

**ARCHETYPES IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S THE BEAR**

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

I wish to make a study of the archetypal symbols in William Faulkner's story The Bear and its sequel "Delta Autumn." These stories rely heavily on mythical and primitive elements, and I feel that the insights that modern psychology -- especially that of Carl Jung -- and comparative anthropology have gained into the mechanism of the unconscious and primitive mind can be used to clarify these elements and point up their full significance. Such an analysis may, I hope, help to resolve some of the critical problems which have centered around this seminal work of Faulkner's.

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## CHAPTER I

### ARCHETYPES AND PRIMITIVISM

The Bear, Irving Howe writes, "invites a multiplicity of subtle readings; it shares in certain qualities of myth; it carries a religious aura...."<sup>1</sup> This multiplicity of readings is possible because The Bear is one of Faulkner's most complex works, containing ever deepening levels of meaning: the dimension of adventure or literal action, the dimension of historical or social significance, a moral dimension, a psychological dimension, and, most profoundly, a mythical or archetypal dimension. To speak of the different dimensions of a work of literature is in no sense to try to limit it; nor are these ways of viewing it mutually exclusive. Criticism chooses to emphasize one or the other of these dimensions in order, as Howe elsewhere notes, to "point to a dominant emphasis, a significant stress in the writer's subject or his attitude toward it."<sup>2</sup> When I say, then, that The Bear can most profitably be discussed by considering its archetypal significance, I am in no sense trying to set

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<sup>1</sup>William Faulkner (New York, 1952), p. 253.

<sup>2</sup>Politics and the Novel (New York, 1957), p. 16.

up an absolute category or to rule out any of the other approaches which can be used to enjoy and evaluate it; rather I am simply emphasizing one of the possible readings -- the one which I think throws the most light on the depth of meaning to be found there.

The quality of myth and the religious aura which Mr. Howe mentions lie at the heart of The Bear. It is a work — which returns to the beginnings of man's history, to those — rituals and beliefs which grew out of his earliest primordial — efforts to cope with his existence. In short, it is a work which draws upon the archetypal patterns of man's primitive and subconscious mind. One critic has written: "It is doubtful whether, without a Procrustean fitting process, the events of...The Bear could be made exactly conformable to any recorded mythical pattern. So much the better, so long as the spirit and suggestiveness of myth are available."<sup>3</sup> No particular myth, it is true, is re-enacted here, but more than the spirit and suggestiveness are available: the raw materials out of which the myths of all cultures are shaped, the universal — mythic elements, form the basis of the ritual action of The Bear. The universality of this mythical material serves to broaden and deepen the possibilities of interpretation rather

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<sup>3</sup>W. R. Moses, "Where History Crosses Myth: Another Reading of 'The Bear,'" Accent, XIII (Winter, 1953), 22.

than to restrict it to one particular myth. Walter Slatoff sees the value of this method when he writes that so long as our reactions to the story are in suspension rather than crystallized into one hard and fast interpretation, "they remain experiences rather than rational or verbal constructions."<sup>4</sup> Thus, an archetypal approach -- an analysis of the symbols around which the action revolves, symbols which essentially are neither rational nor verbal -- will provide us with a method for going to the heart of the mythic elements without restricting them to any one reading. I would like, therefore, in this introduction, to make some remarks about the genesis and uses of archetypal criticism.

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<sup>4</sup>Quest for Failure (Ithica, 1960), p. 242.

# I

"Mythology," writes Kerenyi, "like the head of Orpheus, goes on singing in death and from afar."<sup>5</sup> Despite Whitman's passionately iconoclastic plea --

Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia  
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts  
That matter of Troy and Achilles', wrath and Aeneas',  
Odysseus' wanderings,  
Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your  
snowy Parnassus...

the old legends, the tales from a time shrouded in the mists of prehistory, still hold strong and mysterious attraction for modern minds. "Myths and tales can hardly be banished to the museum when they have attracted almost all the major English poets, not to mention the minor ones, from Chaucer to the present."<sup>6</sup> For these myths provide more than romantic embellishment, more than elaborately decorative metaphor: they provide the very core of much of literature. Archetypal — criticism seeks to point up these myths, to seek their origin — and to establish their relationship to literature. In order to do so the critic must depend heavily on the insights that psychology and anthropology have provided into the operation of the human psyche.

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<sup>5</sup>Carl Jung and C. Kerenyi, Essays on a Science of Mythology (New York, 1949), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry (New York, 1957), p. 3.

At the outset we should understand Northrop Frye's warning: "Because psychology and anthropology are highly developed sciences, the critic who deals with this kind of material is bound to appear, for some time, a dilettante to those subjects."<sup>7</sup> This is generally true, especially since the critic's interest in these sciences extends only as far as they throw light upon literature; nevertheless valuable attempts have been made and will continue to be made by archetypal critics to use these related disciplines as tools of criticism. And if mistakes are sometimes made, we can take consolation in the assurance of Edward Glover that "the academic eclectic is harmless enough."<sup>8</sup>

Carl Jung first defined the term archetype in connection with his system of analytic psychology and in doing so incidentally laid down the basis for archetypal criticism; it is necessary, therefore, in order to grasp fully what archetypal critics are attempting to do, for us to have some understanding of his theories. It is not possible here nor is it necessary to give a detailed account of the development of Jung's thought or the influence that thinkers from

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<sup>7</sup>"My Credo," Kenyon Review, XIII (Winter, 1951), 106.

<sup>8</sup>Freud or Jung (New York, 1950), p. 188.



Schopenhauer to Freud exerted upon its formation,<sup>9</sup> but it is important to know something about how the theory of archetypes first occurred to him. While working in a hospital, he came upon a case which made a tremendous impression on him: the patient was a fifteen year old girl who displayed two separate personalities. In her waking life she was a very commonplace girl, but under hypnosis she displayed a knowledge of matters which could not have been consciously acquired. To Jung there was something particularly challenging about this case and from then on he focused his research on the unconscious phenomena of psychoses.<sup>10</sup> In dealing with the phantasies of mentally deranged people and the dreams of young children, he discovered frequent and surprising similarities between these dreams and phantasies and the texts of mythology and folk literature, elements which could not have been consciously acquired, for the dreams contained mythic events which could not have been known to the patients or children: there was no question of any cryptomnesia providing them with this knowledge.<sup>11</sup> "It

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<sup>9</sup>An interesting account of the development of Jung's views can be found in Ira Progoff, Jung's Psychology and its Social Meaning (New York, 1953), pp. 21-35.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>By "cryptomnesia" Jung means the coming to the consciousness of a memory whose origin has been completely forgotten, so that it seems to be a spontaneous production. Cf. Raymond Hastie, Religion and the Psychology of Jung (London, 1957), p. 51.

can be proved in some cases that there have been no conscious normal channels through which the mythological elements entered the particular person's unconscious material. So that the only possible answer to the occurrence of such elements in the unconscious material is that the unconscious mind, apparently as such, consists to large extent of mythological material."<sup>12</sup>

Freud had reached similar conclusions, not only in his interpretation of myths like that of Oedipus, but also in his tendency to equate the psychology of primitives with that of modern neurotics. Of dream symbols he wrote:

We derive our knowledge of them from widely different sources: from fairy tales and myths, jokes and witticisms, from folklore, i.e. from what we know of the manners and customs, sayings and songs, of different peoples, and from poetic and colloquial usage of language. Everywhere in these various fields the same symbolism occurs, and in many of them we can understand it without being taught anything about it. If we consider these various sources independently, we shall find so many parallels to dream-symbolism that we are bound to be convinced of the correctness of our interpretations.<sup>13</sup>

Freud, however, proceeded on a biological, primarily sexual basis, while Jung interpreted the unconscious symbol formations from a cultural point of view. For a Freudian the

<sup>12</sup>Carl Albert Meier, Jung and Analytical Psychology (Newton Center, Mass., 1959), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (New York, 1938), p. 141.

rituals and taboos which were dealt with consciously by primitive man but unconsciously by modern man seemed atavistic retentions which were manifestations of illness. For a — Jungian, however, myth was not just the dream content of the inhibited individual, but a protoplastic pattern of the race — which bespoke not illness but natural participation in what — Jung termed the collective unconscious. —

In Jung's theory not only personal dreams but universal myths arise from the unconscious. For besides the personal unconscious, there are present in every individual the great "primordial" images, as Jacob Burkhardt called them, the symbols of human imagination from time immemorial. "The fact of this inheritance," Jung argues, "explains the truly amazing phenomenon that certain motifs from myths and legends repeat themselves the world over in identical forms."<sup>14</sup> These recurring motifs Jung calls archetypes, contending that they arise out of the collective unconscious of the race, the consensus gentium. He felt that the theory of the personal unconscious was insufficient to explain the constants found in dreams or their resemblance to the universal myths; there must be something below the level of the personal unconscious which could account for the archetypes. The personal

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<sup>14</sup> Two Essays on Analytical Psychology in The Collected Works of C. G. Jung (New York, 1953), Vol. 7, p. 64.

unconscious, Jung wrote, "includes all the contents that have become unconscious.... The collective unconscious on the other hand, comprises all that is unconscious, that is to say all the inherited possibilities of representation which are not individual but common to the whole of mankind." (Jung's italics.) Freud, in his later works, arrived at a view surprisingly similar to Jung's:

In studying reactions to early traumata we often find to our surprise that they do not keep strictly to what the individual himself has experienced, but deviate from this in a way that would accord much better with their being reactions to genetic events and in general can be explained only through such influence. The behavior of a neurotic child to his parents when under the influence of an Oedipus and castration complex is very rich in such reactions, which seem unreasonable in the individual and can only be understood phylogenetically, in relation to the experiences of earlier generations.... In fact it seems to me convincing enough to allow to venture further and assert that the archaic heritage of mankind includes not only dispositions, but also ideational contents, memory traces of the experiences of former generations.<sup>15</sup>

We might say in summary, then, that while Jung accepts the idea of a personal unconscious, he further posits a more basic level of unconsciousness, the collective, and that it provides each individual with a cast of images and motifs, the archetypes, which, he further argues, are biologically

<sup>15</sup>Seelenprobleme der Gegenwart (Zurich, 1931), p. 164.

<sup>16</sup>Moses and Monotheism (New York, 1939), pp. 156-57.

inherited: "We mean by collective unconscious, a certain psychic disposition shaped by the forces of heredity; from it consciousness has developed. In the physical structure of the body we find traces of earlier stages of evolution, and we may expect the human psyche also to conform in its make-up to the laws of phylogeny."<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of literary criticism it is not necessary to enter the controversy over the nature of the transmission of archetypes,<sup>18</sup> nor even to accept the whole of Jung's analytical psychology; it is sufficient to realize that there is a body of archetypes which have universal manifestation and significance.<sup>19</sup> In this sense Leslie Fiedler gives the term archetype perhaps its broadest definition when he uses it to "mean any of the immemorial patterns of response to the human situation in its most permanent aspects...whether those patterns be considered to reside in the Jungian

<sup>17</sup>Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York, 1933), p. 190.

<sup>18</sup>Most literary critics reject this idea as none of their concern. Northrop Frye calls this part of Jung's theory "an unnecessary hypothesis in literary criticism, so far as I can judge." Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 112. Rene Wellek refers to it as "a dangerously occult idea." Concepts of Criticism (New Haven, 1963), p. 335.

<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of those myths which are universal, cf. Clyde Kluckhohn, "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Myth-making" in Richard M. Ohmann, The Making of Myth (New York, 1962), pp. 52-65.

Unconscious or the Platonic World of Ideas."<sup>20</sup>

If we consider Jung to be one of the parents of archetypal criticism, Sir James Frazer would be the other. His monumental work, The Golden Bough, which appeared in twelve volumes from 1890 to 1915, was a study of magic and religion, tracing numerous myths to their prehistoric beginnings. The Golden Bough, along with Sir Edward Taylor's Primitive Culture (1871), gave rise to a school of comparative anthropology which traces the cross-currents of myth from culture, as well as to a group of Cantabrigian scholars who might be considered the forerunners of the archetypal critics. This group, composed of Jane Harrison, F. M. Cornford, Gilbert Murray, Andrew Lang and others, dealt with the ritual conflicts underlying the works of the Greek tragedians and Homer.<sup>21</sup>

T. S. Eliot, in his notes to The Wasteland, acknowledged a debt to the work "which has influenced my generation profoundly; I mean The Golden Bough." For, if Jung had provided the machinery, Frazer had provided the raw materials for archetypal criticism, the myths themselves. Together the two disciplines, psychology and anthropology, have created a

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<sup>20</sup>"Archetype and Signature," Sewanee Review, LX (Spring, 1952), 261-262.

<sup>21</sup>Wilbur Scott, Five Approaches to Literary Criticism (New York, 1962), p. 249.

literary tool, a method for seeing deeper into the nature of symbols than we have seen before.

Two facts must be remembered when dealing with archetypal criticism: there are universal myth and dream symbols and these figure in much of our literature. Clyde Kluckhohn has written that "certain features of mythology...are apparently universal or...have such wide distribution in space and time that their generality may be presumed to result from recurrent reactions of the human psyche to situations and stimuli of the same general order."<sup>22</sup> These recurrent reactions result in "the formation of imaginative productions, of powerful images."<sup>23</sup> Mircea Eliade points out, for example, that "We encounter the 'paradise myth' all over the world in more or less complex forms."<sup>24</sup>

These myths, of course, appear in literature. It is to be expected of the poet, Jung writes, "that he will resort to mythology in order to give his experience its most fitting expression....The primordial experience is the source of his creativeness."<sup>25</sup> Northrop Frye is equally insistent on the

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<sup>22</sup>"Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking," p. 52.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>24</sup>"The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition," in Ohmann, The Making of Myth, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup>Modern Man, p. 189.

### archetypal nature of literature:

The search for archetypes is a kind of literary anthropology, concerned with the way literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folk tale. We next realize that the relationship between these categories and literature is by no means purely one of descent, as we find them reappearing in the greatest classics -- in fact there seems to be a general tendency on the part of great classics to revert to them.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, in summary, we may conclude that there are universal symbols and motifs, the archetypes, which figure in myths the world over and recur in conscious literary works. It is, however, necessary to make one very basic distinction which has not always been observed by myth critics: though literature includes myth, it is not myth. Richard Chase, for example, refuses to accept this distinction, insisting that myth and literature are synonymous and that folk-lore, legend and so forth can be treated as literature.<sup>27</sup> Such a view, I think, leads only to confusion. Susanne Langer, one of the pioneers in the modern study of myth, is quite correct when she states that "Legend and myth and fairy tale are not in themselves literature, they are not art at all...; however, they are the natural materials of art."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>"My Credo," pp. 99-100.

<sup>27</sup>Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge, 1949).

<sup>28</sup>Form and Feeling (New York, 1953), p. 274.



Along this line another important distinction is made by Fiedler. We have already seen his definition of archetype; to supplement this he introduces another term, signature. "I use Signature to mean the sum-total of individuating factors in a work, the sign of the Persona or Personality, through which the Archetype is rendered....Literature, properly speaking, can be said to come into existence at the moment a Signature is imposed upon the Archetype. The purely archetypal, without signature elements, is the myth."<sup>29</sup> — Myth can be retold in any language and in any form just so faith is kept with the basic plot and essential symbols, but when one of these myths is fashioned into literature by Milton or Dickens or Faulkner, the signature is unmistakable. The Cinderella story may take many forms, but Shaw's Pymalian bears its author's unique imprint.

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<sup>29</sup>"Archetype and Signature," pp. 261-62.

## II

Faulkner, without consciously trying or intending to do so, seems to have created novels and short stories which have directly placed him in the school of psychological novelists -- particularly in that group which concern themselves with the primacy of the will and the unconscious in man's behavior.

