

Love, Rapacity, and Community in "Go Down, Moses"

RICHARD PASCAL

The ghost of that ravishment lingers in the land. . . .

— WILLIAM FAULKNER¹

IT IS ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING and significant moments in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* when the young Ike McCaslin, having puzzled out the truth about his grandfather's incestuous relationship with the slave girl Tomey and subsequent refusal to recognize the son thereby engendered, argues desperately to himself that "*there must have been love. . . . Some sort of love. Even what he would have called love: not just an afternoon's or a night's spittoon.*"² Appalled by the possibility that his ancestor Carothers McCaslin regarded intimate contact with another human being as an experience no more personal than that of chewing tobacco, Ike is not concerned just then about expanding the general implications of his thoughts. In the context of *Go Down, Moses* as a whole, however, those implications are of vital importance. Ike's ponderings suggest that love may be categorized into various "sorts," of which the lowest is the callous use of another person for the servicing of one's own sensual whims. Whether such an attitude is love in any but a strictly literal sense is perhaps doubtful; Ike himself seems to regard it as beyond or beneath the bounds of the concept, and hence mentally refers to it by an image to which he clearly feels the term "love" is utterly inapplicable. Yet the image his mind has conjured up *does* suggest "some sort of love" — a distorted sort. The spittoon and the disgusting activity associated with it suggest a debased sexual act in which Tomey is seen as a distant, object-like receptacle for the old man's casual expectoration-ejaculation.

This image of debased lovemaking metaphorically represents the appropriative impulse referred to elsewhere in *Go Down, Moses* by the term “rapacity,” and the tension between love and rapacity is the book’s central, underlying theme. Most readers and critics correctly light upon the issues of racism and the destruction of the wilderness as the major themes, and feel that they are somehow inseparable. As Michael Millgate expresses it, the two issues are “inextricably linked: the wilderness disappears to make way for a system based on physical or economic slavery, and Ike’s education in the wilderness fosters a sense of values which prompts him to a repudiation of that system and of the concept of land-ownership upon which it is based.”³ But such a comment — and Millgate’s view is fairly representative — fails to uncover the conceptual basis of the connection between racism and the avaricious appropriation of the wilderness, which is bound up with the notion of “rapacity.”⁴ Put simply, rapacity is the original impulse of the lustful ego to assume control and dominance of the world beyond the self; the more specific forms it assumes are racism and avarice; and rapacity in turn is explicable only in relation to its inverse, love.⁵ These observations seem to me essential to a full understanding and appreciation of the work. Without them, it is difficult to regard it as much more than a sincere but moralistic literary jeremiad on the ills of American society, whereas in their light *Go Down, Moses* becomes a work of penetrating social insight, and a profound exploration of the meaning of communal relationships. For the book is, most basically, about communities: the small county of Yoknapatawpha, the South generally, and American society as a whole. So it is not surprising that an examination of the love-rapacity issue ultimately leads in that direction. But I shall elaborate upon all this in greater detail.

Although the concept of love is in a sense logically prior to that of rapacity, it is easiest to begin by examining the latter, as Faulkner has provided a dramatic symbolic instance of it in the lovemaking of old Carothers and Tomey. By making that act incestuous as well as miscegenatory, hence flagrantly in breach of one of the most universal of all social taboos, Faulkner ensures that even a non-racist reader will somewhat share Ike McCaslin’s

shocked response. Like Ike too, we are not meant to remain arrested in conventional moral abhorrence, but to consider more profoundly what the act signifies, ethically and emotionally. Carothers "summoned" Tomey "because she was his property" and then "dismissed" her "because she was of an inferior race" (p. 294), and it is his willingness to summon and dismiss another human being which is the most significant indication of the nature of their sexual relationship. Effectively if not literally, it was rape, the self brutally dominating the will of the other, and in so doing regarding the other only as object. By his attitude and behaviour Carothers reduced Tomey to something beneath the level of a person while at the same time elevating himself to something above it, a kind of godling with absolute power and control. And the conventionally shocking fact that she was his daughter strongly emphasizes a further aspect of such an attitude: to erase the personal element in the human beings with whom you are in intimate contact is to want to see and relate to no one but yourself. In essence, old McCaslin made love to an image of himself — there, essentially, is the perversion.

