solitaire, indomptable et seul, veuf, sans descendance et exempté de mort — le vieux Priam privé de sa femme et survivant à tous ses fils ». (GDM 150)

There is no killing here—only encounter, witnessing, recognition; the joining in an absolutely

benign way of wilderness, wild Animal, old and still partly wild Indian, and the boy who will preserve in himself what of wildness and wilderness he can for a while longer. WR 210

And the Ike stories keep going back until Ike meets his first parents in the magnificent last scene of "The Bear," Part 1, when he relinquishes the gun (human power and destruction), the watch (mechanical human time orientation), the compass (mechanical human space orientation) and the stick (a tool against the wilderness), and submits himself to the wilderness with only the knowledge and virtue that is within him. He does this in order to meet old Ben on his own terms and the ground of being. This point of non-human origin is where Ike is headed, and he cannot get there without Sam, who is one of Ike's mediators on his way back to his first father and mother. Ike cannot kill old Ben because he is also one of his fathers and that would be deliberate patricide, just as the destruction of the wilderness for Ike would be a form of matricide. "The Bear" is one of our most profound ecological fictions and belongs with Thoreau's *Walden*. Such texts require deep meditation and mediation because they are about the relation of the self to nature—the non-human universe—and relate the formation of the self to the forms of nature in ways that should concern us all in this age of possession, manipulation, exploitation and destruction of nature for purely human ends. WR 199

If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwed and childless as to have become his own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater. GDM 160

*Go Down, Moses* as a whole is about how the self must free itself from possession and possessions and reconceive its fundamental relations to the Land, to people, and to things. The central concerns of *Go Down, Moses* are profoundly ecological: the main polarity in this work is between ecological/economic and the ecological. 171 WR

Thoreau's phrase that "in wildness is the preservation of the world" has to be turned all around to apply to Ike, and this very necessity tells us something about a fundamental difference between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the extent to which a resource of that time has become an anachronism in ours. What Thoreau meant by this remark—and he assumed as everybody else in his time seemed to assume, that open wild space to the west was inexhaustible—was that if man does not periodically walk out of society and into wildness to renew himself at the source he will perish into a kind of over-civilized human torpor. Much of the power of "The Bear" derives from the finality with which Faulkner imagines the human destruction of wildness and so the elimination of it as a source of values and renewal. Thoreau's remark becomes a doomsday statement because with pure wildness gone how will the world be preserved: what now, what next?

WR 229

« Ike is the human equivalent of the great Auk: an extinct being — and worse a human possibility destroyed by human history » WR 203

Ike is not a saint; he does not want to raise up the lowly; he is not concerned with spiritual perfection; all of his efforts are toward the preservation of something from the past rather than toward the attainment of something in the future. In this final acknowledgment of the old snake as "Chief [. . .] Grandfather" Ike commits himself to a whole non-Christian lineage, to a non-white, non-western ancestry. What he commits himself to is the new world before it is corrupted and polluted by the old world. WR 235

Ike can never be wildness because he is human, and can never have wild blood because he is white. Wildness has to be external to and other than the white self. Wilderness, wildness, wild blood

all precede Ike and vanish out of history by the time he is eighteen. He can only come to know them. He cannot be any of them; they can become the matrix of his being and he can become their preserver. But true wilderness, wildness, and wild blood are gone from the world and another source of preservation, sanity, and renewal must be found by those who come after. Nobody in Faulkner after Ike can ever turn (or return) to "wildness" as a source of renewal or as a source of renewal or as a source of generative being. This fiction lays that resource to rest as completely as *Absalom, Absalom!* lays Sutpen's imperial dream and the Old South to rest. Ike's way is as dead as Sutpen's, even though it is never destructive and is, even today (maybe more so than ever,) powerful in its appeal precisely because it is so difficult to live and be without destroying and polluting. WR 253