Any interpretation of what Faulkner is about in his stories will be greatly aided by a recognition of the extent to which he utilizes the anti-intellectual, subconscious concepts of human character.<sup>30</sup>

The subconscious and the non-rational, two dominant factors in Faulkner's art -- and nowhere moreso than in The Bear -- are the basis of Jung's psychology, which is ultimately a world-view: "The rational attitude of culture necessarily runs into its opposite, the irrational devastation of culture. We should never identify ourselves with reason, for man is not and never will be a creature of reason alone....The irrational cannot and must not be extirpated. The gods cannot and must not die."<sup>31</sup>

In a sense acceptance of Jungian psychology entails a distrust of the purely rational and an understanding of the vital role played by the emotions, the intuition or whatever

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<sup>30</sup>Harry M. Campbell and Ruel E. Foster. William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal (Norman, 1951), p. 42.

<sup>31</sup>Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, p. 71.

name we give to the faculties of subconscious apprehension: faculties found more evident and more operative in primitive than in civilized man. The struggle of Isaac McCaslin is, in large part, to escape the shackles which lock him in a social and intellectual system based on "the rational attitude of culture," to escape the shackles by flight into the wilderness, by a return to the understanding of primitive man, by participation in archetypal rituals. Thus Ike can say of Sam Fathers, the primitive Indian, the old priest of the wilderness: He set me free.

The question of Faulkner's primitivism has been discussed so often that for me to take it up again here might seem unwarranted; yet the discussion has often been predicated on a misunderstanding of the true nature of primitivism as a philosophic position. Primitivism is often thought of in Rousseauian terms -- the noble savage, the unspoiled, idyllic life of the childlike naif in a state of natural grace. When Neal Woodruff argues that "There is no rigid scheme, no consistency to suggest that fulfillment is a consequence of being poor white, or Indian or a child,"<sup>32</sup> he is thinking of Faulkner's primitivism in this rather shallow Rousseauian sense. Yet I think Faulkner's primitivism is far more profound than that: it is

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<sup>32</sup>"The Bear' and Faulkner's Moral Vision," Studies in Faulkner (Carnegie Series in English, no. 6) (Pittsburg, 1961,) p. 59.

a way of seeing the world, of ordering experience, and is thus basically an epistemological and axiological system, albeit one which rejects the rational in favor of a more basic and archaic way of knowing: "Ideas and facts," Faulkner believed, "have very little connection with truth."<sup>33</sup>

James Baird in his book Ishmael argues that the cultural failure of the West, especially the failure of its religious system, forced many writers outside a comfortable orthodoxy into a search for symbols to embody their vision of life; this search led to the examination of primitive religions and the mythical substructures out of which they grew. "Authentic primitivism is a mode of sentience, a creed springing inevitably from a state of cultural failure. It represents one attempt of Western man to restore the symbolism of human existence."<sup>34</sup> Such a philosophy is quite different, Baird contends, from the Rousseauian primitivism which he terms "the symbolism of nostalgic reference," that is "the symbolic presentation of instances of the archaic, or distant, or 'remotely good.'"<sup>35</sup> The mode of life of the American Indian, for example, might be seized upon as pure

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<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Jean Stein, "Writers at Work: William Faulkner," Paris Review, IV (Spring, 1956), p. 49.

<sup>34</sup>(Baltimore, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

and good because it is direct and simple, but this is not to go to the heart of primitivism, to the central religious symbols which give primitive life its existential meaning. Such decorative primitivism Baird rejects, and I wish to follow him: for in The Bear Faulkner is recreating the true mythical past of the primitive mind; his primitivism is more than nostalgia or romantic metaphor. "We must see the distinctions between the artist of nostalgic reference, the symbolist of externalities...; and the artist of primitive feeling,...the marker of life symbols reconstructing an archetypal reality."<sup>36</sup> Faulkner is the second type of artist, and in such art primitivism and the use of archetypes are merged in an atavistic return to the archaic past, through the artist's own subconscious, in search of a culture and a symbolism to replace the dead faith of his own age. Like Jung and Baird, he sees modern man not as a separate creature in time, but as preserving archaic man within himself. As modern psychology has shown us, "A single person may step out of his cultural pattern at any time, producing dreams or acts which bring again to life myths which might have been thought to be dead or outgrown...."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Idem.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes. The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, P rebirth and Resurrection (New York, 1963), p. 15.

The Bear, of all Faulkner's works, relies most heavily on primitive archetypes, on the myths we thought dead or outgrown. Through participation in ancient rituals and rites -- which I shall delineate in the following chapters -- Isaac McCaslin seeks to return to the religion and culture of primitive man, to attain a vision of life lost in modern civilized culture. His return is a journey out of civilization, out of consciousness, out of Christianity into the wilderness, the unconscious, the archetypal. He seeks escape from the decay and corruption of his own time and place in the eternal archetypes which lie at the core of man's earliest experience.

Critics have wanted to see The Bear as an artistic statement of one or another modern creed. Hyatt Waggoner, who is determined, despite all Faulkner can do to prevent it, to make him a Christian, sees the "theology" of The Bear as "a kind of 'demythologized' and somewhat romantic Christianity."<sup>38</sup> Neal Woodruff, on the other hand, writes, "The Christian motifs and Biblical analogies, however -- both covert and overt, early and late -- seem to me to parallel a humanistic vision, to illuminate and reinforce it, but not to transform

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<sup>38</sup> William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington, 1959), p. 207.

it into a Christian account of man."<sup>39</sup> There are, without doubt, many Christian overtones, but the point to be stressed is that the symbols and allusions used are not those unique in Christianity but are those which Christianity shares with other religions, which are common to all men, which, in short, are archetypal. Likewise, the values that Ike discovers in the wilderness may parallel those of humanism, but they are not accepted because they are the values of humanism; rather they are the primitive values that Ike acquires from the hunt, the wilderness, the old bear: endurance and pity and tolerance and forbearance and love. And in many other ways Faulkner's vision in The Bear is opposed to the principles of humanism: there is no sense of the progress or perfectability of man; if anything, just the opposite is true: what modern man has considered progress is the very force which is destroying the value of life. The symbols of Christianity and humanism, however, Faulkner employs in so far as they serve his artistic purpose. He once spoke of Christianity as the Jewish fairy tale which was imposed on the Western world,<sup>40</sup> yet, because of their value, he would not hesitate to employ Christian symbols: "...out of the background of religion

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<sup>39</sup>"The Bear' and Faulkner's Moral Vision," p. 44.

<sup>40</sup>New Orleans Sketches (New York, 1961), p. 54.

which we have and which is a part of the experience the writer draws from,...if it [the symbol] seems good at the moment, he uses it with all gratitude....<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Quoted in Joseph L. Fant and Robert Ashley, eds., Faulkner at West Point (New York, 1964), p. 102.



### III

Alexander Kern has called The Bear "the profoundest and most penetrating exploration to date of the American myths of the destruction of the Eden of the wilderness and the fate of the Adamic hero."<sup>42</sup> Although it is particularly American, The Bear really deals with the universal theme of the loss of Eden and the dispossessed Adam. In examining a work which relies so heavily on myth, it seems to me that the mythical or archetypal approach that I have discussed will be of great value. Such an approach is, however, fraught with certain dangers. Cleanth Brooks has shown this clearly -- and amusingly:

Anthropology has been used to throw startling light upon the Compson family. In The Golden Bough we are told that in Burma adulterers kill a pig to atone for their crime and pray that the hills and streams will be healed. Now someone has noted that the Compsons kill a pig for their Christmas dinner, but they do it without penitence and without expressing any wish for atonement. This is so ingenious that the voice of common sense may seem that of a churlish spoilsport. Yet only one of the Compsons, Uncle Maury, is an adulterer, and Uncle Maury is not Burmese. Shall there be no more innocent consumption of pork chops and spare ribs in Yoknapatawpha County because someone has read The Golden Bough?<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>"Myth and Symbol in Criticism of Faulkner's 'The Bear'" in Bernice Slotz, ed., Myth and Symbol (Lincoln, 1963), p. 154.

<sup>43</sup>William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven, 1963), pp. 7-8. The article to which Brooks refers is Barbara Crossman, "The Sound and the Fury: The Pattern of Sacrifice," Arizona Quarterly, XVI (1960), p. 11.

Certainly common sense rebels at this sort of legerdemain; certainly common sense must always temper the use of archetypal criticism, as it must, indeed, any criticism. But common sense alone seldom allows the reader of a work of art to receive its full impact: thus, I take it, we have scholarship, the attempt to discover the figure in the carpet. Whether the criticism be historical, psychological, textual or archetypal, this is its purpose. To argue, therefore, as Mr. Brooks does, quite cogently, that the archetypal approach can be and often is misused is not to argue against the validity of the instrument itself: the scalpel is not to blame when the doctor slips.

Many critics, however, want to discredit the method itself, and, while this is not the place for a general discussion of the pros and cons of myth criticism, I would like to consider briefly the most persistent, yet perhaps the most feeble charge brought against it. Malcolm Cowley's attack is typical and probably the best known: "Instead of approaching any imaginative work as an object to be studied for itself and revealed in its true nature, they are tempted to regard it as subject matter for an imaginative work of their own, a critical tone poem or fantasia. The result is that the work under discussion may be transformed into something its author never intended it would be."<sup>44</sup> Cowley concedes that myth criticism

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<sup>44</sup>The Literary Situation (New York, 1958), p. 15.

can give texts "a new dimension. But," he adds, "the fact remains that far too many of the readings are more like spiritualistic seances or demonstrations of parlor magic. When the critic utters an incantation, waving his sorcerer's wand -- presto! -- everything is transformed into something else."<sup>45</sup>

There is no doubt, certainly, that some myth critics have gone to extremes and have offered readings which seem ridiculous: Cowley is particularly appalled by Richard Chase's book on Melville. But to dismiss all significance and meaning in a work that the author did not "intend" is surely an anachronism in modern criticism. The coup de grace was delivered a number of years ago in an article "The Intentional Fallacy," the contents of which are so widely known that I need not reiterate.<sup>46</sup> A number of years before this, however, Miss Maud Bodkin, one of the first of the archetypal critics, had anticipated and effectively answered the kind of objection which Cowley raises. I will let her statement serve as defense for the archetypal approach to criticism:

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>46</sup>W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, Sewanee Review, LIV (1946), pp. 468-88. Cf. T. M. Gang, "Intention," Essays in Criticism, VII (1957), pp. 175-86; R. Jack Smith, "Intention in an Organic Theory of Poetry," Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), pp. 625-33.

It is with the complete resources of our minds that we must appreciate, if appreciation is to be genuine. If, for instance, we have found certain elements in experience made newly explicit through the teaching of Freud, that new awareness will enter into our appreciation of Othello, or of Hamlet, though it was not present in Shakespeare's own thought, nor the audience for whom he wrote.

One can no more bind within the limits of the author's intention the interactions of new minds on a play or poem that lives on after his death, than one can restrict within its parents' understanding the interrelations of the child that goes forth from their bodies to live its own life in the world.<sup>47</sup>

If, then, the search for archetypal meaning in a work of art leads into the dark recesses of man's unconscious and into the dim history of his primitive past, we must be willing to pursue it there; whether or not the artist knew that he too had traveled there is not, strictly speaking, the concern of the literary critic. Many an artist is surprised by the depth of his own vision; perhaps here lies his genius. And we can only be grateful that psychology and anthropology help us fathom it.

"Myths," Albert Camus wrote, "are made for the imagination to breathe life into them."<sup>48</sup> New and significant meanings are breathed by each generation of writers into tales which arose out of man's earliest awareness of his world and himself.

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<sup>47</sup>Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (Oxford, 1934), p. 334.

<sup>48</sup>The Myth of Sisyphus (New York, 1955), p. 89.

Thus a poet as modern as Yeats couches his vision in a legend as ancient as that of Leda. It is the purpose of archetypal criticism to interpret anew these myths. Stanley Edgar Hyman, evaluating Miss Bodkin's contribution to criticism, said, "She not only has used the poem to illustrate her archetypal pattern, but has made the pattern illuminate the poem,...and greatly heighten and inform enjoyment."<sup>49</sup> In so far as I am able, I want to perform the same function for The Bear.

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<sup>49</sup>The Armed Vision (New York, 1952), p. 147.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WATER AND THE WILDERNESS

Floyd Watkins, seeking to capture the spirit of The Bear by accompanying a group of Faulkner's Oxfordians on a hunt to the Delta, described the wilderness -- or what was left of it -- as "a man's world -- or a boy's."<sup>1</sup> This rather casual remark carries a great deal of meaning, for in it is the crux of Faulkner's attitude toward the wilderness: it is the world of the boy, the world in which he can escape the restrictions and traditions of society, the entanglements of family, and that most horrible symbol of civilization -- woman. It is the world of Huck Finn's raft, Ishmael's ocean, Nick Adam's Big Two-Hearted River: the primal wilderness, uncorrupted, the boy's dream.

In this chapter I want to set forth Faulkner's attitude toward society and the wilderness, showing how he holds views on each which have long and honorable tradition in American literature and social thinking; and then to present the basic archetypal symbol which he uses to characterize the wilderness -- water. The first of these tasks has been performed

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<sup>1</sup>"Delta Hunt," Southwest Review, XLV (Summer, 1960), p. 268.

often before, and much of what I will say is an assimilation of the view of other critics; the second has not been commented upon, however, although through the water symbolism, Faulkner makes his most profound statement about the wilderness.

Faulkner's belief in the communal nature of the land, a kind of primitive, non-rational communism, is central to his philosophy in The Bear, but it runs as an important theme throughout much of his work. In "Lo" (1935) an Indian reminds President Jackson that "God's forest and the deer which he put in it belong to all";<sup>2</sup> in "Retreat" (1938) Buck and Buddy McCaslin believed that "land did not belong to people but people belonged to land."<sup>3</sup> Faulkner's view of the land as an almost mystical force can be seen in another passage from The Unvanquished: "the earth would permit them to live on and out of it and use it only so long as they behaved and...if they did not behave right, it would shake them off just like a dog getting rid of fleas."<sup>4</sup> This view Faulkner instills in Ike McCaslin who, as an old man, we are told, "owned no property and never desired to since the earth was no man's but all men's, as light and air and weather were...."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Collected Stories (New York, 1943), p. 401.

<sup>3</sup>The Unvanquished (New York, 1938), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>Go Down, Moses (New York, 1955), p. 3. Hereafter reference to this work will be cited by the abbreviation GDM.

The very phrasing of this view is similar to the views of the nineteenth century American radicals such as Thorstein Veblen or Henry George. George wrote, "The equal right of all men to use the land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air -- it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence."<sup>6</sup> This strain of radicalism has, oddly enough, run through American social thinking since the beginning of our history; odd, because in no other country has the concept of private property and private ownership of the land become so deified as it has in America. The Shakers, the experimenters at Brook Farm, Emerson, Thoreau -- these and many more, however, thought counter to the rising tide of selfish private ownership. In doing so they had a long tradition of social thinking behind them. The Biblical injunction, "The land shall not be sold forever,"<sup>7</sup> and the attitude of Christ and the early Christians toward private property provided part of the framework for such thinking. By the eighteenth century a philosophy based on the concept of natural rights had grown up to support the idea of communal ownership of land, a philosophy expounded by -- among others -- Locke, Rousseau, and the Physiocrats, who contended "that the evils

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<sup>6</sup>Progress and Poverty (New York, 1953), p. 338.

<sup>7</sup>Leviticus 25:23.



which plague mankind derive from the private ownership of land, that when men claim to possess the earth they claim to possess those who live upon it as well."<sup>8</sup>

Rousseau in his "Discourse on Inequality" stated this philosophy as forcefully as possible:

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying This is mine, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, "Beware of listening to this imposter; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody."<sup>9</sup>

Faulkner, in Absalom, Absalom! relies heavily on this idea for the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen. "Where he [the boy Sutpen] lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say, 'This is mine,' was crazy."<sup>10</sup> But returning to civilization, Sutpen sees the man who had fenced off the land and said, "This is mine," who had bought and used other people and said they were his; and Sutpen, too, is made mad by the desire to own land and people of whom he can say "This is mine."