The ancestral McCaslin's lovemaking with Tomey is the prototypical pattern for the behaviour of whites towards blacks in the later society: the black, no matter how intimately related by blood or in the heart, must ultimately be regarded as a non-person. The shadowy figure of the rapacious patriarch haunts his descendants as their "heritage," or the right and duty to assume the deific ancestral ego. In one of the most well-known sections of the book, great-great-grandson Roth Edmonds thinks back to his childhood and the day he assumed "the haughty ancestral pride" (p. 111). Roth had a black boy, Henry, as his close childhood friend. Henry was really a foster-brother to Roth, inasmuch as his own mother had died in childbirth and the only mother he ever knew was Henry's mother, Molly. For years the two boys played and ate and even slept together, "wanting, as all children do . . . only to love, to question and examine unchallenged, and to be let alone" (p. 111). Then one day Roth realizes the meaning of white and black in Southern society. After finishing supper at Henry's house, Roth peremptorily announces that he is going home, and deliberately walks with a quickened

pace so that Henry is forced to trail behind. In the bedroom, Roth waits until Henry has undressed and lain down upon the pallet where they usually sleep in warm weather. But instead of lying down with him, Roth climbs into the bed. When Henry attempts to get in with him, Roth says, "harsh and violent," "No!," and the two boys sleep separately for the first time (p. 112).

Faulkner's telling of the story conveys brilliantly the tension between love and rapacity in the soul of young Roth, and thus the human cost of racism to the racist himself. The "ancestral pride" is seen to run counter to and impede the earliest and hence most basic human impulse, "only to love." Through the night the black child sleeps easily, with "quiet, untroubled breathing," whereas Roth lies "clenched and rigid" staring at the ceiling (p. 112), for asserting dominance over his friend entails exerting rigid control over himself. Roth's "clenched and rigid" seven-year-old form is a dramatic image and example of the struggle of the human being to become socialized — when socialization means subduing an integral part of one's emotional nature.⁶ At the cost of "harsh and violent" damage to himself, Roth successfully re-enacts Carothers McCaslin's dismissal of Tomey and repudiation of relationship to their son Turl; as Carothers refused to say "My son" to a nigger, Roth refuses to go on treating Henry as a brother.

It is in this sense that the Southern social heritage, the ancestral pride, is a curse, the "curse of his fathers" as Faulkner phrases it in introducing the episode (p. 111). And there is more to the curse than racism. Its other pervasive manifestation, avarice, which may afflict blacks and whites alike, is first hinted at by Molly Beauchamp in "The Fire and the Hearth" when she tells the adult Roth Edmonds that she wants a divorce from Lucas because she is afraid that he will find the buried treasure he has been searching for so obsessively. Success in such a venture would be disastrous, she feels, " 'Because God say, "What's rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware" ' " (p. 102). A little later in the story Molly reiterates this view in terms worth noting carefully: she speaks of " 'the *curse* of God that's gonter destroy him or her

that touches what's done been rendered back to Him' " (p. 122, emphasis added). Her use of the term "curse" recalls its earlier appearance, in the Roth-Henry episode, and the point, of course, is that racism and the avarice displayed by Lucas are aspects of the same chronic social disease. Endemic to the culture, the curse is inherent in the socializing process. This is the real implication of Ike's words when he tells the black preacher (in Section iv of "The Bear") that " "This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse' " (p. 278).

