

A COMPANION TO
WILLIAM
FAULKNER

EDITED BY RICHARD C. MORELAND

A Companion to William Faulkner

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Introduction

Richard C. Moreland

William Faulkner has received more critical attention than any other American writer, and since the 1980s that critical attention has dramatically changed. At first either ignored or considered scandalous or insufficiently engaged, Faulkner was then long championed by the New Critics for his formal experiments and his focus on apparently universal themes of tradition, community, and individual moral consciousness. Now, however, his writing is more often appreciated for raising unwieldy questions about the legacies of ongoing economic change, historical violence, and intractable social tensions, both within the US South and in related contexts such as urbanization and mass culture in other parts of the US and Europe, plantation economies in the Caribbean, and civil wars and racial codes in Latin America. His readers have also returned to questions of social and aesthetic forms, especially the formation of gnarled cultural consciousness and uneasy critique, both in his subject matter and in his adaptations of existing literary styles and popular culture genres. This dynamically changing state of Faulkner criticism is what this volume proposes to represent.

The chapters are grouped in five parts. The first part, "Contexts," emphasizes recent critical attention to various dimensions of the world within which Faulkner's work is situated – reflecting, exploring, and interrogating that world. The chapters in this part demonstrate how various contexts precede and surround Faulkner's work, not merely figuring as backdrops or subject matter but thoroughly informing everything that is done, said, heard, or written in his novels and stories. This part begins with Richard Godden's study of powerfully persistent, underlying economic structures in the US South and slow, faltering changes in the relations between laborers and their masters, debtors, and employers. Grace Elizabeth Hale and Robert Jackson place Faulkner's work within a history of regional and national thinking about race and civil rights that changed almost as slowly as economic structures, while Anne Goodwyn Jones closely links Faulkner's life and work with changing "beliefs about gender and sexuality contemporary to both." Catherine Gunther Kodat shows how Faulkner, like Jean-Luc Godard, struggled with art's place in a more rapidly shifting twentieth-century world

of cinema, pulp fiction, and mass-market commerce. Michael Zeitlin's focus is yet another context in which Faulkner's writing has been read and reread, a Western intellectual history dominated by Marx and Freud, and Jay Parini reflects on his own and others' approaches to Faulkner biography as "historical context of a particular kind."

Turning from "Contexts" to "Questions," the second part considers certain common issues, problems, and debates in recent Faulkner criticism somewhat less as aspects of the surrounding world than as questions posed within Faulkner's fiction. Owen Robinson's chapter traces how Faulkner's distortions of language and narrative tend to defamiliarize certain fundamental but unstable constructions of reality, and to implicate his readers in these constructions, both as individual readers and as members of choruses like those represented in the fiction. Barbara Ladd shows Faulkner exploring a more conscious moral imperative articulated by Ralph Ellison – "the necessity for white writers to represent black characters in all their human complexity not only as a way to understand black humanity but as a way for whites to come to understand 'the broader aspects' of their own humanity." John N. Duvall's chapter considers some of these broader aspects of both race and sexuality in Faulkner's use of "whiteface" male characters to underscore the "otherness and alienation that result from their fundamental inability to assimilate to the values of their community." The class dimension of this alienation is emphasized in Julia Leyda's attention to the ways Faulkner's fiction challenges "the liberal and paternalist ideas that naturalize and legitimize inequality." Although such questions of race, gender, sexuality, and class figure throughout the fiction, Arthur F. Kinney demonstrates how thoroughly Faulkner frames them within family relationships that seem to define and haunt his characters. Cheryl Lester's chapter stresses instead the importance of geography and place, reviewing critical treatments of place in Faulkner to assess "the limits of Faulkner's hold on his world and its diverse peoples, material life, historical formation, geopolitical location, struggles, and possibilities." The question addressed by Ted Atkinson is how Faulkner responds to the profound change during his career in the relation between the individual and the state, as the philosophy of liberalism was transformed in the US "from its nineteenth-century roots as a philosophy of individual liberty and laissez-faire economics into a twentieth-century agent for collective identity and decisive federal action." Lothar Hönnighausen's topic is the variety of ways the fiction represents violence – in individual cases and in recurring patterns of racial, class, family, and mob violence. In at least one period of his career, according to Sean Latham, Faulkner was engaged with the violent aftermath "not of the Civil War, but of the original colonization of the Americas" as he attempted a post-colonial "perspective skewed not by tragedy but by a liberating impulse to escape the anguish of a South turned hopelessly inward on itself." Leigh Anne Duck reflects on more intimate versions of anguish and escape in the "often idiosyncratic interactions" in Faulkner's fiction "between the Southern religious context and individuals' spiritual perceptions." Peter Lurie's chapter traces how Faulkner's *Light in August* addressed the growing influence of cinema in his time: in permitting the historical traumas of Southern history "to remain traumatized, 'unhistorical,' *fascinating*, Faulkner allows a way to distinguish his novel from narratives of the South, like *Birth of a Nation*, that present