<sup>8</sup>Dale G. Breaden, "William Faulkner and the Land," American Quarterly, X (Fall, 1958), p. 345.

<sup>9</sup>The Social Contract (New York, n.d.), p. 193.

<sup>10</sup>(New York, 1951), p. 221)

His own tragedy, and the tragedy of his family, and of the South, is the tragedy of ownership of the land and, consequently, of the Negro.

Ike's grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, like Sutpen, also founds a dynasty based on land he bought from Indians -- land not really theirs to sell -- and like Sutpen, he comes to own people as a consequence of owning the land. And like Sutpen's, his family suffers the tragedy of ownership and slavery. "Social man's initial error is to think that he can own the land. That error alienates him from truth and from himself....His illusion that he can possess things culminates in his attempt to possess other human beings."<sup>11</sup> Thus the tragedy of the Thomas Sutpens and the Carothers McCaslins is their grasping attempts to own land, thereby forfeiting true feeling for it, and to own other human beings, thereby forfeiting human understanding and affection. When Carothers buys Sam Fathers and his mother, a quadroon slave, from Ikemottube, the Indian chief, he is victimizing them in the same way that he has victimized the land.<sup>12</sup>

This desire for things, for property, Faulkner seems to

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<sup>11</sup>Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York, 1964), p. 248.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Stanley Sultan, "Call Me Ishmael: The Hagiography of Isaac McCaslin," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, III (Spring, 1961), p. 54.

say, lies at the heart of what we call civilization. Opposed to it is the wilderness, where the land and the men are still free: the distinction between master and slave, white and black, the conventions and restrictions imposed by society have no meaning there. As a boy, Ike had come to a knowledge "of the wilderness, of the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document: -- of white men fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey....It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive...."<sup>13</sup> Compare Ike's view of the wilderness with this statement of Emersons: "So the reliance on property...is the want of self-reliance....[Men] measure their esteem of each other by what each has, not by what each is. But a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, out of new respect for his nature. Especially he hates what he has if he sees that it is accidental, -- came to him by inheritance, or gift, or crime; then he feels that it is not [worth (sic)] having; it does not belong to him, has no root in him..."<sup>14</sup> These words fit Ike exactly: he values the wilderness because

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<sup>13</sup>GM, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup>"Self-Reliance," Essays: First Series (Boston, 1893), II, pp. 85-86.

in it each man is judged by what he is not by what he has, and he is ashamed of his property because it is the inheritance of his grandfather's crimes. Property, then, is the hallmark of civilization, freedom the hallmark of the wilderness.

These antinomies are basic to understanding The Bear: property versus freedom, civilization versus the wilderness. Faulkner has adopted "a theme -- a point of view, in fact -- deeply embedded in American literature. In the conscious and unconscious memory of American writers, the woods and river have loomed large because of their associations with a primitive and natural existence, free from the restraints and corruption of civilization."<sup>15</sup> For Cooper the life of the Indian in the calm and beautiful surroundings of the virgin forests (somewhat overly romanticized perhaps) seemed good and true. "The wickedness and waste of the settlements," a favorite phrase of Leatherstocking, is contrasted with his own simple, honest life in the wilderness,<sup>16</sup> a life which finally disappears before the axe of the destructive settlers. In Huck Finn the boy and the slave seek to escape the complexity and

<sup>15</sup>Melvin Backman, "The Wilderness and the Negro in Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" PMLA, LXXVI (Dec., 1961), p. 596.

<sup>16</sup>Ursula Brumm, "Wilderness and Civilization: A Note on William Faulkner," Partisan Review, XXII (Summer, 1955), p. 342.

corruption of civilization on a raft in the Mississippi, where they establish a pure and idyllic friendship based on each realizing the true worth of the other; but "from the land come the representatives of civilization, armed with greed and deceit and violence, to shatter their idyll."<sup>17</sup> At the end of the book, Huck, who has been taken in hand by that archfiend of civilization, a woman, says, "I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can't stand it."<sup>18</sup>

The same attitude can be found in some of Melville's works. Ishmael's famous opening passage in Moby Dick on the stultifying nature of life in towns is only the best known example. In Pierre Melville wrote, "there came into the mind of Pierre thoughts and fancies never imbibed within the gates of towns; but only given forth by the atmosphere of the primal forests, which with the eternal oceans, are the only unchanging objects remaining to this day, from those that originally met the gaze of Adam."<sup>19</sup> The forests and the oceans, the two

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<sup>17</sup>Backman, "The Wilderness," p. 596.

<sup>18</sup>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (New York, 1933), p. 343.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Erumm, "Wilderness and Civilization," p. 344.

great aboriginal forces, have remained constant, unchanging, pure, and here man can escape from the crushing forces of civilization.

In the forest, Hemingway's most sensitive character, Nick Adams, seeks to regain the mental equilibrium that he had lost in the rending conflicts of civilization. He thinks of the woods where he is seeking refuge: "Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in a good place."<sup>20</sup>

Though all of these works are different in many artistic ways -- tone, style, characterization -- they share one common point of view: the harmful and corruptive power of civilization and the pure and restorative power of nature. This theme runs through much of America's greatest literature and can be said to be a uniquely American archetype.

The deep-seated suspicion of society that runs through each of these works is a revolt against traditions, customs, pretenses -- the things that bind man and keep him from the freedom of the wilderness. This is symbolized by the fear of women and marriage. Faulkner has called Americans a race of married bachelors,<sup>21</sup> but the fear goes even deeper. These

<sup>20</sup>"Big Two-Hearted River," The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York, 1938), p. 215.

<sup>21</sup>Big Woods (New York, 1955), p. [2].

characters from Leatherstocking to Sam Fathers must abstain from marriage if they are to preserve the freedom they found in the life in nature. "To start a family, to provide and procreate, would have severed their bonds to the wilderness and involved them in all the activities bearing the burden and taint of civilization."<sup>22</sup> Ike marries but refuses to have children; he will give no hostages to civilization; he will not propagate a heritage steeped in the corruption of ownership and slavery. His wife, who cannot understand this refusal, leaves him, so that he becomes "uncle to half a county and father to no one."<sup>23</sup>

In one of her poems Louise Bogan writes, "Women have no wilderness in them." They represent all that is stultifying and civilizing, so that the hunters must escape them and return to the wilderness which has no women in it, no taint of civilization. So each year the band of hunters from Jefferson sever their ties to their women, their property, their offices and ledgers and return to the wilderness for the ritual hunt; here they are no longer businessmen or planters, masters or husbands, but simply men. The masculine nature of the hunt is emphasized. "Then for two weeks he [Ike] ate the coarse

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<sup>22</sup>Brumm, "Wilderness and Civilization," p. 343.

<sup>23</sup>GM, p. 3.

rapid food -- the shapeless sour bread, the wild strange meat, venison and bear and turkey and coon which he had never tasted before -- which men ate, cooked by men who were hunters first...."<sup>24</sup>

In this escape from civilization the hunters are seeking to return to their primitive origins and to escape the corruption in which they engage the rest of the year. Their values in the wilderness thus become the values of the primitive and only the ability of each individual as a hunter is of importance. Henderson and Oakes have pointed out that "primitive folk are without...any complex culture-pattern associated with property or prestige which must be guarded or fought over. It is enough that they should become men and live successfully within the modest opportunities for achievement open to them as individuals, in an otherwise totally communal, undifferentiated group."<sup>25</sup> So closely does this parallel Faulkner's ideas about the nature of the land and of man's role vis-a-vis the land and each other that it might have been written as a description of the ideal of The Bear, for this ideal is that of primitive society where the land exists for all to use in common trust, where men exist only as men, "not white nor black nor red but men, hunters."

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>25</sup>Wisdom of the Serpent, p. 50.



In brief summary, then, we can state Faulkner's beliefs on the antinomies of civilization versus the wilderness thus: man cannot in any meaningful way own the land for it is the common property of all men; the perverted attempts at ownership serve only to alienate man from the land, from his fellowmen whom he must exploit to maintain his ownership; modern civilization is predicated upon ownership and thus by its very nature is corrupt and corrupting; and to escape this corruption of ownership and its attendant evils man must seek the primitive life which antedates ownership and provides man with the secret of his nature. "In the woods, man, within the pattern of natural existence, strips away the layers of artificiality imposed on him by society and bares the vital forces of his inner being. By confronting his essential self, he acknowledges his relation to the world of nature, its cyclical pattern of death and regeneration, and hence his own role in that pattern."<sup>26</sup>

The yearly hunt for the bear is more than a hunt, for the bear is more than a bear; he is "not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild

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<sup>26</sup>Volpe, A Reader's Guide to Faulkner, p. 239.

life...."<sup>27</sup> and the hunt for him is "the yearly pageant-rite of the old bear's furious immortality."<sup>28</sup> Thus the hunt takes on a religious significance, for in a very real sense the hunters are seeking god, seeking the spirit of the wilderness; and by this rite they hope to expiate their guilt. They seek a yearly rebirth and they must seek it by submerging themselves in the wilderness. The archetypal symbol Faulkner uses for the wilderness is water, the primal water, source of all life, symbol of rebirth.

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<sup>27</sup>GDM, p. 193.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

## II

In primitive religions a select band of initiates inhabit a sacred place which endows them with supernatural energy; this place is the center of the world, the sacred omphalos, through which the group communicates with God.<sup>29</sup> For Faulkner, as he re-created the symbolic religion of primitivism, the woods are such a sacred omphalos and, perhaps unconsciously, he sought the symbol which carries the greatest archetypal significance to characterize his sacred place: the symbol of water. "The realm of primordial and generative waters," Baird tells us, "describes the deepest reach of the symbolistic imagination in primitivism."<sup>30</sup> For the primitive, water was the symbol of the source of life, not only of human life but of the universe and the gods as well. "Behind all the manifestations of the cosmos and the gods is the symbol of water. It is the reality from which all life emerges."<sup>31</sup>

"Birth," Freud said, "is almost invariably represented by some reference to water."<sup>32</sup> He relates this phenomenon to

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<sup>29</sup> Pierre Gordan, Sex and Religion (New York, 1948), p. 120

<sup>30</sup> Ishmael, p. 341.

<sup>31</sup> Charles H. Long, Alpha: The Myths of Creation (New York, 1963), p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, p. 143.

the evolutionary fact that all mammals are descended from water creatures and that each person passes the first phase of his existence in water, i.e. the amniotic fluid of the mother's womb. Jung points out that the maternal significance of water is one of the clearest and most pervasive in mythology.

From water comes life....All that is living rises as does the sun, from the water, and at every evening plunges into the water. Born from the springs, rivers, the seas at death man arrives at the water of the Styx in order to enter upon "the night journey of the sea." The wish is that the black water of death might be the water of life; that death, with its cold embrace, might be the mother's womb, just as the sea devours the sun, but brings it forth again out of the maternal womb.<sup>33</sup>

In another place he writes, "The primal water conceived as the womb, the breast of the mother, and the cradle, is a genuinely mythological image."<sup>34</sup>

Apparently the association of water with birth has figured in myth and religion for as long as man has had either. Thales, the earliest of the Greek philosophers, asserted that everything came from water, and he was only echoing what Homer had said of Oceanus, "source of all things."<sup>35</sup> Freud shows that the myth of the birth of the hero in different cultures and

<sup>33</sup>Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, p.

<sup>34</sup>Essays on a Science of Mythology, p. 148.

<sup>35</sup>Iliad, XIV, p. 246.

in different ages is "represented in countless dreams by pulling out of the water or rescuing from the water" the hero-infant.<sup>36</sup> These mythological examples could be extended, but the fact seems obvious that water is an archetypal symbol of birth and regenerative power. Loren Oken in the last century attempted to provide a scientific basis for this mythological motif. According to his view, the first man "must have developed in a uterus much larger than the human one. This uterus is the sea. That all things come from the sea is a truth that nobody will dispute who has occupied himself with natural history and philosophy."<sup>37</sup> Oken wrote two decades before Darwin's *Origin of Species*, yet later evolutionary discoveries proved him to be essentially correct: mankind was born out of the womb of the sea.

The archetype of birth by water has a corollary; the archetype of rebirth by water, for if man is born of water, then he must return to the symbolic water-womb for spiritual rebirth. Christian baptism is only the best known of many ritual and mythical spiritual renewals. Jung realized this: "water is the original source of all birth, the element that

<sup>36</sup>Moses and Monotheism, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup>"Entstehung der ersten Menschen," Isis, IV (1819), cols. 1117. Quoted in Jung and Kerenyi, Essays on a Science of Mythology, p. 47.

purifies everything because everything is reborn in it." (my italics)<sup>38</sup> This symbolism, though fairly obvious, exists on several levels. The most apparent symbolism of baptism and similar rites is the washing away of sin and purifying the spirit in the sense of the psalmist who sang, "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."<sup>39</sup> But the symbolism has a deeper meaning: the submergence in water is death, a loss of consciousness and ego, and the rising from the water is a rebirth into a spiritual and eternal life. Thus it is a symbolic return to the womb so that from the womb man can be reborn again. Or, as Charles Lang writes, "the descent into water is analogous to...a return to the womb. The purpose of such descents into the unformed chaotic is renewal and stability. The symbolism of baptism is derived from this element in the water symbolism. By plunging into the water the old is washed away and the new creation emerges."<sup>40</sup>

One critic has written of "the protecting womb of the wilderness" in The Bear,<sup>41</sup> and, indeed, the wilderness is a

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> Psalms 51:2

<sup>40</sup> Alpha, p. 190.

<sup>41</sup> Francis L. Utley, "Pride and Humility: The Cultural Roots of Ike McCaslin," in Utley et al., Bear, Man, and God: Seven Approaches to William Faulkner's The Bear (New York, 1964), p. 248.

womb in the sense I have discussed, the womb of the primitive earth where the primitive rites of renewal are acted out. Here in the dark, somber, impenetrable forest the hunters -- Major de Spain, General Compson, Walter Ewell, McCaslin Edmonds and the rest -- retreat from the corruption of their decaying world, a world tainted by slavery and commercialism, to seek the primal source of strength and life. At ten, Ike McCaslin is taken there for the first time, to enter "his novitiate to the true wilderness."<sup>42</sup> And for him the wilderness is like the sea, the mythical water of birth:

He saw the wilderness through a slow drizzle of November rain....the surrey moving through the skeleton stalks of cotton and corn in the last of open country, the last trace of man's puny gnawing at the immemorial flank, until, dwarfed by that perspective into an almost ridiculous diminishment, the surrey itself seemed to have ceased to move (this too to be completed later, years later, after he had grown to be a man and had seen the sea) as a solitary small boat hangs in lonely immobility, merely tossing up and down, in the infinite waste of the ocean while the water and then the apparently impenetrably land which it nears without appreciable progress, swings slowly and opens the widening inlet which is the anchorage. He entered it....

It seemed to him that at the age of ten he was witnessing his own birth.<sup>43</sup>

Witnessing his own birth upon entering the wilderness that is like the sea: here is the symbolism of the water-birth

<sup>42</sup>CM, p. 195.

<sup>43</sup>Idem.

archetype; Iko knew of this place, he says, before he ever saw it, as a part of some memory, "memory from the long time before it ever became his memory."<sup>44</sup> This memory, which we can see as the collective unconscious memory of the race, has instilled in him the knowledge of the wilderness and of its power to provide him a new life of the spirit. Here he will undergo an initiation into the primitive life and seek to wash away the stain of ownership and slavery that is his inheritance from Carothers McCaslin and civilization.