An important clue to the connection between the dual aspects of the curse is provided by the first story, "Was," which reminds us that in the ante-bellum South racism and possessiveness actually were combined in the institution of slavery. The stories which follow suggest that even after slavery was banned, whites continued to believe that they "owned" blacks in some sense. The implication is that the lure, the mystique of possession, has less to do with satisfaction of physical needs than with ego-gratification. To possess something is to dominate and control it, to make it servile to one's sense of self-importance. It is like extending the power of the self beyond the natural, bodily boundary of such power. Physical possessions are almost like extra-bodily limbs, and socialized humankind tends to believe of them what can be strictly true only of the body which houses the self, that to *have* is to *be*. Extending the urge for being beyond the natural limit of having is like attempting to extend the very self in space and time. Hence Carothers McCaslin's drive to build an empire and found a dynasty: it is a lust for spatial and temporal ego-extension.⁷ Hence also, on a less grand scale, the need of whites to feel superior to blacks. To treat another as being inferior in kind to oneself is like saying "I am exerting complete control over my experience of you; you and I are not equally parts of a world greater than ourselves, but rather you are part of the world of my ego: you are mine."

In short, to discriminate against black human beings is to attempt to possess them; to possess material things is to make niggers of them: and in both cases the compulsion of the over-reaching ego to dominate the external world is the basic moti-

vating cause. As mentioned earlier, that compulsion is referred to in the book by the term "rapacity." When speaking with the black preacher, Ike thinks he senses in him the "boundless rapacity" (p. 278) of the carpet-baggers who despoiled the South after the War. Yet the carpet-baggers aren't the real problem in the South, Ike later realizes. In his long conversation with his cousin Cass he envisions the plantation as a microcosm of the Southern social system, an "edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity" (p. 298). The significance of Faulkner's choice of this phrase to designate such a key concept in the book becomes evident when we recall that "rapacity" is a cognate of "rape," and further recall the nature of old McCaslin's lovemaking with Tamey. As that act of rape was essentially motivated by self-love, so also is the rapacious attitude generally a drive to turn all that is external and other into a glorifying adjunct of the self.

Love, the inverse of rapacity, is the single most important theme in *Go Down, Moses*, in that all others relate back to it. In one of the few critical discussions to take note of the centrality of the love theme, R. D. Ackerman describes Ike McCaslin as a "priest of nature" who rejects "romantic love" because it emphasizes division, especially the basic distinction between subject and object. Ike chooses instead for a kind of mystical natural love which values ultimate unity rather than division, especially "the interminable moment of oneness with nature, which is also the moment of myth and of sexual love." As a result, Ackerman says, "the very foundation for civilized life and love is destroyed. Without an initial separation of identities there is no basis for a coming together. *Mine* and *thine* (the basis of civilization), *I* and *Thou* (the basis for conscious love) are constructs of civilization, not nature."⁸

There is, as we'll see, a problem with this argument, but Ackerman is acute in perceiving that underlying the wilderness-civilization issue is the conflict between two forms of love, each of which is definable in terms of attitudes toward wholeness and plurality, unity and division. On introducing Ike in the first story, Faulkner tells us that he "loved the woods" (p. 3), and later, in "The Old People," mentions his "love and pity for all which lived and ran"

(p. 181). And what Ike loves is the wholeness, the unity of the natural world, his apprehension of which is beautifully conveyed in the wilderness stories. Near the end of "The Bear," for example, Ike returns to the knoll under which Sam Fathers is buried, and feels that Sam is

not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one.
(pp. 328-29)

It is a Whitmanesque vision of a universe in which all is flowing unity, a continuum, and change is a stabilizing factor. In such a world, customary temporal and spatial distinctions are insignificant; the lives of individual creatures are not separable *lifetimes*, bounded by something called "death," nor are they physically independent, unrelated to anything larger. No single being is an end in itself or comes to an end, for each partakes of the scope and immortality of the whole.