this history so falsely.” And Vincent Allan King discusses Faulkner’s self-conscious relationship with both modernism and the popular culture industry.

Chapters in the third part focus on the main “Genres and Forms” in which Faulkner found many of these worldly contexts and questions articulated, and the different ways he attempted to reshape these genres and forms in his own writing. His experiments in poetry, drawing, hand-made books, letters, drama, romance, prose sketches and other short fictions, screenplays, essays, and speeches are the subject of this part’s first chapter, by Thomas L. McHaney. Philip Weinstein considers the influence of “some modernist precursors without whose work it is difficult to imagine Faulkner becoming Faulkner,” including Conrad, Freud, Eliot, and Joyce; then he “compares Faulkner’s practice with that of his most compelling peers,” especially Proust, Woolf, Hemingway, and Mann. Susan V. Donaldson places Faulkner at the intersection of older traditions of pastoral, gothic, and the sublime, including a shift “from the erotic sublime to something like a racial sublime,” while Greg Porter sees Faulkner negotiating in different ways “the tension between authorial invention and generic formula” in his engagement with the conventions of the contemporary detective story and the psychological suspense story or *roman noir*. Hans H. Skei surveys Faulkner’s long career as a writer of short stories, a form he took seriously for both financial and artistic reasons, sometimes easily accepting editors’ suggestions but often also rewriting stories as better stories, as parts of story collections or cycles, or as imported parts or adapted and expanded germs of novels. Noel Polk’s two chapters end this part by considering first Faulkner’s non-fiction writing, not as a guide to his fiction, “but rather as emerging out of a more discursive and public part of his character,” especially his sense of his responsibilities as a citizen, friend, and father. Then Polk reviews the textual record of Faulkner’s writing in the forms of holographs, typescripts, tear-sheets, and galley proofs as another resource for understanding his life and the different public appearances of his work.

Criticism focused on contexts, questions, genres, and forms in the first three parts is combined in the fourth part’s “Sample Readings” of particular works. Donald M. Kartiganer reads *As I Lay Dying* as a self-reflexive novel of and about compromise, “combining private need with family duty, lyric meditation with narrative action – conceived by a writer who has reached a moment in his career when these conflicting drives have become the terms of his own personal and professional situation.” In John Carlos Rowe’s reading of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the novel’s narrative unreliability and literary self-consciousness about genres and forms such as lies, fables, chronicles, parables, yarns, odes, epitaphs, gossip, allegory, as well as realism, avant-garde modernism, and postmodern metafiction, raise the question of how these different forms of storytelling serve or disserve the political and moral criticism of social reality. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s reading of the Snopes trilogy – *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion* – combines cultural studies with Lacanian psychoanalysis to help explain how the men in these novels, both collectively and individually, either force, resist, or adapt to cultural change in a stratified society.