Faulkner, in presenting the wilderness through water symbolism, deepens its significance by drawing on all the subconscious associations surrounding the water-birth archetype. And he effectively fuses the two symbols of primitive escape from civilization that have appeared repeatedly in American literature. "In Two Years Before the Mast, in Moby Dick, in Huckleberry Finn the water is there, is the very texture of the novel; the Leatherstocking Tales propose another symbol for the same meaning; the virgin forest. Notice the adjectives -- the virgin forest and the forever inviolable sea."<sup>45</sup> To escape civilization Ishmael shipped out to sea, Huck took off on his raft, and Leatherstocking,

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>45</sup>Leslie Fiedler, An End to Innocence (Boston, 1955), p. 148.



like so many early Americans, went deeper into the wilderness; for each, water or wilderness was a retreat, a return to the womb. "Ishmael on the sea," writes Baird, "dreams of its deepest and least known generative waters out of which rose the continents and islands, and on land, of the primal world of...the rain forest and of the original life of the ancient earth."<sup>46</sup> In The Bear Faulkner not only juxtaposes the two primal forces of water and wilderness, he fuses them into one all-encompassing symbol.

As a water-womb symbol, the wilderness, then, is a state of innocence and primitive goodness, Eden before the fall. The myth of original innocence or of an Edenic existence has a psychological basis. It is argued that such a concept stems from the prenatal unconscious remembrance of existence in the womb, an existence which for man was perfect. His ejection from the warm, dark place of complete comfort into a cold and alien world (Rank's "birth trauma") is paralleled in mythologies by the idea of a fall: Adam is driven from Eden. The relation of the birth trauma to myths of the fall, Joseph Campbell says, "is one of those mythological universals that surely merit interpretation, rather from a psychological than

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<sup>46</sup> Ishmael, p. 342.

from an ethnological point of view."<sup>47</sup>

Following this mythological motif, we can view the wilderness as the primitive Edenic existence before the advent of the wins of ownership and slavery, and civilization as the postlapsarian world of the fall. The yearly pageant-rite of the hunt, then, is an attempt of the men, by becoming hunters again, by returning to the primitive life, to regain their lost purity. They seek the blessings of the wilderness spirit, Old Ben, the bear. And just as Faulkner used water as a symbol of the wilderness, so he turns again to water imagery to present Ike's first view of Old Ben:

It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It did not walk back into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion as he had watched a fish, a huge old bass, sink back into the depths of its pool and vanish without even any movement of its fins.<sup>48</sup>

It sank back into the depths of the water: the image of the primal sea creature, the fish. The bear is, of course, always a bear, but Faulkner's image here is more than just a comparison used in passing, for his bear, in the world of shadows that

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<sup>47</sup>The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (New York, 1959), I, pp. 61-62.

<sup>48</sup>GTM, p. 209.

is the unconscious memory, is akin to the ancient fish gods of mythology.

But a distinction must be made here between the two functions of the fish figures in the world's myths and religions. On one hand the fish is seen as the destroyer, the dragon-fish: the Chinese dragons, Grendel in Beowulf, in Babylonian mythology Tiamat with whom Bel-Merodach struggles, and the Leviathan of the Old Testament. In Isaiah 27:1 we find: "In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." Many critics see *Moby Dick* as the fullest expression in literature of the fish as destroyer;<sup>49</sup> "the White Whale represents the mythological dragons of both Western and Eastern tradition."<sup>50</sup> But there is another mythological function of the fish, not as destroyer but as life giver. In Hindu theology Vishnu the Preserver is opposed to Siva the Destroyer; and the first avatar -- literally, descendant of Vishnu -- is

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<sup>49</sup>Van Wyck Brooks first suggested the connection between *Moby Dick* and Grendel in Emerson and Others (New York, 1927), p. 205. Koh Kasegawa suggests Tiamat in "Moby-Dick as a Symbolic Myth," Studies in English Literature (Tokyo) XXXVI (1960), pp. 257-272.

<sup>50</sup>Dorothee Finklestein, Melville's Orienda (New Haven, 1961), p. 163. Not all critics, of course, see the Whale as a symbol of evil; cf., for example, D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature.

the Matse or Fish, the redeeming avatar. This is the symbolism of The Bear: Old Ben as live-giving, redeeming fish. And again we find a close connection with the Christian symbol of baptism: "The fish is used as a symbol of baptism, for, just as the fish cannot live except in water, the true Christian cannot live save through the waters of baptism."<sup>51</sup>

Without pushing the identification to the extreme, I would like to suggest a parallel between Old Ben as fish-redeemer and Christ, as I have between the rites of the wilderness and baptism. Consider the comments of Tertullian, the early theologian, in his treatise on baptism, where he links the symbol of salvation (a fish) and the symbol of baptismal rebirth (water): "We are little fish and like our fish, Jesus Christ, we are born in the water, and we are not safe in any other way than by remaining in the water."<sup>52</sup> If we were to paraphrase this to read, "Ike and the other hunters are little fish and like their fish, Old Ben, they are of the water-wilderness, and they are not safe in any other way than by remaining in the wilderness," then would we not have the core of Faulkner's attitude in The Bear toward the primitive life of the wilderness?

<sup>51</sup>George Fergusson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art (New York, 1954), p. 15.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Thomas Stafford, Christian Symbolism (New York, 1952), p. 39.

Thus the wilderness, like the primal, life-giving water and the bear, the spirit of that wilderness, form the milieu in which the rebirth of Isaac McCaslin is accomplished. Ike is ready to begin his initiation into the community of the hunters and the secrets of the wilderness.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INITIATION: A NEW LIFE

"Everywhere one meets with the mysteries of initiation," writes Mircea Eliade, "and everywhere, even in the most archaic societies, they include the symbolism of death and a new birth."<sup>1</sup> Among primitive peoples, the initiation of the young boy into the secrets and beliefs of the tribe is an event of major importance, perhaps the most important event of his life, for initiation has both social and religious meaning of great significance and is thus one of the most pervasive archetypes the world over. The pattern of initiation is invariable: the boy is taken from his mother by a new spirit father, who will act as his guide and mediator; loses his old life as the child of woman by a return to the labyrinth womb of the ceremony; sees a vision of the tribal god; and then is reborn into the world of men. Each of these stages I will consider in greater detail, for they constitute the pattern of Ike's experience in the wilderness. Thus when I speak of the pattern of initiation in The Bear, I refer not to a boy's general awakening to the knowledge of evil -- a

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<sup>1</sup> Myths, Dreams and Mysteries (New York, 1960), p. 197.

theme which runs through so much of American literature from Goodman Brown to Holden Caulfield -- but rather to a strict pattern of action, a ritual, which is found at the center of primitive religion. Initiation does indeed involve the initiate's becoming aware of the existence of evil in the world, as Huck or Henry Fielding or Nick Adams becomes aware of it; but their experience is, in no formal sense of the word, an initiation. Ike's experience is. With Sam Fathers as his guide, he follows step by step the primitive ritual of death to his old life and rebirth into what Howe calls "the manly heroic possibilities of life."<sup>2</sup>

When the action of The Bear begins, Ike's mother -- the vain and silly Miss Sophonsiba whom we encountered in "Was" -- is already dead, as is his father, Uncle Buck McCaslin. But Ike, even as a child, is surrounded by the patrimony of his grandfather, the rapacious Carothers McCaslin, and his mother who insists that his father inhabit the plantation house that Carothers had built.<sup>3</sup> It is from this world that the boy must

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<sup>2</sup>William Faulkner, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup>Before his marriage, Uncle Buck with his twin, Uncle Buddy, in a partial rejection of their inheritance from old Carothers, had moved out of the grand house and into a log cabin. They used the house as a slave quarters, but locked only the front door at night, so that the Negroes could leave by the back door with the tacit understanding that they be back by the next morning. The attitude of these two brothers was unusually humanitarian for their time and place, but they could never bring themselves to reject outright the land and the slaves they had inherited or to acknowledge their Negro brother.

be separated and reborn as a child of the wilderness of wilderness parents.

Pierre Gordan tells us that the concept that "transcendental fatherhood was more essential than physical fatherhood originally derived from the initiations."<sup>4</sup> For an essential feature of the rites was a guide or guru to lead the initiate through the ritual and serve as the intermediary between the boy and the spirit world.<sup>5</sup> Myth and literature supply us with many such figures: Virgil in the *Divina Commedia* as the guide to Dante, Hermes as the guide to Aeneas in the *Aeneid*, Heracles as messenger to the underworld in the *Alcestis*. "As we trace him back to more primitive levels we find him represented as the tribal medicine man identified with the animal as totem..., as Master of Initiation."<sup>6</sup> This figure is familiar to those with a knowledge of Jungian psychology as "the wise old man," the primitive tribal sorcerer or medicine-man who is endowed with some unusual or magical power. He is one of the most predominant of Jung's archetypal figures and in the initiation serves as the father-guide.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Sex and Peligion, pp. 123-24.

<sup>5</sup>Henderson and Oakes, Wisdom of the Serpent, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>7</sup>Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, pp. 94-95. He may also represent "a negative and dangerous aspect," Jung says, but that side of the archetype does not concern us here.



Bruno Bettelheim, who believes that the process of initiation is an attempt on the part of primitive man to share in the act of giving birth, a higher and more valuable life than the physical one the mother had given the boy, points out that "all writers on the subject have stressed that initiation is an act of rebirth, that in the ritual the adult man brings into being a new adult, the initiated boy. It has been fully recognized that one of the purposes of the ceremony is to give the boy...the impression that the boy was reborn [sic] by the father, and therefore owes his life to the father."<sup>8</sup> This new father need not be the physiological parent and often is not, for it is the life of the spirit not of the flesh which is the gift of the initiator.

That Sam Fathers plays such a role in The Bear is so obvious that I hardly need to point it out. The name alone gives all away, for it is as meaningful as any in a medieval allegory; "the name 'father' was given -- and still is -- to priests and initiators."<sup>9</sup> The old Indian, in whose veins ran the blood of kings and of slaves, is for Ike the father of the wilderness, the guide, the teacher, the priest; he "entered his novitiate to the true wilderness with Sam beside

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<sup>8</sup>Symbolic Wounds (Glencoe, Ill., 1954), p. 109.

<sup>9</sup>Gordon, Sex and Religion, p. 126.

him."<sup>10</sup> The phrase, "as Sam had taught him," runs like a refrain through the book, for it is Sam Fathers who teaches him the ways of the wilderness and who gives him the secret that will lead to his vision of the bear.

"Everywhere the mystery begins with the separation of the neophyte from his family, and a 'retreat' into the forest. In this there is already a symbolization of death."<sup>11</sup> This first step of initiation in The Bear is accomplished when Ike, at the age of ten, is taken from the plantation world -- the world of Carothers and Sophonsiba -- into the wilderness by Sam Fathers. His old life, the profane life, is finished; by his journey into the water-womb of the wilderness with Sam, he is both dying and being purified for his new birth.

In the wilderness, Ike twice feels himself in the presence of Old Ben, but does not see him. The second time:

He only heard the drumming of the woodpecker stop short off, and knew that the bear was looking at him. He never saw it. He did not know whether it was facing him from the cane or behind him. He did not move, holding the useless gun which he knew now he would never fire at it....

Then it was gone. As abruptly as it had stopped, the woodpecker's dry hammering set up again.... "I didn't see him," he said. "I didn't, Sam."

<sup>10</sup>GDM, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup>Eliade, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries, p. 179.

"I know it," Sam said. "He done the looking. You didn't hear him neither, did you?"  
 "No," the boy said....<sup>12</sup>

Old Ben, then, has seen Ike, and if the boy can prove himself worthy, the bear will let him come to him and receive his epiphany. So Ike goes to the woods each day to learn the ways of the hunter, the lore and craft of the primitive man of nature, and the virtues of humility and patience. But he carries with him his gun, and because of it the bear eludes him.

"You ain't looked right yet," Sam said.  
 He stopped. For a moment he didn't answer. Then he said peacefully, in a peaceful rushing burst, as when a boy's miniature dam in a little brook gives way: "All right. Yes. But how?"....  
 "It's the gun," Sam said....The gun, the boy thought. The gun. "You will have to choose," Sam said.<sup>13</sup>

To come into the presence of the bear Ike must relinquish his gun, the symbol of his physical power to kill; he must be willing to rely on his spiritual resources alone. The gun is symbolic of the hunter's will over nature's, a will which, in Ike, must be abnegated in an act of obedience to the spirit-god of the wilderness.

In this respect, I want to suggest another similarity to the primitive initiation ritual, the rites of circumcision.

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<sup>12</sup>GDM, p. 203.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

Freud suggests that the father, fearful that the son on becoming an adult might take his woman (the Oedipus complex), forces the son to accept the sexual dominance of the father by undergoing ritual castration, i.e., circumcision. "Whoever accepted this symbol showed by doing so that he was ready to submit to the father's will, although it was at the cost of a painful sacrifice."<sup>14</sup> The son, then, must lose his own will in that of the father's. Old Ben, in one sense, will not allow Ike to complete his initiation into manhood until the boy relinquishes the symbol of his own will and power (as well as the most obvious modern phallic symbol) -- the gun.

He had left his gun; by his own will and relinquishment he had accepted not a gambit, not a choice, but a condition in which the bear's heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the ancient rules of hunter and hunted had been abrogated. He would not even be afraid, not even in the moment when the fear would take him completely: blood, skin, bowels, bones, memory from the long time before it became his memory....<sup>15</sup>

So Ike relinquishes his gun in order to complete his obedience to the bear and gain his vision. But even this sacrifice is not enough: he still carried two objects of civilization, of the modern anti-primitive world:

<sup>14</sup>Freud, An Autobiographical Study (New York, 1952), p. 129. Cf. Moses and Monotheism, p. 122.

<sup>15</sup>GM, p. 207.

He had already relinquished, of his will, because of his need, in humility and peace and without regret, yet apparently that had not been enough. He stood for a moment -- a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the other from his overalls and hung them on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and entered it.<sup>16</sup>

The gun and compass were presents from his cousin McCaslin, trustee of the family estate, and the watch had been his grandfather's.<sup>17</sup> In rejecting these last accoutrements of civilization and family, Ike frees himself of their taint.<sup>18</sup> He is unencumbered, ready to enter the primitive existence wholly and without reservation.

One other aspect of Ike's rejection should be noted: in leaving the compass and the watch behind he is symbolically freeing himself from the restrictions of space and time. The similarity of this freedom to that felt by mystics of both East and West at the moment of their enlightenment, when they become one with some spiritual force, gives us a feeling of

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>17</sup>The rejection of these inheritances anticipates the final rejection of the whole McCaslin heritage, the land he "owned." This occurs in section four, but the seed is here. Cf. Sultan, "Call Me Ishmael," p. 55.

<sup>18</sup>It is interesting to note in this respect that Emerson wrote that civilized man "has a fine Geneva watch, but fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun." Essays: First Series, II, p. 83.

the depth of Ike's experience. Not only is his old life in civilization being transcended but rational consciousness itself is dissolved. At this point Ike is almost ready for his vision, but he must retreat even farther into the unconscious until personality is lost entirely: he must lose himself in the labyrinth.

One of the essential steps in initiation is the descent into the labyrinth, a symbolic return to the womb, from which the initiate can be reborn. Joseph Campbell writes that "a constellation of images denoting the plunge and dissolution of consciousness in the darkness of non-being must have been employed intentionally, from the very earliest date, to represent the analogy of threshold rites to the mystery of the child into the womb for birth."<sup>19</sup> This labyrinth symbolism has taken many forms -- a maze, a system of corridors in a temple, or, most commonly in primitive societies, a dance -- yet it "always has the same psychological effect. It temporarily disturbs rational conscious orientation to the point that... the initiate is 'confused' and symbolically 'loses his way.' Yet in this descent into chaos the inner mind is opened to the awareness of a new cosmic dimension of a transcendent nature."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>The Masks of God, I, pp. 65-66.

<sup>20</sup>Henderson and Oakes, Wisdom of the Serpent, p. 46.