Ike's "love and pity for all which lived and ran" contrasts deeply with Carothers McCaslin's rapacity. The implication is that love is non-egotistical where rapacity is ego-glorifying, and it is suggested in "The Old People" and "The Bear" by the contrast between two different attitudes toward violence. The rapacious human kills cruelly or thoughtlessly, to assert control over nature. The human who loves naturally, represented by the figure of the hunter, kills so that he may touch a sacred thing, re-establish contact with the ego-overwhelming unity of existence. That is the significance of the pagan ceremony in which Sam smears Ike's face with the still hot blood of his first kill: the deer's blood is consecrated, partakes of a higher natural reality in which the blood of any single creature is, ultimately, the blood of all. The young hunter must understand that the relationship between himself and the life he has taken is not one of dominance, but kinship. With the deer's blood Sam marks Ike "one with the wilderness" (p. 178), and it is in this sense that the hunter "loves the life he spills" (p. 181).

Only gradually does Ike come to learn the full meaning of the ceremony. Days afterwards, the two hunters glimpse phantom deer, "taller than any man," and Sam speaks to it in a primitive tongue: "'Oleh, Chief . . . Grandfather'" (p. 184). The point of Sam's respectful salutation is that there were animals before there were humans, that humans are descended from animals, and that they are therefore our "grandfathers," the true "old people" of the story's title. It is from them, not from his human grandfather Carothers McCaslin, that Ike must receive his heritage, his sense of who and what he is. Thus years later, alone in the woods and looking for Old Ben, it occurs to him that only his "thin clear quenchless lucidity" (p. 207) differentiates him from the bear and from all other animals. "Lucidity," the light of the rational faculty by which we order and measure our perceptions of reality, by which we make and highlight distinctions between the various parts of creation, ill equips us for understanding the whole. That is why Ike must abandon his watch and compass in order to see Old Ben; they, like the gun which he also abandons, are weapons of defence and aggression against nature, reason's dissecting gauges of time and space.

Just how thin and insignificant is this human lucidity, and how much more important the irrational, unconscious mode of understanding which we share with the animals, becomes fully apparent to Ike when, returning to the woods after Sam's death, he spies a rattlesnake dangerously in his path. At that moment he freezes unconsciously into the same pose of deference to the "old ones of the earth" which Sam had impressed on him years earlier:

. . . he put the other foot down at last and didn't know it, 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.' (p. 329)

Ike's response flows from fear, a mode of intuitive understanding which is prior to reason. The instinctive reaction of the individual being when confronted with the possibility of its own extinction, sensorily as well as mentally overwhelming, fear is like an invasion from without the self. In making the self feel its smallness and

vulnerability, fear can seem a shameful state. But as Sam had continually emphasized to Ike, there is nothing shameful about *instinctive* fear. This he may experience without being shamefully "afraid" in another sense (to which I'll return in a moment), because it brings him to a consuming awareness of a greater reality. A "sharp shocking inrush from when Isaac McCaslin long yet was not" (p. 329) annihilates egotism into knowledge of relationship: "'Chief . . . Grandfather.'" It is a kind of religious awe, a non-creasing respect for the naturally super.

There is another species of dread, though, which is to natural fear as rapacity is to love. When Ike is confronted by the snake he feels "fear all right but not fright" (p. 329), a phrase which echoes a distinction made several times previously. Sam's constant advice to Ike was "'Be scared. . . . But don't be afraid'" (p. 207); and in hunting for Old Ben without his gun Ike is said to know that he will "not even be afraid, not even in the moment when the fear would take him completely" (p. 207). The thrust of this distinction is suggested by General Compson's words when, attempting to convince Cass Edmonds to allow the adolescent Ike to remain in the woods a few days longer, he says "'You've got one foot straddled into a farm and the other foot straddled into a bank . . . this boy was already an old man before you damned Sartoris and Edmonses invented farms and banks to keep yourselves from having to find out what this boy was born knowing and fearing too maybe but without being afraid'" (pp. 250-51). The clear implication is that it is modern socialized humankind which is not "fearful" but "afraid." To be thus afraid is to hide behind human artifacts and social conventions. It is that pervading anxiety of modern society which Thoreau had in mind when he said that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," and which Cass Edmonds hints at when he tells Ike "'we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our sources'" (p. 167). To shun the natural sources of life is to avoid real fear, to repress it. Thus puny, rapacious humans are said to "hack at" the wilderness in "a fury of abhorrence and fear" (p. 193) as they conquer the land, for "scared" fear manifests itself as disgust, sickness of the ego over the possibility of contact with something