The fifth and final part, “After Faulkner,” considers three different legacies of Faulkner’s writing. Timothy P. Caron reviews the critical response to Faulkner from

early and New Critical readings through the theory boom to a new attention to Faulkner's later writing and a turn toward comparative Faulkner studies. Discussing one of the most important areas of this recent comparative work, Deborah Cohn analyzes Faulkner's literary influence on Spanish American authors, the political implications of his relationship with Latin America, and the current scholarly interest in "commonalities shared by the South, Latin America, and the Caribbean, including the legacies of slavery and the plantation; cultural mixing and hybridity; and the experience of US colonialism and imperialism." Finally, Patrick O'Donnell reflects on even broader commonalities suggested by Edouard Glissant's sense of Faulkner's "continuity, his ongoing presence in a [postcolonial] world of historical contingency and brutal contact, whose narrative is a multiplicity of conflicting and converging narratives."

This volume is itself a multiplicity of narratives both conflicting and converging with each other. Most of the conflicts result from the very different questions asked by each contributor. How might Faulkner's work reflect the history of economic conditions in the US South? Where does his writing fit in the twentieth century's changing ways of thinking and writing about race, sexuality, Marx, or Freud? How does Faulkner's fiction itself address these questions, or other questions about class, family, the state, colonization, religion, cinema, or pulp fiction? Comparing Faulkner to other modernist writers produces a different picture than analyzing his adaptations of pastoral, the sublime, or crime fiction. But of course many of the questions asked in different chapters also intersect and overlap in various contributors' references to some of the same novels, even some of the same incidents in those novels, and different questions converge again in the chapters designated as sample readings. Perhaps this multiplicity of narratives comes together most dramatically in the strong sense throughout this volume that all these questions are parts of an ongoing critical dialogue, a trans-historical, trans-national, trans-cultural, trans-sexual dialogue among different readers learning from and building upon each other's different readings. In multiplicity, then, and what some of Faulkner's contemporaries and characters might fear as a kind of miscegenation, this attentive, continuing dialogue suggests a healthy future for Faulkner studies.

PART I
Contexts

A Difficult Economy: Faulkner and the Poetics of Plantation Labor

Richard Godden

Preface: A Labor Parable

The bound man carries in his hands the means to his unbinding, at least according to Hegel (1910: 180–9), whose argument runs as follows: the master, seeking to ensure the independence of his mastery, consigns the slave to chattel status, or that of a thing capable of acting only as a dependent extension of his master's will. No human, no matter how peculiar the institution which binds him, is without will. Slaves who assume will-less-ness by playing Sambo make a choice in barely possible circumstances: more typically, they adopt the available means of limited resistance – they go slow, sick, silent, or they steal – activities registered as a delay in or reticence over the provision of the master's goods. Consequently, the master, at the moment of his mastery and in receipt of those goods that amount to his substance, may recognize that those who render him supreme do so with reservation. Furthermore, since the objects through which he represents that mastery to himself derive from labor that is not his own, he needs must at some level know that his authority, the authority in the antebellum South of a labor lord rather than a landlord, depends on the labor of the bound man. Or, as Hegel would have it: “just when the master had effectively achieved lordship, he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent consciousness but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved” (1910: 184). Such recognition involves him in an impassable contradiction: the lord must extract from his lordship the very materials that define it. Put tersely, he must deny who he is (a man made by slaves) in order to be who he is (a slave-empty, masterful master).

Meanwhile, the bound man, contemplating his hands and the goods that they have made, exists in an equally problematic relation to those objects of labor. Having experienced himself as little more than an extension of his lord's will (or as a negation, one “whose essence of life is for another” [Hegel 1910: 182]), he too is troubled because he recognizes, in the independent existence of the goods made by him, the negation of his

own prior negation by the lord: “Shaping and forming the object has . . . the positive significance that the bondsman becomes thereby the author of himself as factually and objectively self-existent” (p. 186). Such a moment is uncomfortable in that it requires the slave to experience his hands as both the instruments of his own death (as a dependent self) and of the subsequent manufacture of a nascent, independent, and radical self. “Precisely in labor, where there seems to be some outsider’s mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through his rediscovering of himself by himself, of having and being a mind of his own” (p. 187). Where the master risks his masterful self in the appreciation that the objects of his desire are the products of the slave’s hand, the slave risks his abject self in the consciousness that his labor not only postpones the master’s satisfaction, but also produces an object “that is permanent” and “remains after the master’s desire is gratified” (p. 186). Judith Butler notes that Hegel’s discussion of labor “begins to show how the world of substance becomes . . . the world of the subject” (Butler 1987: 58); though one should add that since slaves are subjects subjected to systemic coercion, they are likely to live in dread of that freedom which the substance of their labor might reveal to them. Nonetheless, within the parable, a parable peculiarly applicable to the slaveholding South, goods and persons radically divide – split on a structural contradiction: that the plantocracy is simultaneously independent (or the world the masters made) and yet dependent (or the world the slaves made). From which it would follow that white should be black; or, more accurately, that white planters are blacks in whiteface.