Losing one's way in the labyrinth is synonymous to the plunge into the abyss of primal water, the return to the prenatal condition, involving the initiate's loss of consciousness.<sup>21</sup> After leaving behind his watch and compass and entering the woods, Ike "realized he was lost."<sup>22</sup> He walked in circle after circle seeking his way; he "made his next circle in the opposite direction and much larger, so that the two of them would bisect his tracks somewhere, but crossing no track nor mark anywhere of his feet or any feet...."<sup>23</sup> Totally lost in the wilderness, finally completely separated from his old life, Ike is at last ready for his vision: his initiation is completed. "Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there...."<sup>24</sup>

This vision is the last step of initiation: "a visionary animal...replaces the master of initiation. This has been described as a tutelary or guardian spirit to be obeyed from thence forward; in return, the youth will be given supernatural powers, whether in running or in gambling or in hunting or in becoming just simply a man."<sup>25</sup> San Fathers, then, has

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>22</sup>G.M., p. 208.

<sup>23</sup>Idem.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>25</sup>Henderson and Oakes, Wisdom of the Serpent, p. 50.

been superceded by the bear god, the androgenous spirit who becomes both father and mother to the initiate. This second mother, Jung says, is often an animal and even an animal normally thought to be a male, like Hiawatha's mother, who first appears at the Great Bear of the Mountains.<sup>26</sup> The moment the bear appears is the moment of Ike's rebirth, of his wilderness epiphany; he becomes just simply a man.

Incipit vita nova.

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<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Lewis, The Picaresque Saint (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 308.



## II

We have followed the steps of Ike's initiation into the community of hunters and the secrets of the wilderness, into spiritual manhood; the question now is, what effects will this new vision have upon his life as a man? "In philosophical terms," Eliade writes, "initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become another...."<sup>27</sup> Ike, then, by these rites, has successfully severed his bonds with the old life and assimilated the values of the hunter and the wilderness. Land, wealth, family, status -- these values of modern society -- no longer have any meaning for him; instead he has a new set of values.

"What is required of the initiate," Henderson and Oakes tell us, "is courage, humility and purity of heart...."<sup>28</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, in writing of The Bear, points out that these are just the values which Ike attains: "A cluster of virtues is unambiguously present from the start, as qualities to be striven for, prizes to be won...: pity and humility

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<sup>27</sup>Death and Rebirth (New York, 1958), p. x.

<sup>28</sup>Wisdom of the Serpent, p. 55.

and courage and pride and the will to endure and the rest."<sup>29</sup> They are like a magic incantation, these virtues of the primitive heart, and throughout The Bear Ike recites them like a religious devotion, perhaps to draw strength from their very sound, for they have become his creed, his articles of faith.

Knowledge of these virtues come to Ike as a revelation. He has striven for them to be sure; he has studied the ways of the wilderness long and hard in order to become a good hunter: he has shown courage and pride and humility and endurance. But their full meaning come to him only with his vision of the bear, in some mystical, non-rational way. For his initiation, culminating with this vision, gives him, as Eliade says, a new way of seeing. The initiate feels "that by his ordeal he has won something beautiful and valuable in the secrets he has been taught. He sees his native land with new eyes. He has learned of the altijira, the dream time, when there were totem-ancestor heroes, who were either men or animals or both."<sup>30</sup> This statement of the ideal of initiation describes Ike's experience exactly: he has acquired a secret beautiful and valuable; he sees both his patrimony and the wilderness with new eyes; and he has learned of the dream

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<sup>29</sup>The Picaresque Saint, p. 196.

<sup>30</sup>William Howells, The Heathens: Primitive Man and His Religions (Garden City, N.Y., 1950), p. 198.

time when the land was free and men lived in peace and equality.

But the corollary of Ike's acquiring a new set of values is his concomitant vision of evil: to understand the virtues of the wilderness he must at the same time understand the corrupting nature of his old life -- the rape of the land, the slavery, the whole social and economic framework of the South. If we read the experience of his initiation in part one correctly, then much of the critical confusion which exists over Ike's renunciation of all the land and wealth of his grandfather in the long and abstruse part four disappears.

Part four is out of sequence with the events in the rest of The Bear. It takes the form of a long dialogue between Ike and his cousin McCaslin Edmonds on Ike's twenty-first birthday. In the commissary of the plantation Ike has been pouring over the ledgers that his father and uncle kept jointly, and from their cryptic, illiterate and often humorous entries, he has deduced the tragic story of the cruel misgenesis of his grandfather. Carothers McCaslin had bought a Negro slave, Eunice, in 1807. Ike's father made this entry of her death: "Drowned in Crick Christmas Day 1832." But beneath it his uncle has written: "June 21th 1833 Drowned herself," and then his father's "23 Jun 1833 Who in hell ever heard of a niger drowning him self," and then again his

uncle's "Aug 13th 1833 Drownd herself."<sup>31</sup>

"But why? But why?" Ike questioned. Why did Uncle Buddy think she had drowned herself? He finds the answer farther on in the ledger. Carothers had had a child by Eunice in 1810, Tommasina, or Tomy as she was called. Twenty-three years later he had fornicated with this daughter, his own half-Negro child. When Eunice learned of this, she drowned herself, and both sons of Carothers knew it, although Buck was unwilling to admit it. The knowledge of this incestuous relationship hits Ike with the blow of a hammer: "His own daughter His own daughter. No No not even him...."<sup>32</sup>

He learns that Tomy had died giving birth to the child, a son, Turl, a son whom Carothers would never acknowledge, except, at the last, for a bequest of a thousand dollars in his will. "So I reckon that it was cheeper than saying My son to a nigger," Ike thought. "Even if My son wasn't but just two words,"<sup>33</sup> those same two words that Sutpen could never bring himself to say to Charles Bon, his own part Negro son. The horror of this knowledge -- of Carothers' having used his own daughter like "a night's spittoon" and refusing to recognize his own who to him was only a chattel, a piece of property,

<sup>31</sup>CW, p. 267.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 269-70.

a thing -- resolves Ike to refuse any part in such a patrimony. Thus on his birthday, the day when by the laws of civilized society the land was to have become his, Ike repudiates it, refuses to own the land and the people who by right should be free.

The moral strength to make this decision, it must be understood, stems from the vision of the wilderness and the virtues of primitivism, those end products of Ike's initiation. To McCaslin, Ike repeats, "Sam Fathers set me free," free of the curse of his grandfather and of all the South, "their ravaged patrimony, the dark and ravaged fatherland."<sup>34</sup> Thus we can see the truth of the important insight that R. W. B. Lewis has had into The Bear: "The harmony of the parts may be summarized in ancient formulas: the birth into virtue, and the vision of evil. Only the person adequately initiated can have the vision at all; and only the potency of the initiation enables the reborn individual to understand the evil when it is encountered. The action in section four (the discovery and renunciation) is made possible by the experience that preceded it: the ritual of the wilderness contains, implicitly, the decision in the commissary."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>35</sup>The Picaresque Saint, p. 202.

By participating in the archetypal rite of initiation, Ike attains the moral stature to transcend his own time and environment and to reject the material goals of his society, because he has had a glimpse of the eternal, the timeless. Eliade says of the initiate that "he learns the mystical relations between the tribe and the Supernatural Beings as these relations were established at the beginning of time."<sup>36</sup> Ike's "tribe" is not a literal one, not the band of hunters from Jefferson, but the primitive hunters of a past and perhaps mythical time, men in and of the wilderness; and by his initiation into this tribe of the archetypal dream time, Ike's values become those of its Supreme Being, the old bear, the wilderness god. And he, then, cannot accept, as his cousin and Major de Spain and General Compson and all the rest do, simply the nostalgic desire for a past way of life they seek to regain in the hunt, while never repudiating the ties that alienate them from the wilderness life; Ike's commitment to the wilderness is total.

The difference between Ike and the other hunters is stressed in the scene where Ike is pleading with his cousin to let him stay behind in the wilderness when the others leave. McCaslin objects that he cannot stay behind without

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<sup>36</sup> Death and Rebirth, p. x.

missing too much school. Ike continues to plead when old General Compson speaks:

"All right," General Compson said. "You can stay. If missing an extra week of school is going to throw you so far behind you'll have to sweat to find out some hired pedagogue put between the covers of a book, you better quit altogether. -- And you shut up, Cass," he said, though McCaslin had not spoken. "You've got one foot straddled into a farm and the other straddled into a bank; you ain't even got a good hand-hold where this boy was already an old man before you damned Sartorises and Edmonses invented farms and banks to keep yourselves from having to find out what this boy was born knowing and fearing too maybe without being afraid, that could go ten miles on a compass because he wanted to look at a bear none of us ever got near enough to put a bullet in and looked at the bear and came the ten miles back on the compass in the dark; maybe by God that's the why and wherefore of farms and banks."<sup>37</sup>

This speech is significant for it is a reprise of the two major subjects I have discussed: Faulkner's attitude toward modern society and the truth which Ike had attained by his initiation into the wilderness. The farms and banks were only attempts of man to escape from himself, artificial devices which corrupt and blind and alienate him from nature. All the hunters, except Ike -- even General Compson, for all the truth of his words -- have one foot in the bank and one in the farm, so that they can never know, perhaps fear to know, what Ike "was born knowing" -- or reborn knowing: that the courage and pride and humility and endurance of his old fathers is worth all their banks and farms.

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<sup>37</sup> GDM, pp. 250-51.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE HUNT: DEATH OF A GOD

"So he should have hated and feared Lion,"<sup>1</sup> Faulkner writes at the beginning of part two of the story, which deals with the last hunt for Old Ben and with his death. The "he" of the sentence is Ike and Lion is the great, wild mongrel dog who will at last bring Old Ben to bay. So Ike, as a child of the wilderness that the old bear ruled, should have hated the dog and feared it for the death that it would bring about, but he does not. This first sentence, then, sets forth the central paradox of The Bear: Ike and Sam Fathers and, to a lesser degree, the other hunters all take part in the hunt for and death of the animal spirit who is their only hope of escape from the commercialized world of their banks and farms. For the death of the bear precludes the final destruction of the wilderness itself. Logic would demand, then, that they try to preserve the life of the bear, yet they kill him. This ritual sacrifice -- for Old Ben's death is sacrificial -- is impelled by some force deeper and more profound than simple logical reasoning can account for, by some logic of the heart

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<sup>1</sup>GDM, p. 209.



far below the level of purely rational understanding. We must simply accept the paradox of the hunt as Ike does:

So he should have hated and feared Lion. Yet he did not. It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too.<sup>2</sup>

This paradox makes The Bear one of Faulkner's most difficult works for our modern, perhaps overly rational, minds to cope with. Yet none of his works has intrigued critics more. Herbert Perluck calls The Bear Faulkner's Hamlet. "As in Shakespeare's play, its rich and subtle interweaving teases us out of thought, confounds us too..."<sup>3</sup> All true, but we must not be too teased or confounded, for there is a great deal of light which the study of the symbolic nature of the bear and the hunt can cast on Faulkner's meaning in this work. Therefore, I want to consider the nature of the bear as a symbol as it appears in primitive religions and, then, the hunt as a ritual sacrifice.

The bear itself may not be, strictly speaking, an archetype; that is, he does not figure in all myths the world over,

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>3</sup>"The Heart's Driving Complexity': An Unromantic Reading of Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" Accent, XX (Winter, 1960), pp. 36-37.

yet he is probably the most nearly universal sacred animal of primitive religions. A. Irving Hallowell, in his book on bear ceremonialism, writes that "no other animal was found to attain such universal prominence as the bear, nor to have associated with it, over such a wide geographic area, such a large series of customs."<sup>4</sup> The bear may thus be viewed as the most representative of those animals around which rituals and ceremonies have grown up, the most archetypal animal. Old Ben, who is seemingly, immortal, is seen as having a personality, a spirit; he is even given a name and is referred to as The Man. These practices accord with the attitude that primitives had toward the bear.

Primitive people observed the sagacious qualities, the omnivorous habits, and the wide range of facial and bodily expression of emotional behavior in the bear. They were struck by seeing the bear rise on his hind legs and sit up against a tree just as if he were a man. The fact that a bear, unlike other animals, walks on the sole of his foot with the heel touching the ground and leaves a footprint of heel, toe, and arch like that of a human being had a great impact on the mind of primitive man.<sup>5</sup>

Such characteristics led primitive man to view the bear with certain respect and awe which often became religious veneration.

<sup>4</sup>Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere (Philadelphia, 1926), p. 184.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth La Budde, "Cultural Primitivism in William Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" American Quarterly, II (Winter, 1950), pp. 323-24.

Frazer deals at length with the religious rites that center around the bear among the tribes of Asia, rites that closely parallel those of the Indians of North America. The attitudes of these people are somewhat ambiguous.

On one hand they give it the name of kamui or "god"; but as they apply the same word to strangers, it may mean no more than a being supposed to be endowed with superhuman, or at all events extraordinary, powers. Again, it is said that "the bear is their chief divinity";... "amongst the animals it is especially the bear which receives an idolatrous veneration...." Yet, on the other hand, they kill the bear whenever they can....<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in spite of their veneration of the bear, their according him the status of divinity, the primitive nevertheless hunts and kills him, the reason being, in part at least, that they hope in this way to acquire some of the bear-like qualities that they see as virtues.<sup>7</sup> The bear thus becomes for them a symbol of certain primal qualities that they wish to transmit into their own lives and seek to do so by hunting and killing the bear and even eating its flesh.

In a more sublimated way, the animal symbolism of dreams serves the same purpose. These animal symbols, Jung believes, refer to instinctual processes which play a vital part in animal biology. It is these processes which determine and shape the life of an animal. For his everyday life man seems to need no instincts, especially when he is convinced of the sovereign power

<sup>6</sup>The Golden Bough (New York, 1943), I, p. 505.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 516.

of his will. He ignores the meaning of instinct and devalues it to the point of atrophy, not seeing how much he endangers his very existence through loss of instinct. When therefore dreams emphasize instinct they are trying to fill a perilous gap in our adaptation to life.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we can view the bear as possessing certain instinctual qualities. The primitive man recognizes the value of these qualities and hopes to attain them for himself by sacrificing the bear, perhaps because in the very act of hunting and killing this animal he must develop those same virtues: patience, endurance and pride. To modern man, however, who has no contact with a world where flesh-and-blood animals roam wild in dark forests, the bear would be only a symbol for all those instinctual qualities which civilized existence has extirpated from his daily life. And he "dreams" of such an animal as the bear as a sort of vicarious attempt to fill the emotional gaps in his own non-instinctual life: in the bear he finds all that he is not.

The hunters from Jefferson fall somewhere between these two positions: as men of banks and farms, they are not true primitives, yet they are able to experience a hunt for a bear. To them also he represents the virtues that they, in their daily routine, have forfeited; and, at the same time, the

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<sup>8</sup>Civilization in Transition in The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, X, p. 360.

hunt allows them -- as it does the primitive -- to exercise these old virtues in a more than vicarious way. But to exercise the very virtues that Old Ben exemplifies, they must hunt him, and the only outcome that the hunt can have is the bear's death. There was a "yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill,"<sup>9</sup> and yet, ironically, fulfill themselves as hunters, to learn the lesson that Old Ben can teach them, they must ultimately kill him, just as the primitives must sacrifice their sacred animals.

Thus, while on the face of things, it would seem illogical, even sacrilegious, for the believer to kill the object of his belief, there is a deeper sacramental reason for the death of the sacred animals. Frazer argues:

the savage is by no means so illogical and impractical as to the superficial observer he is apt to seem; he has thought deeply on the questions that concern him, he reasons about them, and though his conclusions often diverge very widely from ours, we ought not to deny him the credit of patient and prolonged meditation on some fundamental problems of human existence. In the present case, if he treats bears in general as creatures wholly subservient to human needs and yet singles out certain individuals of the species for homage which almost amounts to deification, we must not hastily set him down as irrational and inconsistent, but must endeavor to place ourselves at his point of view, to see things as he sees them, and to divest ourselves of the presuppositions which tinge so deeply our own view of the world.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>CDM, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup>The Golden Bough, I, p. 517.