so much grander and other. The contrast with the hunter's "love for the life he spills" could not be more extreme.

That love for the natural whole and all the individual beings in it is associated with other forms of love, those having to do with human emotional and sexual relations, must seem a tenuous proposition to many readers if the sparsity of critical commentary on the point is at all indicative.⁹ Yet that connection is both implicit in the book's conceptual framework — if rapacity is apparent in humans' relations with nature and with one another, so too must love be — and intimated more directly at certain points. For example, we are told that the ten-year-old Ike recognized natural fear "as a boy, a youth, recognizes the existence of love and passion and experience . . . from entering by chance the presence or perhaps even merely the bedroom of a woman who has loved and been loved by many men" (p. 204). The clear suggestion here is not only that such fear will be as fulfilling as sex, but that the two are in fact closely related. Sexual passion, of course, is as natural an experience as instinctive fear, and both are responses to the stimulating world beyond the self, incitements to further, more intimate contact with it. In "The Fire and the Hearth," Ike, briefly remembering the last time he and his wife made love, thinks "they had touched and become as God" (p. 107); in "Delta Autumn" he asserts his belief that "'every man and woman, at the instant when it don't even matter whether they marry or not . . . at that instant the two of them together were God'" (p. 348). "God" in both contexts seems simply a more abstract term for what the wilderness symbolically embodies: the larger whole, the supreme being. In the ego-subsuming intimacy of passionate sex, lovers achieve fulfilment which is, like the wilderness as Ike later dreams of it, "a dimension free of both time and space (p. 354). And just as Ike's life is shaped by his love for the wilderness, passion is for others an ultimate meaning, the one thing worth living for. Roth's mulatto mistress is willing to sacrifice security and self-respect, treasures of the ego, for what she regards as love's self-evidently supreme worth. This is the gist of the scornful question she addresses to Ike when he suggests she do the sensible, safe thing: "'Old man . . . have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember any-

thing you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (p. 363). And it is why Rider, in "Pantaloons," would rather die than go on living without Mannie; after alcohol, hard labour, and violence fail to make him forget the love which alone liberated him from the stifling confines of singularity, death is his prison-break.

But as the story of Rider and Mannie suggests, passionate love is not limited to the moment of consummation when a complete transcendence of the single self is achieved. The opposition which Ackerman perceives between "sexual love" and "romantic love," or more generally between mystic union and separateness, is misleading, for although various "kinds" of love may be distinguished in *Go Down, Moses*, they are a continuum in which each shades into the other. Rider's love for Mannie is clearly emotional as well as sexual. So, too, is that of Lucas for Molly. The long anecdotal account of Molly's desire for a divorce in "The Fire and the Hearth" ends with the one open display of affection we ever see from Lucas, and it is also the only time he swallows his ego and acquiesces to the wishes of another.