An Historical Interlude

The applicability of Hegel’s “Lordship and Bondage” to Faulkner’s major plantation fiction (*The Sound and the Fury* [1929], *Absalom, Absalom!* [1936], and *Go Down, Moses* [1942]) derives from a continuity of labor use within the Southern economy, a continuity bridging the ante- and postbellum periods. Jay Mandle, historian of African American labor, notes that Confederate defeat notwithstanding, black labor in the plantation South remained bound, or more accurately, “not slave, not free” (Mandle 1992: 21–32), during the second half of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth centuries. As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, after the war, “the slave went free; stood a brief time in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (1935: 30). The brevity of that free-time under the sun was ensured by a failure of Northern nerve in the matter of land redistribution. When the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 decreed over three million slaves “free,” Lincoln effectively transformed a war into “a social revolution in the South.” The revolution remained “unfinished” (Foner 1988: 7) in large part because 40 acres and a mule, per freedman, were not forthcoming. No matter that ex-slaves might protest, “[t]he property which they hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of *our* brows” (Foner 1988: 105), Congressional Republicans, while prepared to deprive planters of their illegitimate property in persons, were unprepared to dispossess them of what were held to be their legitimate property rights in land. As Eric Foner observes: “Without

land there could be no economic autonomy, for African American labor would continue to be subject to exploitation by its former owners" (Foner 1988: 104).

Non-redistribution ensured a protracted stand-off between a labor force on the brink of translation into a class of free workers, and planters unwilling to transform themselves into a managerial class; that is, to reconceive themselves as rentiers rather than labor lords (see Wright 1986: 17–50). Landowners sought prewar levels of control but had to reorganize production fast or face bankruptcy. "Southern planters emerged from the Civil War in a state of shock. Their class had been devastated – physically, economically and psychologically . . . The loss of the planters' slaves and life savings (to the extent that they had invested in Confederate Bonds) wiped out the inheritance of generations" (Foner 1988: 129). Freedmen wanted autonomy but had as a lever only their capacity to work. Consequently, Northern hopes for the development of wage labor in the South proved fragile; freedmen were sufficiently "free" to resist gang labor and vagrancy acts, but lacking capital they were not "free" enough to avoid being bound in yet another peculiar institution – the institution of sharecropping.

Share wages differ substantially from free wages. The owner contracts to pay his laborer at the close of the growing season; payment takes the form of a predetermined share of the crop. Should the yield be low, or the international price of cotton drop, or the market be glutted, the cropper may not make enough to pay the merchant who has "furnished" his seed and sustenance on credit for the year – in which case, the tenant becomes a peon insofar as he is bound to labor to pay the debt (see Wright 1986: 81–123). A study of black tenants in Alabama in 1932 estimated that only 10 percent received any cash for their year's work, with the remainder "breaking even" or "going into the hole" (Rony 1971: 159). With labor immobilized by such means, the debt holder – be he the merchant, or the planter, or both as one – exerts an absolute authority over the laborer. Jonathan Wiener argues that because owners maintained "involuntary servitude" as "the special form of Southern wage" from Reconstruction to the New Deal, they cannot be spoken of as "classical capitalists" (Wiener 1979: 992). Eric Foner, less emphatic, speaks of the South as "a peculiar hybrid – an improvised colonial economy integrated into the capitalist market place yet with its own distinctive system of repressive labor relations" (Foner 1988: 596). Mandle specifies the distinction, arguing that "the plantation mode of production" (turning on labor "confinement") is a better analytic device for interpreting postbellum economic underdevelopment and racial etiquette than "the capitalist mode of production" (Mandle 1992: 23). He emphasizes how much of capitalism was missing from the South, at least until the early forties. The South was not a free labor market, nor did "bourgeois individualism" (shadowed by "merit" and "universalist principle") carry much weight in a region where "subordination and paternalism typify relations between white and black" (Mandle 1992: 67).