Indeed, if we view the hunt for Old Ben as the last hope for the hunters to regain the virtues of the wilderness, the virtues that the old bear himself possesses and transmits through the hunt, then their ritual, to the primitive mind, is by no means irrational and inconsistent: it is their only hope.

The bear, then, is an archetypal symbol, as is the bull of ancient Crete or Spain, or the lion of Africa, embodying the instinctual qualities necessary to the fully developed life. Modern man whose life is emotionally truncated and stifled can experience these qualities only through dream symbols, but the hunters, through the ritual of hunting Old Ben, can fill these emotional gaps in their lives in so far as they emulate him. Thus in killing him they do not feel indifference toward him, but like Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea, they love the life they must take.

Ike, therefore, cannot hate and fear Lion, for the dog possesses all the qualities that Old Ben called forth from the hunters. Even though the dog is instrumental in bringing about the death of the bear, he is also one of the wild, free creatures of the wilderness and as such is alone worthy of his role in the hunt. When Sam Fathers captures Lion, he tells the others,

"It's the dog."

"The dog?" Major de Spain said.

"That's gonter hold Old Ben."

"Dog the devil," Major de Spain said. "I'd rather have Old Ben himself in my pack than that brute. Shoot him."

"No," Sam said.

"You'll never tame him. How do you ever expect to make an animal like that afraid of you?"

"I don't want him tame," Sam said....<sup>11</sup>

Sam's insistence that the dog which will hold Old Ben not be tamed is in effect insistence that "he must never be rendered a civilized dog,"<sup>12</sup> for only an animal with a spirit as wild and untrammelled as the bear's own can contend with Old Ben; the other dogs, like their masters, are only temporarily in the wilderness while Lion, "like some natural force," seems a part of the wilderness itself. "Lion inferred not only courage and all else that went to make up the will and desire to pursue and kill, but endurance, the will and desire to endure beyond all imaginable limits of flesh...."<sup>13</sup> Only he has these qualities which will allow him at last to bring Old Ben to bay: so these two wild, fierce, proud creatures, true inhabitants of the wilderness, the bear and the dog, pit their courage and pride against each other in one final ritual of self-immolation.

There is a third contender: Boon Hoggenbeck. It is he who finally kills the old bear. At first glance there could

<sup>11</sup>GM, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup>H. H. Bell, "A Footnote to Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" College English, XXIV (December, 1962), p. 182.

seem no unlikelier candidate among the hunters for this task than Boon who had never been known to kill anything yet has spent all his life in the wilderness. "He had the mind of a child, the heart of a horse," this great hulking man; "he was brave, faithful, improvident and unreliable; he had neither profession job nor trade...."<sup>14</sup> Yet his very incapacities become his virtues in the wilderness: he is free of all ambition, greed, and desire of ownership, at home in the wilderness, lost out of it.<sup>15</sup> Aside from Sam Fathers, who is too old, and Ike, who knows he can never bring himself to kill the bear, Boon is the truest primitive, the one of the hunters who is the purest: he must be the one to kill Old Ben. For while "Sam was the chief, the prince, Boon, the plebeian, was his huntsman."<sup>16</sup> So there was the dog, there was the hunter, and the time had come for the last hunt, the last ritual of the bear's furious immortality.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 227-28.

<sup>15</sup>In this connection John Longley has made a significant contribution to understanding one incident in The Bear which is often thought irrelevant to the story, both artistically and thematically, i.e., the trip Ike and Boon make to Memphis to bring back some whiskey. Here is Longley's explanation: "Aesthetically, this episode interrupts the flow of the story, but in terms of significance and meaning, the Memphis trip is inserted to demonstrate that Boon cannot function outside the Wilderness. This significance is underlined in the impact of his wildly uncouth appearance on the city people, his inability to stay out of saloons, his unrestrained drunkenness, and his quarrelsome tirades on the magnificence of Lion delivered to total strangers too terrified to ignore him." The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963), pp. 90-91.

<sup>16</sup>GM, p. 222.



## II

"It was December. It was the coldest December he had ever remembered. They had been in camp four days over two weeks, waiting for the weather to soften so that Lion and Old Ben could run their yearly race."<sup>17</sup> Ike is sixteen and has been hunting the bear for six years, but he seems to sense that this hunt was the beginning of the end, the final culminating act of the wilderness drama. Sam, too, senses the tragic inevitability of the last chase for the great bear in the doomed wilderness. "Somebody is going to [kill Old Ben] someday," he said to Ike. "'I know it,' the boy said. 'That's why it must be one of us. So it won't be until the last day. When even he don't want it to last any longer.'<sup>18</sup> The last day has come.

In primitive religions the ceremony of killing the sacred bear follows certain ritual patterns; the same is true for the final hunt for Old Ben. An example of the ritual proscriptions is the kind of weapon which must be used. "Contemporary practice, as well as traditional testimony indicates the use of more primitive weapons, even when guns are available. This

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

appears to be due to an inhibition which, although difficult to define except in vague terms, seems, nevertheless, to be connected with the whole ideology of which the bear is the focus. It is simply the feeling, conserved from a remote past, perhaps, that in killing a bear the most appropriate weapon for the task must be one of an aboriginal type."<sup>19</sup> In The Bear the weapon is a knife which Boon wields. All morning the hunters had pursued the bear until Lion finally trapped him.

This time the bear didn't strike him down. It caught the dog in both arms, almost loverlike, and they both went down. He [Ike] was off the mule now. He drew back both hammers of the gun but he could see nothing but moiling spotted hound bodies until the bear surged up again. Boon was yelling something, he could not tell what; he could see Lion still clinging to the bear's throat and he saw the bear, half erect, strike one of the hounds with one paw and hurl it five or six feet and then, rising and rising as though it would never stop, stand erect again and begin to rake at Lion's belly with its forepaws. Then Boon was running. The boy saw the gleam of the blade in his hand and watched him leap among the hounds, hurdling them, kicking them aside as he ran, and fling himself stride the bear as he had hurled himself onto the mule, his legs locked around the bear's belly, his left arm under the bear's throat where Lion clung, and the glint of the knife as it rose and fell.

It fell just once. For an instant they resembled a piece of statuary: the clinging dog, the bear, the man astride its back, working and probing the buried blade. Then they went down, pulled over backwards by Boon's weight, Boon underneath. It was the bear's back which reappeared first but at once Boon was

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<sup>19</sup>Hallowell, Bear Ceremonialism, p. 34.

astride it again. He had never released the knife and again the boy saw the almost infinitesimal movement of his arm and shoulder as he probed and sought; then the bear surged erect, rising once with the man and dog too, and turned and still carrying the man and the dog it took two or three steps toward the woods on its hind feet as a man would have walked and crashed down. It didn't collapse, crumple. It fell all of a piece, as a tree falls....<sup>20</sup>

The almost sexual quality of this last struggle -- the bear clasping Lion "almost loverlike," Boon with his legs around the bear, thrusting and probing with the knife as in a violent sexual assault -- fuses the three wilderness forces -- the bear, the dog, and the hunter -- into one, locked in a final death struggle, frozen for a moment like a work of art.

So Old Ben dies and Lion, mortally wounded, soon follows him: "from time to time the great blue dog would open his eyes, not as if he were listening to them but as though to look at the woods for a moment before closing his eyes again, to remember the woods or see that they were still there. He died at sundown."<sup>21</sup> More than just a dog and a bear have died; their death marks the beginning of the end of the wilderness, the sun is setting on a way of life. Only Ike and Sam realize this fully. At the moment of Old Ben's death, Sam collapses and must be carried back to his hut. "He lay there --...the old man, the wild man not even one generation from the woods,

<sup>20</sup> GDM, pp. 240-41.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

childless, peopleless, kinless...and only the boy knew that Sam was going to die."<sup>22</sup> Without the wilderness and the animal death of the wilderness, Sam, its priest, had no reason for living. Ike had first become aware of this the morning Sam trapped Lion and saw that the end was at hand. "It had been foreknowledge in Sam's face that morning. And he was glad, he [Ike] told himself. He was old. He had no children, no people, none of his blood anywhere above the earth.... It was almost over now and he was glad."<sup>23</sup> Sam Fathers, the last of the true primitive hunters who had once lived in the wilderness, not only knows he must now die and accepts it, but he welcomes death. His age has past. Old Ben knew this also and he too seemed ready for death, knowing that his kingdom was passing away. Thomas Bangs Thorpe, writing on the death of another legendary bear, mused, "There was something curious about it, that I never could understand, -- and I never was satisfied at his giving in so easy at last.... My private opinion is, that that bear was an unhuntable bear, and died when his time came."<sup>24</sup> To the end, Old Ben fought on, displaying the virtues for which he was revered, yet his time had come and he knew it. He was ready to die.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>24</sup>"The Big Bear of Arkansas," in Utley et al., Bear, Man, and God, p. 222.

So we come again to the central paradox of the hunt: the hunters kill the animal they venerate, the archetypal symbol of the instinctual virtues so necessary to their lives as men. Yet this killing of the bear is not an evil act; it is a result of the very condition of being a hunter. The evil, I want to insist, lies not in the hunt and death of the bear but in the destroying of the conditions in which a new bear and new hunters could rise up, in the death of the wilderness itself.

Among the primitives who worship and sacrifice the bear, there is a prayer: "please come to us again and we will sacrifice thee."<sup>25</sup> The primitive apparently believes in the resurrection of the animal he kills, a resurrection "which will enable him to catch and kill them, and again reap all the benefits which he has already derived from their slaughter. For in the prayers addressed to the worshipful bear...the creatures are invited to come again, which seems clearly to point to a faith in their future resurrection."<sup>26</sup> Even more explicit is the explanation that the primitive "confessedly slays and eats the beast that another may come in its place and be treated in a like manner."<sup>27</sup> In the psychology of the

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<sup>25</sup>Frazer, The Golden Bough, I, p. 506.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 516.

<sup>27</sup>Idem.

primitive, then, killing the bear is not evil, for only through a sacrifice can his virtues accrue to the hunters; but they know that he will return and be hunted again, so that, to their way of thinking, the sacrifice merely propagates the eternal life of the bear and preserves his virtues. Just this eternal return of the bear is what is precluded in Faulkner's work, for the conditions of his return, the preservation of the wilderness milieu, are doomed to destruction at the hands of civilization with its axe and machine, its banks and its farms. The wilderness will be sold for timberland, the primitive Eden will be subdivided. And there are no bears in suburbia.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SNAKE: END OF AN ARCHETYPE

"He went back to the camp one more time before the lumber company moved in and began to cut the timber."<sup>1</sup> This last trip of Ike's to the wilderness presents for us a dramatic enactment of the abstract concept that I have called the death of the wilderness. We see this event in our nation's history not merely as intellectualized hypothesis or theorem, but as lived and moving experience. For what Ike witnesses is not only a great social change, but a deeply felt existential change in his own life. Ursula Brumm has commented upon this "uniquely American experience for which Europe has no counterpart: the destruction of the wilderness by civilization in one short, dramatic act taking less than a man's lifetime."<sup>2</sup> In an earlier chapter I presented the wilderness as archetype, a place of freedom of escape from civilization, the water-womb of renewal and rebirth; in this chapter I want to trace the death of this archetype as Ike lived it.

If escape to the wilderness has been one of the germinal themes of American literature, the destruction of that wilderness by the rapacious forces of civilization is the other side

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<sup>1</sup>CDM, p. 315.

<sup>2</sup>"Wilderness and Civilization," p. 345.

of the thematic coin. One critic has pointed out the ironic nexus of the two themes: "The hero in the new world has frequently been pictured with an ax in his hand; at his feet lies the last of the trees on which he has exercised his magnificent biceps. The mournful irony of Cooper's Natty Bumppo is echoed here: the man of the woods opens the way for the destruction of the forest he loves."<sup>3</sup> Thus the man who loves the wilderness is often the unwitting vanguard of the civilization he is trying to escape. By his ability to survive in the forest he encourages others to follow him and, because of their desire to own and exploit, to destroy the wilderness.

The desire for ownership and profit do not accord with a life of harmony in nature; the land is exploited, used up, ruined, with callous disregard for what it would become, not a land but a wasteland. Hemingway, seeing the same destructive forces begin their work in Africa, commented bitterly on the acquisitiveness of civilization. "A continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys, cuts down the trees, drains the water.... [America] had been a good country and we made a bloody mess of it."<sup>4</sup> The bloody mess of America -- the barren eroded land

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<sup>3</sup>Lynn Altenbernd, "A Suspended Moment: The Irony of History in William Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" MLN, LXXV (November, 1960), p. 577.

<sup>4</sup>The Green Hills of Africa (New York, 1935), pp. 284-85.



and the ugly, sprawling cities -- seemed to Faulkner the curse laid upon men for destroying what nature had put on earth.

In The Bear this destruction -- a mechanized rape of the woods -- is symbolized by the train and the sawmill which seemed to represent to Faulkner the relentless tenacles of industrial civilization that slowly spread across America, choking to death the old primitive way of life. In Light in August Faulkner describes the sawmill as leaving behind "a stumpocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn...."<sup>5</sup> Only a vista of bleak stumps remains after the sawmill has done its work, and such is to be the fate of Ike's sacred wilderness.

After the death of Old Ben, Major de Spain, who "owned" this land, had leased it to a lumber company. He seemed no longer able to sustain any sense of the life as a hunter; with Old Ben dead, there were, metaphorically at least, no more bears to hunt, so "When November came no one spoke of using Major de Spain's house."<sup>6</sup> The tension which had existed between the men as hunters and as owners, bankers and farmers, could no longer be sustained; they could not serve two masters,

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<sup>5</sup>(New York, 1950), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>GDM, p. 316.

for one master was dead. John Lydenberg has pointed up this conflict in the nature of Major de Spain and the other men of Jefferson: "In their rapport with nature and their contest with Old Ben, they regain the purity they have lost in the workaday world.... But as Southerners they are part of 'that whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice'; they are part of that South that has bought and sold land and has held men as slaves. Their original sins have alienated them irrevocably from nature."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, although we are never told exactly why Major de Spain is willing to be a party to the destruction of the wilderness he had once loved, what pressures caused him to forego the land, the implication is nevertheless clear: he is guilty of the same crime as Ikkemotubbe and Thomas Sutpen who had sold the land before him. When Ike, who goes to de Spain's office to ask the use of the cabin for his last trip, encounters him behind a desk, Major de Spain is a different man from the hunter of the wilderness; he is an owner, a businessman, a man of civilization. Ike wants to ask him to go with him:

"Maybe if you..." His voice died. It was stopped, he never knew how because Major de Spain did not speak and it was not until his voice ceased that Major de Spain moved, turned back to the desk and the papers spread on it and even that without moving because he was sitting at the desk with a

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<sup>7</sup>"Nature Myth in Faulkner's The Bear," American Literature, XXIV (March, 1952), p. 63.

paper in his hand when the boy entered, the boy standing there looking down at the short plumpish grey-haired man in sober fine broadcloth and an immaculate glazed shirt whom he was used to seeing in boots and muddy corduroy, unshaven, sitting t the shaggy powerful long-hocked mare with the worn Winchester carbine across the saddlebow and the great blue dog standing motionless as bronze at the stirrup.... Major de Spain did not look up again.

"No. I will be too busy."<sup>8</sup>

Too busy to hunt ever again, he can turn the land over to the sawmill, but not without some sense of guilt; and his guilt is all that remains to a man once a hunter who participated in the wilderness life. Though critics have taken little notice of him, Major de Spain is one of Faulkner's truly tragic characters, a man who has lost his faith and sold his salvation to a sawmill.

Thus when Ike returns to his wilderness home, the sawmill is massed for the assault. "The doom of the wilderness was written plain; it would be killed by the tireless destructiveness of the machines as surely as Ben was by the tireless destructiveness of Lion...."<sup>9</sup> Arriving, at Hoke's, the tiny log-line junction, Ike is appalled by what he sees; he

looked about in shocked and grieved amazement even though he had had forewarning and had believed himself prepared: a new planing-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails red with the light bright rust of newness and

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<sup>8</sup>GEM, p. 317.