Love, then, in its less mystical forms, is simply the self's sense of rapport with other persons and other beings, blurring its feelings of independence, separateness, difference. What might be termed "familial love" is one of the major motifs in the book. This is what binds the young Roth and his black foster family, and it is certainly as significant a force as sexual passion in the relationships of Lucas and Molly, Rider and Mannie. Its significance is conveyed by the recurring image of the hearthfire, "ancient symbol," we are told in the final story, "of human coherence and solidarity" (p. 380). In "The Fire and the Hearth" it represents, more specifically, the familial union of Lucas and Molly. After Zack Edmonds has stolen Molly from her home, Lucas must tend alone "the fire which was to burn on the hearth until neither he nor Molly were left to feed it" (p. 46); and it is while standing before this fire that Lucas — after nearly dousing it — reaches a critical pitch of rage and determination to reclaim his wife. The hearthfire is significantly present, too, in the story of Roth and Henry, "centering the life" (p. 110) in the black family's home. And in "Pantaloons in Black" Rider is said to have lit, as Lucas

did, a fire on his wedding night — which expires at almost the precise moment of Mannie's death.

Familial love in any specific cluster of relationships is, however, only a localized form of feelings of more general human coherence and solidarity. Outside the individual family it radiates, ideally, into communal love, rapport with the even larger human group. This in part is what is behind Faulkner's repeated emphasis upon the tangle of blood relationships in Yoknapatawpha. Those "McCaslin-Edmonds Genealogies" which zealous critics have drawn up to serve as guides for confused readers¹⁰ seem almost to suggest that the county is one extended family — which, figuratively speaking, it is. The network of blood relationships is suggestive of the profound emotional interrelatedness of Yoknapatawpha's citizens, an interrelatedness which even, as we have seen earlier in considering the Roth-Henry episode, transcends racial lines. Thus Ike is "uncle to half a county" (p. 3), and thus also Molly Beauchamp is addressed by everyone as "Auntie." Much of the pathos of that moment in "Delta Autumn" when Ike touches the mulatto woman's hand rests in the implication that, though a Northerner herself, she represents the return of the prodigal son Jim Beauchamp; in their brief physical contact the "strong old blood" completes its "long-lost journey back to home" (p. 362). The blood is McCaslin blood, familial, yet the home is not the ancestral plantation, but Yoknapatawpha County, dwelling place of the larger, the communal family.

Hence the significance of Molly's desire, in the final story, for Samuel Beauchamp to "'come home right'" (p. 383). In the beginning of that story we see the 26-year-old Sam in his prison cell in Chicago awaiting execution.

The face was black, smooth, impenetrable; the eyes had seen too much. The negroid hair had been treated so that it covered the skull like a cap, in a single neat-ridged sweep, with the appearance of having been lacquered, the part trimmed out with a razor, so that the head resembled a bronze head, imperishable and enduring . . . [H]e half lay on the steel cot in the steel cubicle just outside which an armed guard had stood for twenty hours now, smoking cigarettes and answering in a voice which was anything under the sun but a southern voice or even a negro voice. (p. 369)

The impression is that of a man thoroughly alienated from his home community, his race, and even himself. When the census-taker asks his occupation, he replies, with significant wit, " 'Getting rich too fast' " (p. 370), implying that he has carried to a socially disapproved extreme the otherwise approved rapacious behaviour of his society. And when asked " 'If they don't know who you are here, how will they know — how do you expect to get home?' " he replies " 'What will that matter to me?' " (p. 370).

Nothing, obviously. But as the story goes on to show, it does matter to some people back in Yoknapatawpha, particularly old Molly, and the extent to which it matters to whites and blacks alike suggests the extent to which the community as home, as an organic network of emotionally interrelated human beings, still exists beneath and despite the society "founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity." The problem is that natural relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, men and women, are in many cases unsanctioned. In this sense, the true *community* is smothered and obscured by the *society*, the official structure of the community which reflects only a distorted version of the natural communal reality.¹¹ For things to be set right, the society must come to acknowledge openly the network of natural relationships which is the community. And if Yoknapatawpha (and the South generally) ever does so, Faulkner implies, it will be at least partly through the efforts of strong-minded individuals like Molly, who insists that Sam be given a proper civic funeral and that his death be accorded a prominent notice in the newspaper; and like Miss Worsham, the white woman who says of Molly, " 'We grew up together as sisters would' " (p. 375). When Gavin Stevens goes to offer condolences to Molly, he finds her sitting before the fireplace with her brother and Miss Worsham; and, sitting himself, he finds that the four of them make "a circle about the brick hearth on which the ancient symbol of human coherence and solidarity smoldered" (pp. 379-80). Like that fire, the community smolders yet with some sense of familial coherence and solidarity — and, flaring, momentarily consumes society's distorted conventions. Sam is given the funeral and obituary notice demanded by Molly, and