Because the laborer could not realize his "wage" until he cashed in his crop (what Gerald Janes called "the long pay"; quoted by Mandle 1992: 21), he was bound to the land for at least a year, during which time the landlord sought unlimited power over the productive energies of the cropper and his family, or, in the words of Charles Johnson, writing in 1934, the planter "demands an unquestioning obedience to his

managerial intelligence . . . the right to dictate and control every stage of cultivation; [he] cannot and does not tolerate the suggestion of independent status” (Johnson 1966: 127). What Johnson misses is that this level of “policing” also ensured that the knower knew little else, thereby rendering himself liable to the damaging insight that he depended upon his dependents.

Whether one views Johnson’s “tradition of dependence” (Johnson 1966: 104) as the result of a distinctive system of production or as the remnant of an archaic regime, it is clear that “dependency” was both all pervasive and much disputed within the agricultural South from Redemption to the New Deal. I would reiterate that dependency cuts two ways, though tacitly: that is to say, within such a regime, the white landowning class, owing their substance to black labor, are in essence black. The same claim could not be made of capitalist employers, that is, that they are in essence their workers, since under wage labor, employer–employee relations are “partial” in that the wage payer pays for, and assumes power over, only the working part of the workers’ day. In contradistinction, the notion of dependency grows out of what Mark Tushnett calls the “total relations” of slavery – relations between binder and bound that extend to the whole life of the slave or tenant, and to the whole life of the master or landlord (Tushnett 1981: 6). The co-dependence of the white landowning Southern class and black labor must be denied, though during the teens and early twenties shifting demographic patterns ensured that black did not rest quite so quiet and easy within white. As portions of the tenantry mobilized, so structures enforcing dependency necessarily relaxed: in Jay Mandle’s terms, “dependency” weakened toward “deference” as economic circumstances indicated that the bound black body might just unbind (1978: 71–83). Where the properties of the selfhood of the owning class – from face, to skin, to sex, to land – are determined by the laboring other, any looseness of the other threatens that self’s best parts. In Joel Williamson’s terms, commenting on disruptions within the legacy of Southern black–white relations in the first half of the twentieth century, for white to release black may involve the declaration, “I’m not going to be me anymore”:

Southern white identity . . . was intimately bound up with the Southern white image of the Negro, however unreal that image might have been. To let that image go, to see black people as people, was a precarious and exceedingly dangerous venture that exposed the individual to alienation from his natal culture and the loss of his sense of self. (Williamson 1984: 499)

At which point figures for demographic change condition the corporeality – the face, sex, skin, and land – of an owning class as it negotiates the retention within itself of that which has made it what it is, the increasingly unsettled body of African American labor.

If the extended counter-revolution of the planter class from 1865 may be thought to involve the retention of the black within the white, US entry into the Great War finally triggered a long-deferred whitening of whiteness by way of steady out-migration. What