<sup>9</sup>Moses, "Where History Crosses Myth," p. 27.

of piled crossties sharp with creosote, and wire corrals and feeding-troughs for two hundred mules at least and the tents for men who drove them;... he...did not look any more, mounted the log-train caboose with his gun and climbed into the cupola and looked no more save to the wilderness ahead within which he would be able to hide himself from it once more anyway.<sup>10</sup>

The sense of finality gives this last return to the wilderness an autumnal, elegiac tone, for Faulkner is writing a prose requiem for a dying world. And, as an accompaniment, constant and ominous, is the sound of the saws beginning their work.

As Ike boards the train for his last ride, he is struck by the change he sees in what was once an innocuous, and even humorous, intrusion of civilization:<sup>11</sup>

He watched the train's head complete the first and only curve in the entire line's length and vanish into the wilderness, dragging its length of train behind it so that it resembled a small dingy harmless snake vanishing into weeds....It had been harmless once....But it was different now....this time it was as though the train....had brought with it into the doomed wilderness even before the actual axe the shadow and portent of the new mill not even finished yet and the rails and ties which were not even laid; and he knew now what he had known as soon as he saw Hoke's this morning but had not yet thought into words: why Major de Spain had not come back, and that after this time he himself, who had had to see it one time other, would return no more.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> GPM, p. 318.

<sup>11</sup> Faulkner includes here a short humorous anecdote of a bear cub who was playing on the tracks when the first train penetrated the wilderness. The cub was so frightened by the noise of the whistle that it skimmed up a tree and stayed there for two days. Ibid., pp. 319-20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 318-321.

The train, like the sawmill, is presented as one of the mechanical monsters of civilization, and Ike significantly sees it as a snake, once harmless, now deadly. This view of the train as snake-like is not a casual comparison, but a metaphor which foreshadows his encounter with the age-old symbol of evil, the serpent. Ike was to meet Boon at the Gum Tree, but first he goes to the grave where Sam and Lion and the paw of Old Ben lie buried. As he turns to leave,

he froze, immobile, one foot just taking his weight,... not breathing, feeling again and as always the sharp shocking inrush from when Issaac McCaslin long yet was not, and so it was fear all right but not fright as he looked down at it. It had not coiled yet and the buzzer had not sounded either, only one thick rapid contraction, one loop cast sideways as though merely for purchase from which the raised head might start slightly backward...: the old one, ancient and accursed about the earth, fatal and solitary and he could smell it now: the thin sick smell of rotting cucumbers and something else which had no name, evocative of all knowledge and an old weariness and of pariah-hood and of death.<sup>13</sup>

He stands motionless until the snake glides away slowly, leaving him

standing with one hand raised as Sam had stood that afternoon six years ago when Sam led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child, speaking the old tongue which Sam had spoken that day without premeditation either: "Chief," he said: "Grandfather."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 330.

That the snake is an archetypal symbol of evil Faulkner leaves no doubt: Ike's apprehension of it is not merely personal fear, but evokes the racial memory which fears the snake with a transcendent fear -- "feeling again and as always the sharp shocking inrush from when Isaac McCaslin long yet was not." As the bear was for him an archetype of all the wilderness virtues, the snake is an archetype of all the world's evil and death. When asked, "what sort of symbol was the snake?" Faulkner replied, "The snake is the old grandfather, the old fallen angel, the unregenerate immortal."<sup>15</sup> As such he is almost universally feared, and such fear, Jung argues, is instinctive. Instincts, he writes, are dispositions to behave according to certain patterns which, like the archetypes, have been instilled by primordial experiences of the race.<sup>16</sup> Thus this fear is an archetypal response to an archetypal symbol, corresponding "to the mentality of the primitive, whose language possesses no abstractions [to express the concept of evil]."

The dream of the snake reveals a fragment of psychic activity that has nothing to do with the dreamer as a modern individual. It functions at a deeper level....

The snake-motif is certainly not an individual acquisition of the dreamer, for snake-dreams are very common among city dwellers who have never probably seen a snake.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Elotner, Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, Va., 1959), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche in The Collected Works, VIII, pp. 130, 133-34.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-48.

From the earliest time the snake has symbolized evil, the dark force which threatens man with destruction. As such a symbol he appears in much of the world's mythology. In Judeo-Christian myths the serpent as Satan brought about man's fall from Eden, while in the myths of Persia it is the serpent who stole from Gilgamesh the elixir of life. In Egyptian mythology, the serpent's bite inflicts the fatal wound on Ra as it does in Russian mythology on Oleg, the sun-hero. Among the Aztecs Quetzacoatl, the serpent deity, is pictured as a devourer of men. Such a catalogue of the role of the serpent in the world's ancient religions could be extended, but the fact seems clear that the snake is a universal symbol of the evil force at work in the world. Like the bear, the snake has always fascinated primitive man, partly because of its strange serpentine movement which suggests a "devouring and entwining animal."<sup>18</sup> The fact that in its poisonous sting or crushing coils lurks physical death marks him as the archetype of spiritual death as well, "the evil principle incarnate..., persisting yet as a reminder of the radical evil implicit in the beginning of things."<sup>19</sup>

Faulkner thus equates the train with the snake, so that "the snake who stole life from man...is the prototype of the

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<sup>18</sup> Jung, The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious in The Collected Works, IX, pt. 2, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Altenbernd, "A Suspended Moment," p. 581.

logging train which devours the wilderness."<sup>20</sup> The ancient symbol of evil is fused with the modern symbol of destruction. Yet Ike salutes the snake in the old tongue taught him by Sam Fathers, seeming thus in some way to acknowledge his kinship to the archetype of evil. Why?

The critics at this point have either ignored the problem or given answers not wholly satisfactory. Some see the salutation as meaning that Ike cannot escape his heritage; he is, like it or not, the grandson of his grandfather, a child born into a sin from which he cannot escape. Alexander Kern writes, "When, in part five, Isaac encounters the threatening rattlesnake, . . . and addresses it automatically in the old tongue . . . he is seen as Sam's son but with a difference . . . Ike, if he is not accepting the evil in nature, is certainly saying that he is grandson of Carothers McCaslin, a son of the Christian world, and not the complete inheritor of the wilderness ethic."<sup>21</sup> But if the snake is a purely Christian symbol and Ike, when confronted with it, accepts his part in the original sin it symbolizes, why then does he later repudiate the heritage of his grandfather and refuse to participate in the sins of ownership and miscegenation? Why does he address the snake in the old primitive tongue of the wilderness? Kern's statement does

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<sup>20</sup>Ucley, "Pride and Humility," p. 241.

<sup>21</sup>"Myth and Symbol in Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" p. 157.



not deal with these difficulties.

John Longley offers a different explanation:

The serpent...must appear at this moment because the Wilderness, Eden-like as it is, is not Eden but a part of the fallen world. Evil is in the world, even in the Eden of the wilderness. Concurrently, the snake is a sacred, totemic animal and entitled to its place there....Only after the snake is gone does Ike realize that he has been standing with his hand raised in the ritual gesture and has spoken the words in the old tongue he learned from Sam: "Chief...Grandfather." He is saved from death by the same inexplicable rapport that caused Old Ben to spare him; he is recognized as one of the initiate Wilderness creatures and is safe from harm. On his part, Ike acknowledges the snake, who is simultaneously sacred and a disinherited outcast, like Oedipus or Philoctetes. Thus Ike accepts the reality of evil in the world.<sup>22</sup>

This passage strikes me as rather confused, but Longley seems to be saying that Ike accepts some kind of Manichean view of the world, that the wilderness has both a good and evil deith -- the bear and the snake -- and that Ike accepts the evil in the wilderness as co-existing with the good. Such a view would explain, perhaps, Ike's salute to the snake, but one wonders if the wilderness always contained the evil principle or if the snake, like the train and the sawmill, poses its threat only after Old Ben's death. Was Ike deluded in thinking his wilderness Eden was free from the evil and corruption of the civilized world?

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<sup>22</sup>The Tragic Mask, p. 94.

Neither Kern's nor Longley's explanation is very satisfying, but it may be that no totally satisfactory logical explanation can be found for what is, like Ike's vision of the bear, essentially a mystical experience. However, certain things seem to me to be clear. The wilderness, as long as Ben lived and was hunted, was not a part of the fallen, civilized world, but a sacred place of primitive values, the uncorrupted, but not uncorruptible, Eden of Ike's boyhood. The snake, like its modern counterpart the train, posed no threat as long as the hunters chose to preserve the primitive virtues of the wilderness, but when they acquiesced in its destruction, the snake became a potent force. It now can devour the wilderness symbolically as the train and the saw-mill will devour it literally. Ike, who realizes that the serpent has entered Eden, not so much to cause the fall but as a result of man's choice to fall, sees in it the sins of Ikkesotubbe ("Chief") and Carothers McCaslin ("Grandfather") which have corrupted even the hunters.

Still, this explanation leaves two questions unanswered: why does Ike speak in the old tongue and is he accepting the dominion of the snake over him. To answer these questions, I can only suggest a certain complex irony. Ike, when confronted suddenly by the snake, realizes the great power it has over the defenseless wilderness. As he is himself a child born into the

corruption it symbolizes, he would also be vulnerable to its deadly bite were it not that he had been reborn as a child of the wilderness bear. His salvation is then both a recognition of the ancient power of the snake and a rejection of its power over him; by speaking in the primitive language he demonstrates to the snake that he alone refuses to let the primitive virtues die and to accept a place in the civilized world. The snake is thus powerless to harm him.

Such a reading substantiates the efficacy of Ike's initiation into the wilderness, allowing him to acknowledge evil without accepting it. His vision of the bear is sufficient to sustain him now against the vision of the snake. His salutation is a kind of exorcism of the archetypal serpent in the primitive tongue: though the wilderness, from which he gained his vision, is doomed, Ike has assimilated its values to protect himself from the evil of his Grandfather.

## II

The last scene of *The Bear* drives home the full impact of the end of the wilderness life, for the last encounter we have is not with Ike, who has accepted the death of the primitive way of life and has the moral vision to live surrounded if untouched by civilization, but of Boon who is a man lost without his dog, his bear, his woods. After his encounter with the snake, Ike slowly becomes aware that he can hear "a sound as though someone were hammering a gun-barrel against a piece of railroad iron,"<sup>23</sup> and he follows the sound until he comes to the Gum Tree.

At first glance the tree seemed to be alive with frantic squirrels. There appeared to be forty or fifty of them leaping and darting from branch to branch until the whole tree had become one green maelstrom of mad leaves, while from time to time, singly or in twos or threes, squirrels would dart down the trunk then whirl without stopping and rush back up again as though sucked violently back by the vacuum of their fellow's frenzied vortex. Then he saw Boon, sitting, his back against the trunk, his head bent, hammering furiously at something on his lap. What he hammered with was the barrel of his dismembered gun, what he hammered at was the breech of it. The rest of the gun lay scattered about him in a half-dozen pieces while he bent over the piece on his lap his scarlet and streaming walnut face, hammering the disjointed barrel against the gun-breech with the frantic abandon of a madman. He didn't even look up to see who it was. Still

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<sup>23</sup>GM, p. 330.

hammering, he merely shouted back at the boy in a hoarse strangled voice:

"Get out of here! Don't touch them! Don't touch a one of them! They're mine!"<sup>24</sup>

The picture is one of great pathos: the hunter who had the courage and the strength to struggle with and kill Old Ben reduced to a petulant frenzy over a tree full of squirrels. His frantic cry, "Don't touch them!...They're mine!" seems to indicate that Boon too now suffers the delusion of ownership, having lost all sense of the freedom and plenty of the old wilderness. Utley speaks for most critics when he says that Boon's "mad cry is of greed, directed toward his best human friend Ike; the craving is for the pride of possession, the vice which has destroyed the wilderness."<sup>25</sup> But such an interpretation ignores another, and I believe better, reading of what Boon is doing: he is destroying his gun.

In the first version of this incident that Faulkner wrote, in the story "Lion," Boon does seem to be trying to put his gun back together, but in the revised version for The Bear, he seems not to want to reassemble the gun but to destroy it. He wants not to kill the squirrels out of some greedy sense of ownership, but to protect them as the last vestiges of the wilderness; and we must remember that when he shouts at the

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 330-31.

<sup>25</sup>"Pride and Humility," p. 248.

intruder, he does not look up to see who it is. He is not trying out in greed against his best friend, rather, as Cleanth Brooks has written, "Boon, too, senses that the old world has been lost, and in a kind of desperation he would hold on to -- would frantically fend others away from -- the tree full of squirrels which represents something of the abundance and freedom of the old wilderness."<sup>26</sup>

Those who are familiar with Faulkner's own explanation of this incident -- "He was trying to get a jammed shell out to make it fire, and didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels" --<sup>27</sup> may object to Professor Brook's interpretation, but it seems to me obvious that Faulkner, for what ever reason, was mistaken in assigning such a meaning to Boon's action: beating the breech of the gun with its barrel "with the frantic abandon of a madman" can hardly be construed as trying to unjam the shell. Technically, the shell of a shotgun is not in the breech but in the chamber behind the barrel

<sup>26</sup> William Faulkner, p. 271.

<sup>27</sup> This interpretation was given to a class at the University of Virginia in answer to a student's question. Here is the full exchange:

Q. "In the final scene of The Bear, Boon is sitting under the tree with the squirrels, doing something with his shotgun. It's not clear to me whether he is destroying his shotgun or trying to put it back together."

A. "It had jammed. He was trying to get a jammed shell out to make it fire, and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels. He was under the tree where the squirrels couldn't get out of it and he didn't want anybody else to shoot the squirrels until he could get his gun fixed." Faulkner in the University, pp. 7-8.

and no amount of beating would serve to dislodge it; only pushing the shell through the barrel with a gun rod would accomplish that.<sup>28</sup> Boon is obviously not trying to repair the gun but to destroy it, as if by such destruction he could in some way regain, or at least preserve, his dying wilderness world.

For it is only when Boon, like Ike, returns to the wilderness for this last trip that he realizes

For the first time in his childlike way the full impact that the lumber company operations will have upon him, upon the woods he loves, upon the game he loves to hunt, and upon the only way of life known to him. In a way the gum tree filled with squirrels represents the woods, the game, the hunt rolled into a ball -- the last of all the countless trees, the last game of all the dead past's wonderful game, the last hunt for Boon of all the wonderful hunts of the past, the last of everything, the last of all, the last, last, last.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Boon seeks desperately to preserve this last pitiful remnant of what once had been a noble way of life.

The Gum Tree full of squirrels and the pathetic child minded man hammering away at his useless gun are symbolic of the end of the wilderness archetype itself. The sawmill and the train literally and the snake symbolically will destroy it. And only Ike, with his memory of a dead bear and freedom it had once given, is left to stand against the evil of the

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<sup>28</sup>This information was given to me in a telephone conversation with a gunsmith at the Deep River Armory, August 13, 1965.

<sup>29</sup>Bell, "A Footnote to Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" p. 183.

devouring snake of civilization, not in the hope of defeating it, but only in the hope of repudiating and enduring.



## CHAPTER SIX

### A HORN

The Bear is essentially romantic fiction, and Ike as a young man is a romantic character, perhaps the most romanticized character in Faulkner's canon. He seems almost a figure out of myth, a kind of wilderness prince whose kingdom is destroyed at the moment he was to have ascended the throne. "Nevertheless he did not abdicate, but waited....,"<sup>1</sup> like some deposed Hapsburg who has no empire but who resolutely, and pathetically, maintains his tradition, true to a dead heritage. Ike's gesture of repudiation on his twenty-first birthday and his subsequent life of self-denial are an attempt to maintain in an alien world a way of life, a set of values, which is romantic, nostalgic, quixotically sad. He chooses the life of a carpenter

not in mere static and hopeful emulation of the Nazarene as the young gambler buys a spotted shirt because the old gambler won in one yesterday, but (without the arrogance of false humility and without the false humbleness of pride, who intended to earn his bread, didn't especially want to earn it but had to earn it and for more than just bread) because if the Nazarene had found carpentering good for the life and ends He had assumed and elected to serve, it would be all right too for Isaac McCaslin....<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moses, "Where History Crosses Myth," p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>GDM, p. 309.