the official acknowledgement of filial relationship denied Tomey's Turl a century or so earlier is finally, though only briefly and reluctantly, forthcoming: Yoknapatawpha says "My son" to a nigger.

No sensitive reader could construe the extremely tentative and reluctant recognition accorded Sam by the community as indicating facile optimism on Faulkner's part about the solution of the society's problems. The funeral and obituary are only slightly more than token gestures, and on finishing the story, and the book, it is Molly's strophic lament from the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" which echoes in the reader's mind. In this respect the book's title truly indicates its tone.

It is equally wrong, however, to assume that the book is simply and certainly pessimistic about the prospects for true community. Most critics do make that assumption, at least implicitly, for it is an inevitable corollary of the widely held view that the relationship between nature and society projected in *Go Down, Moses* is one of absolute opposition. As I've tried to show, however, such a reading is misleading. The true opposition is between rapacity, that self-love which impels the individual ego to seek power beyond its natural temporal and spatial limits and thus assume the Godlike boundlessness of existence itself, and natural love, which inclines the individual to seek wholeness only through alliance, to commune undomineeringly with beings external to the self and, literally by extension, with dimensionless supreme being. "Society" (in the particular sense I've been using the term) is irrevocably at odds with nature, then, but humankind in communal groups need not be. Far from being inherently asocial, the rapport which Ike feels with "something, all things" (p. 182) is really the very basis of human relationships and groupings, and the terrific wilderness, in "being myriad, one," is a natural community toward whose balance of part and whole humans in their personal and communal relationships gropingly aspire. When first married, Ike felt that the relationship was

the new country, his heritage too as it was the heritage of all, out of the earth, beyond the earth yet of the earth because his too was of the earth's long chronicle, his too because each must share with

another in order to come into it and in the sharing they become one: for that little while at least, one: indivisible . . . (p. 311)

At the same time that the last two words in this passage baldly echo a famous ideal of American society ("one national, indivisible"), they clearly refer also to the unity within diversity, the myriad oneness, of the wilderness. And the passage further implies that the natural world, the earth, is the original source of the impulse to share which, to some extent and for some little while, at least, enables people to group together in ego-transcending larger wholes — nations as well as marital relationships.

Ike's marriage "fails," of course, because of his wife's fierce, love-denying acquisitiveness; his "new country," like the New World, that "'whole hopeful continent dedicated as a refuge and sanctuary of liberty and freedom'" (p. 283), is desecrated by rapacity. But the "heritage" of the earth, which emphasizes possession through sharing and relationship through love, is thematically juxtaposed against that other sort of "heritage" bequeathed by Carothers McCaslin and what he represents, and it is too simplistic a reading of the novel to assume that the former is dismissed as Ike's impotent idealism. The point is that the McCaslin heritage is a perversion of the heritage of the earth, just as rapacity is a distortion of love and American society is a warped version of the community which it should have been and, most basically if least apparently, is. No perversion can exist without or completely subsume what it distorts; no antithesis triumphs utterly over the original thesis out of which it arose. And if Faulkner does not offer much in the way of a visionary "synthesis," a glimpse of a solution to the conflicts treated in *Go Down, Moses*, neither does he allow a careful reader to take the securely pessimistic view that they represent an unyielding *status quo*, an unfortunate problem which is its own foregone conclusion; those conflicts are presented as "problematic" in a truer, more dynamic sense. Nor is it a weakness in the book that no solution is foreshadowed or even foreseen. Leo Marx has commented, in assessing the achievement of some of the great nineteenth-century American writers, that "by incorporating in their work the root conflict of our culture, they have clarified our situation. They have served us well. To change the situation we require

new symbols of possibility, and although the creation of those symbols is in some measure the responsibility of artists, it is in greater measure the responsibility of society."¹² If in *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner does not proffer any "new symbols of possibility," he certainly succeeds, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, in clarifying the social situations, by dramatically pointing to the common root of two of the culture's sorest problems, racism and avarice.