has become known as the Great Migration involved many migrations into Southern towns as well as into Northern cities. But always the migrants moved away from rural lands. The rate of drift depended on the readiness of Northern capital to draw low-cost labor out of the South. For as long as European immigration served Northeastern labor needs, the planters retained their entrapped workforce. World War I cut the labor supply to the North, with a consequent and drastic increase in out-migration from the South. Between 1916 and 1919, half a million blacks left the region, and Mississippi recorded its first-ever decline in black population (Litwack 1998: 487). During the twenties, Mississippi alone lost over 14 percent of its black males aged between 15 and 34 – that is, ready to move and employable: the figure gains in dimension with the recognition that in 1910 over 10 percent of American blacks were Mississippians. Neil McMillen, historian of African American Mississippi, notes of the wartime phase of the great migration: “To the reader who followed early local press accounts of this mass movement, it surely seemed that an entire people were abandoning the state for the packing houses and steel mills of Chicago, Detroit and St Louis as fast as the railroad could carry them” (McMillen 1989: 262). Rates of abandonment slowed during the twenties and thirties, though migration figures remained consistent with those recorded during the 1910s, that is, at levels higher than in any previous decade. Creative rejection of that economy in daily practice might involve a considered refusal of deference, or taking the time to go to the railhead to find a copy of the *Chicago Defender*:¹ but most typically it turned on the idea of motion – “a persistent and overriding theme in [Southern black] conversations (as in their songs) was movement away from where they were living and working, if not always towards a clearly defined destination” (Litwack 1998: 482). Motion remained for the majority conceptual, in that the depression, with its attendant news of the immiseration of urban blacks, ensured that Northern capital no longer needed to draw on the Southern labor reserve. In effect the breakdown of the plantation economy stalled, though the influx of federal funds, associated with the New Deal, set in place a capitalization of the Southern owning class, which allowed a new regime of accumulation to emerge.

In 1933, responding to a world market for cotton glutted with twelve and a half million unsold bales, the federal government (by way of the Agricultural Adjustment Act) offered Southern landowners between \$7 and \$20 an acre (depending on estimated yield) to plow their crops under. Fifty-three percent of the South’s cotton acreage went out of production. Since a sharecropper, cropping on a half-the-crop agreement, would by rights receive half the federal payment for the sacrifice of his acres, it paid the landowner not to sign sharecropping contracts for the following year. Instead, he might hire the same cropper on a wage, pay him to plow the crop under, and reap the entire subsidy himself. Between 1933 and 1940 the Southern tenantry declined by more than 25 percent, while the number of hired laborers increased, though not proportionately, since landowners might simply evict any unnecessary “dependents,” enclosing their farms to produce larger units, more viable for mechanized agriculture: “The first stage of the consolidation of the plantations was the wholesale eviction of tenants of all classes, especially sharecroppers. The process was protracted but it seems to have been underway

all over the South by 1934, the first full crop year following the creation of the AAA” (Kirby 1987: 64). Eviction, enclosure, and drastically increased tenant mobility were the visible marks of this structural change, as sharecroppers (bound by debt) were made over into cash workers, “free” to be under- or unemployed in a region where dependency was slowly ousted by autonomy as a cultural dominant.

From Subsemantics Toward Semantics: Three Phases of Labor Withdrawal

Phase I: Hiding

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson household, founded on plantation wealth, comes apart. The father drinks; the mother sickens, and the children are variously given to idiocy, suicide, promiscuity, and commerce. Yet, from the perspective of 1929, the house coheres; at least to the point at which a rotting gutter, or a black boy practicing on a musical saw in the cellar, are symbolic indices rather than structural factors. Coherence, albeit precarious, depends upon the domestic labor of Dilsey and her extended black family. That family also has its flaws: Versh, Dilsey’s eldest son, departs for Memphis, intimating the force of Neil McMillen’s observation that the “dark journey” of diaspora seldom involved a single, one-way trip, but instead featured regional stages . . . maybe from Jefferson to Memphis, and so, via New Orleans, to St Louis or Chicago. Similarly restless, Dilsey’s daughter Frony’s youngest son, Luster, longs to go to the circus – ever an image of mobile modernity for Southern writing.² Nonetheless, according to Faulkner’s 1945 “Appendix: Compson, 1699–1945,” Dilsey, her family, and her white dependents “endured,” at least in 1929.

I would suggest that the Compson house retains its form despite dilapidation not simply because Dilsey works to exhaustion, but because the male children of the household continue to perceive themselves through the substantiating and disguised body of the black worker: that is to say, without the recovery within themselves of intimations of the bound man’s displaced presence, they, to echo Williamson, would come apart, ceasing to be what they are – the failing inheritors of an archaic regime of accumulation, founded on coerced labor. My claims are large and abstract: my evidence, constrained by space, will necessarily be narrow and concrete: “concrete” in Brecht’s sense of that term, for whom an attribution of “concreteness” involves the recognition that the reality of things and persons is simply the coming to materiality of “causal complexes,” whose determinants (of class, race, gender . . .), however various, are in the last instance subject to motivation by patterns of labor (Brecht et al. 1980: 82).