By leading such a life he hopes to escape the corruption of Carothers McCaslin and the South, the corruption of civilization; and on this vague hope The Bear ends.

But any evaluation of the meaning of Isaac McCaslin's life and the myth of the primitive wilderness cannot be based upon The Bear alone, for in "Delta Autumn," the story which in Go Down, Moses follows The Bear, Faulkner writes of the end of Ike's life, of what his hope becomes in reality. In this sequel "The romantic theme now completely absent, or rather exorcised," writes Herbert Perluck, there "clearly follows the full, harrowing, shuddering discoveries of 'The Bear.'"<sup>3</sup> For "Delta Autumn" is starkly, painfully realistic in showing what became of Ike's romantic dream; Faulkner does not allow him to live hopefully ever after, and any reading of The Bear would be incomplete, even dishonest, if it did not deal with Isaac McCaslin as he nears eighty.

The full implications of "Delta Autumn" are difficult to relate in a summary of its action. The tone is different from The Bear which was mythical and mystical, symbolic and romantic. This difference is stressed by the change in the hunt and the hunters, and in Ike himself.

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<sup>3</sup>"The Heart's Driving Complexity," p. 34.

Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because roads were better and they had farther and farther to drive, the territory in which game still existed drawing inward as his life was drawing inward, until now he was the last of those who had once made the journey in wagons without feeling it and now those who accompanied him were the sons and even the grandsons of the men who had ridden for twenty-four hours in the rain or sleet behind the steaming mules. They called him "Uncle Ike" now, and he no longer told anyone how near eighty he actually was....<sup>4</sup>

These new hunters are modern men who know nothing of the old wilderness mystique nor of its primitive values. One of them is Roth Edmonds, the son of Ike's cousin, McCaslin, and owner of the estate that would have been Ike's. He is a selfish, callous man, a picture of what Ike, perhaps, might have become without Sam Fathers. The contrast is pointed up by an exchange between the two men on their first night incamp:

"Times are different now," another said.

"There was game here then."

"Yes," the old man said quietly. "There was game here then."...

"And better men hunted it," Edmonds said.... But again the old man looked sharply across at the sullen, handsome, brooding face which appeared now darker and more sullen still in the light of the smoky lanterns. "Go on. Say it."

"I didn't say that," the old man said. "There are good men everywhere, at all times. Most men are. Some are just unlucky, but most men are a little better than their circumstances given them a chance to be. And I've known some that even circumstances couldn't stop."...

"So you've lived almost eighty years," Edmonds

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<sup>4</sup>GFM, pp. 335-36.

said. "And that's what you finally learned about the other animals you live among. I suppose the question to ask you is, where have you been all the time you were dead?"<sup>5</sup>

Roth's charge is that Ike has lived his life in a dream world and that his ideals are predicated on a meaningless belief; is he right?

We are given the answer in an encounter that Ike has in the hunting camp with a young woman, a light-skinned Negro who has been Roth's mistress and by whom he has fathered a child, a son. She comes to the camp to show Roth the boy, but he avoids her, leaving an envelope full of money with Ike to give to her. Confronting Ike, she tells him that she too is a McCaslin descendant and a Negro.

"You're a nigger!"

"Yes," she said. "James Beauchamp -- you called him Jennie's Jim though he had a name -- was my grandfather. I said you were Uncle Isaac."

"And he [Roth] knows?"

"No," she said. "What good would that have done?"

"But you did," he cried. "But you did. Then what do you expect here?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you come here? You said you were waiting in Aluschaskuna yesterday and he saw you. Why did you come this morning?"

"I'm going back North. Back home. My cousin brought me up the day before yesterday in his boat. He's going to take me on to Leland to get the train."

"Then go," he said. Then he cried again in that thin not loud and grieving voice: "Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Can't nobody do nothing for you!"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

He gives her the money, the same payment that his grandfather had made to his Negro children whom he would not acknowledge as of his blood. So the crime is repeated, the McCaslin curse re-enacted, and Ike is enmeshed in it again, unable to escape. "The whole scene is dominated by Ike's sense of the completion of the tragic circle of wrong-doing which Old Carothers had begun, and by his awareness that his own act of repudiation has been rendered meaningless by Roth's initiation of a new onward movement through time."<sup>7</sup> The shock and outrage that Ike feels extend like a chasm behind and before him, a chasm of emptiness. The whole raison of his life has come to nothing. And his anger is directed at the woman who stands before him not as an individual but as a symbol of his family's curse, both a victim and a propagator of it.

"That's right. Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you -- for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man. You are young, handsome, almost white; you could find a black man who would see in you what it was you saw in him, who would ask nothing of you and expect less and get even still less than that, if it's revenge you want. Then you will forget all this, forget it ever happened, that he ever existed --" until he could stop it at last and did, sitting there in his huddle of blankets during the instant when, without moving at all, she blazed silently down on him. Then that was gone too. She stood in the gleaming

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<sup>7</sup>Michael Millgate, William Faulkner (New York, 1961), p. 79.

and still dripping slicker, looking quietly down at him from under the sodden hat.

"Old man," she said, "have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?"<sup>8</sup>

This confrontation is thought by most readers to be the climactic test of Ike's life, and he fails it. The old man we see here is a far cry from the young boy of The Bear, hopeful that his wilderness initiation would protect him from the evils of the civilization he had repudiated. But he seems to have fallen victim of the prejudices that arose out of ownership and slavery, to have acquiesced in the exploitation of the Negro, the curse which lay like a pall over the South.

Critical assessments are almost unanimous in declaring Ike a failure in that his act of renunciation in no way ameliorated the conditions of the land or the Negro.<sup>9</sup> Faulkner himself, in the moralizing tone that characterized most of his

<sup>8</sup>GDM, p. 363.

<sup>9</sup>A few critics have opposed this view, mainly, I feel, because they have not faced the issue squarely. R. W. B. Lewis sees The Bear as a story of moral regeneration, which it is, but he ignores the consequences of that regeneration in "Delta Autumn." The Picaresque Saint. Walter J. Taylor writes, "Ike is living evidence of the fact that in the old days, God planted in the midst of the land he cursed a means of escape from the curse. The inference is that Faulkner is optimistic on the subject:...if God could evolve one Ike, he could evolve another one." "Let My People Go: The White Man's Heritage in Go Down Moses," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVIII (Winter, 1959), p. 30. But such a statement begs the question of whether or not Ike does provide a means of escaping the curse through his act of repudiation.

later public statements, declared Ike a social failure, the kind of man who says, "This is rotten, I don't like it, I can't do anything about it, but at least I'm not going to participate in it myself....What we need are people who will say, This is bad and I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to change it."<sup>10</sup> And John Longley adopting this point of view, writes that Ike's "tragedy grows not out of the saintliness of his personal rectitude but out of the failure of his lonely and lifelong passion to make that saintliness and rectitude operate dynamically and forcefully to do good in the lives of others."<sup>11</sup> Ruel Foster goes even farther by accusing Ike not only of not resisting evil but of promoting it: "his adult withdrawal into the remnants of the wilderness was an attempt to evade his own responsibilities....Ike fails to exercise the norms he learned from nature in civilization itself; thus he contributes in some way to the continuing disorder of the world."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Gwynn and Blotner, Faulkner in the University, p. 246. Cf. also Cynthia Grenier, "An Interview with William Faulkner," Accent, XVI (Summer, 1956), p. 175.

<sup>11</sup>The Tragic Mask, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup>"Social Order and Disorder in Faulkner's Fiction," Approach, No. 55 (Spring, 1965), p. 28. Such a view seems to be most prevalent among critics and similar statements of it can be found in a number of places: Malvin Eckman, "Sickness and Primitivism: A Dominant Pattern in William Faulkner's Work," Accent, XIV (Winter, 1954), p. 73; Frederick J. Hoffman, William Faulkner (New York, 1961), p. 78; Perluck, "The Heart's Driving Complexity," pp. 24-25; Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner (Baton Rouge, La., 1959), p. 133.

Against such charges only Neal Woodruff has attempted an adequate defense of Ike:

On the day after his explanation to McCaslin Edmonds, he moves from the plantation to a rented room in town. He buys carpenter's tools and goes to work with his hands. In a sense, he can do no more, for the evil he perceives is not something to be eradicated by supporting a cause, joining a movement, or preaching a gospel; it is an individual matter of "the heart's truth" being obscured by "the heart's driving complexity," a failure not subject to correction by organizations or rational persuasion.<sup>13</sup>

His implicit question to the other critics -- and it is a good one -- is, what more could Ike do? By his example of a life of renunciation and abnegation, by his refusal to profit from an evil system, has he not done all he can? But I think that beyond the charges that Ike's life changed nothing and Woodruff's defense lies an even more basic problem: granted that Ike was powerless to save others from the curse of civilization's evils, could he save even himself? In sending the girl away, has he not canceled out a life of atonement for Carothers' sin and negated the very values that Sam had taught him in the wilderness?

I am not arguing here, as Olga Vickery does, that what Isaac "could not forgive in Carothers McCaslin, he accepts without hesitation in Roth Edmonds,"<sup>14</sup> for such a statement

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<sup>13</sup>"The Bear' and Faulkner's Moral Vision," pp. 55-56.

<sup>14</sup>The Novels of William Faulkner, p. 134.



seems to me totally incorrect; if anything Ike is more horrified by Roth's act than by Carothers'. Rather I am arguing that Ike's failure lies in refusing to accept a Negro as of one blood with himself. He does not see the woman as a person, but as a thing, a Negro -- as Carothers had seen Tomy. In the wilderness a man was only a man not a color, and Ike betrays his wilderness vision by seeing the color and not the person. And this -- not the failure to cure the blindness in others, but the loss of his own moral sight -- is Isaac McCaslin's tragedy.

And yet something still remains of the wilderness vision of his youth: a horn. A horn that had once summoned a race of hunters to the hunt, the last remnant of Ike's lost world. And this he gives to the child in whom McCaslin blood is mixed.

"There," he said harshly, in the thin and shaking old man's voice. On the nail there. The tent-pole."

"What?" she said.

"The horn!" he said harshly. "The horn." She went and...lifted down the horn, the one which General Compson had left him in his will, covered with the unbroken skin from a buck's shank and bound with silver.

"What?" she said.

"It's his. Take it."<sup>15</sup>

I have said that "Delta Autumn" is realistic rather than symbolic, yet the great significance of Ike's gesture here can be appreciated only if we understand the symbolic purpose of

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<sup>15</sup>GDM, pp. 362-63.

the horn, for, as the horn is all that remains of the primitive wilderness, it is fitting that it should be the single archetypal symbol of the story. It is Ike's private archetype. Such a phrase may seem a contradiction in terms, but there is nothing else to call it, for in this horn are distilled all of the primitive virtues of the wilderness. Just as the wilderness itself is gone, so the possibility of a great universal archetype is gone. The horn alone remains.

I do not contend that the horn is an archetypal symbol in the formal sense that I have set forth and yet, as John Longley writes, "it was a hunting horn and as such stirs the memory of the reader, at whatever subconscious level, with echoes of other sagas and heroes -- Beowulf or Roland or Siegfried."<sup>16</sup> It is thus a symbol of all the heroes and heroic possibilities of life, of the kind of life that the wilderness once offered. Ike has failed to measure up to the heroic life and he knows it, knows it bitterly; perhaps he gives away the horn feeling that he is no longer worthy of it. Yet there is more to the horn: it is a symbol of hope. Michael Millgate sees more than most of the critics the significance of Ike's gift: "The presentation of the horn marks a deliberate attempt on Faulkner's part to merge the wilderness theme with the white-Negro theme,

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<sup>16</sup>The Tragic Mask, p. 85.

just as past and future are merged in the person of the new-born child. The hunting horn, a symbol of the wilderness and of what initiation into the secrets of the wilderness means, is given up to a new generation which will not know what these things signify...."<sup>17</sup> True, the new generation may never know anything of the life Ike has lost and he realizes that; yet the horn is all that he has left, all that he can give the child. Ike had said of the Negro many years before,

...they will endure. They are better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped from white men or that white men and bondages have taught them...And their virtues...Endurance...and pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity.... And more: what they got not only not from white people but not even despite white people because they had it already from the old free fathers....<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps, then, in some way -- in some mystical way that Ike himself does not understand -- the wilderness virtues will be preserved in this Negro child to whom the horn is given.

Otis Wheeler has written of the two wilderness stories in Go Down, Moses: "As for the question of where man is to turn for spiritual renewal when the wilderness is gone, there seems to be no solution: we are apparently to be a race of Roth Edmondses. This is a negative philosophy, a prophecy of

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<sup>17</sup> William Faulkner, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> CDM, pp. 294-95.

decline."<sup>19</sup> Against the decline of a whole civilization, against the death of all the values he holds dear, Ike can offer only a horn from a past time. The great romantic dream which began The Bear ends with this pitiful festure. The horn is a feeble hope, but there is no other.

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<sup>19</sup>"Faulkner's Wilderness," p. 134.

## II

Some critics have seen The Bear as the turning point in Faulkner's career, his first work of affirmation after a series of stark tragedies, but I believe just the opposite is true. As a history of the South, "a land primed for fatality," and by symbolic implication of the Western world, The Bear stands as Faulkner's most pessimistic work, the deepest of his tragic visions. The greed and selfish ambition which figure so centrally in The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! reach their logical culmination in the destruction of the wilderness.<sup>20</sup> The Jason Compsons, Thomas Sutpens, Carothers McCaslins, with their plantations and banks, trains and sawmills, are modern men in modern civilization, the devouring snake of rapacity.

Just as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha woods reflect a general social attitude toward civilization, so the destruction of the woods by the train and sawmill reflects a general attitude toward history. Otis Wheeler has written of Faulkner that "As a twentieth-century man, his thinking is no longer conditioned by an implicit faith in the progress of western civilization. If anything, an unconscious assumption of the decline of the west is the conditioning fact."<sup>21</sup> This Spenglerian sense of

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. Campbell and Foster, William Faulkner, pp. 75-76.

<sup>21</sup>"Faulkner's Wilderness," p. 136.

the decline of the western world permeates The Bear, so much so that to call it an unconscious assumption is to understate its importance. The whole structure of modern civilization, riddled with its evil and corruption, stands poised to crash down around the heads of the men who have jerrybuilt it. "No wonder," Ike thinks at the end of "Delta Autumn," "the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution!...The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge."<sup>22</sup>

Faulkner, Irving Howe writes, "despite his modernistic techniques, is a writer seriously estranged from his time.... [He writes] out of a sense of the terribleness of history."<sup>23</sup> In his use of archetypal symbols, Faulkner has sought not so much to escape from his own time, from history, as to set forth an ideal world by which history can be judged. By this ideal standard -- the life of the primitive wilderness -- modern history is seen to be a chronicle of decline, and of more than decline, of the triumph of evil. This sense of history as failure accounts for Faulkner's unique use of the archetypes: by definition they are eternal symbols of man's deepest nature, his truest self, yet in The Bear the possibility of the archetypal life is ended, destroyed by the modern

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<sup>22</sup>GDM, p. 364.

<sup>23</sup>William Faulkner, pp. 96-97.

world. Jung protested that "The gods cannot and must not die"; but in The Bear they do die and herein lies the tragedy of our time. If they are to be resurrected, it will be only if the generation of the little child comes to understand the symbolic significance of Ike's only gift to give, the horn.

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