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University* (New York: Vintage, 1965), p. 43.
- 2 William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Modern Library, 1942), p. 270. All page references to *Go Down, Moses* are to this edition and will be given in the text.
- 3 Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 212.
- 4 Critics who have seen the importance of the concept of rapacity in explaining the connection include Ursula Brumm, "Wilderness and Civilization: a Note on William Faulkner," *Partisan Review*, 22 (Summer 1955), pp. 340-46; Otis B. Wheeler, "Faulkner's Wilderness," *American Literature*, XXXI (May 1959), pp. 127-30; and Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press 1966), p. 172.
- 5 Two critics have called attention to the significance of the love theme in understanding the related issues of racism and possessiveness: Edward M. Holmes, *Faulkner's Twice-Told Tales* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 60; and R. D. Ackerman, "The Immolation of Ike McCaslin," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, XVI, 3 (Fall 1974), pp. 557-65. Ackerman's is the more thorough and interesting treatment, and is summarized in this article. Stuart James implicitly suggests that the novel is basically concerned with the tension between love and rapacity: "the book is ultimately about sexual domination and its sad ramifications," he says, and notes, further on, that the imagery associated with sexual aggressiveness is ironically "held against the knowledge that sex can be an act of love and is the beginning of life and community." However, James's discussion concentrates upon Faulkner's distance from and attitude towards the views expressed by Ike and other characters, and he doesn't analyze the love theme in depth. See James, "The Ironic Voices of Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*," *South Dakota Review* 16, iii (Autumn 1978), pp. 81, 95.
- 6 James comments that throughout the book, "the revulsion against the Black becomes a revulsion against self, and ultimately against life. . . ." James, p. 96.
- 7 Two other critics who speak generally about this concept use less cumbersome terms for it: Hyatt Waggoner refers to "self-assertiveness," and Walter F. Taylor mentions "self-aggrandizement." I prefer my comparatively clumsy term because in being coined rather than drawn from common speech it more effectively highlights its implication. Charles H.

Nilon has somewhat anticipated me in writing of possessiveness as a "sin of pride . . . which results from egotism and egoism;" I suspect that by the latter term he means something like what I here call "ego-extension," but his discussion pursues different points and he doesn't elaborate. See Waggoner, *William Faulkner: from Jefferson to the World* (University of Kentucky: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1959), p. 206; Taylor, "Let My People Go," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LVIII (Winter 1959), p. 22; and Nilon, *Faulkner and the Negro* (New York: Citadel, 1965), p. 108.

- ⁸ Ackerman, pp. 559, 560.
- ⁹ Aside from James and Ackerman, Holmes is the only commentator even to imply such an association, and he does so only by referring in passing to "the human, and humane, relation between man and man, or even man and earth, a relation expressed . . . by the word *love* employed in its broadest sense. . . ." Holmes, p. 60.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Michael Millgate, *William Faulkner* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), p. 115; Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 448; Robert W. Kirk and Marvin Klotz, *Faulkner's People* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1963), pp. 316-17; and James Early, *The Making of Go Down, Moses* (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1972), p. 111.
- ¹¹ Cleanth Brooks has indicated the usefulness of making a distinction between "community" and "society" in Faulkner: Brooks, "Faulkner's Criticism of America," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, LI (Summer 1975), p. 299.
- ¹² Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 365.