The first of my evidential contractions involves taking Quentin Compson to stand for his brothers in the matter of a shared habit of mind; the second identifies that habit of mind (perceived finally as an ur-structure, generative of the three fraternal monologues), through close attention to the subsemantics of a single passage – Quentin’s recovery of an incident at the branch, in 1909, when he and Caddy (his sister), came

close to engaging in incest. Prior to the analysis, the context: on June 2, 1910, the date of the Quentin section, Quentin drowns himself in the Charles River, his freshman year at Harvard having been paid for by the sale of ex-plantation land. His preparations for suicide (letters, clocks, tram trips, and a purchase of flatirons) decorate his abiding preoccupation with his sister's virginity and its loss – central to which concern would seem to be his own trial for the abduction of a speechless Italian child, who adopts him during his preparatory location-scouting journey to the river Charles. Tried in an ad hoc country court, on the outskirts of Boston, for “meditated criminal assault” (Faulkner 1987: 85) on the sister of an Italian immigrant, Quentin is fined six dollars. The justice accounts precisely for the sum – one dollar to Julio for “taking him away from his work” (p. 87); five dollars to the marshal for his two-hour pursuit. Apprehended for child molestation, Quentin receives a fine for theft of labor time. Incest, since the Italian girl is emphatically a “sister” and has been critically understood to replicate Caddy, and labor, albeit Northern industrial labor, are therefore tacitly aligned within the six dollars. I shall return to the silent co-presence of desire and labor within split signs later.

The conversation at the branch (my focal passage) directly follows not the trial, but Quentin's subsequent beating by Gerald Bland. The two events may be understood as forming a linked frame. Released from a court in which his Southern familial tragedy, concerning a sister's honor, has been rerun as Northern farce, Quentin comes close to seeing double: himself (a “Galahad,” if “half baked” [p. 67]) within Julio (a migrant worker); Caddy (what W. J. Cash calls “the lily-pure maid” [Cash 1971: 89]) as a “dirty” Italian girl; sexual soiling extending into coal-dust; a hymen lost as expenditure of labor-time. Yet, invited to doubt the coherence, desirability, or relevance of his own subject position, Quentin reverts singularly to type. He strikes Bland over the matter of “sisters” (p. 101) and is knocked semi-conscious. At which point the reader encounters an abrupt tonal transition from opacity to transparency. Direct report conceals what Eric Sundquist and Richard Gray have characterized, respectively, as “chaotic first-person effusions” (Sundquist 1983: 12) or “intensely claustrophobic prose” of “an almost impenetrable nature” (Gray 1986: 211). On which grounds it might be argued Bland's punch levels Quentin physically and intellectually, disarming those habits of perception through which he has previously preserved a version of himself. If so, culturally impaired, Quentin does not “recall” the incident of his attempted incest at the branch; rather, he finds it for the first time, discovering a very different brother and sister, and becoming, in effect, the revisionist historian of his own pathologies, and of those of his class insofar as they turn on incest and the hymen. I run ahead of myself, providing the conclusions to a reading without the reading. But, prior to an offer of evidence, I should add that having traced patterns of desire, I shall seek to discern, within the subsemantics of those desires, the whispered presence of African American labor, as that labor structures a cultural erotics founded on the sister's hymen.

The evidence: Quentin comes to the branch in order to call his sister a whore. Instead they talk, and motives emerge; the brother is physically jealous of Dalton Ames and wishes to take his place. Impotence prevents him and provokes the substitution of a childish suicide pact for the sexual act about which he knows so little:

I held the point of the knife at her throat
 it wont take but a second just a second then I can do mine
 I can do mine then
 all right can you do yours by yourself
 yes the blades long enough Benjys in bed by now
 yes
 it wont take but a second Ill try not to hurt
 all right
 will you close your eyes
 no like this youll have to push it harder
 touch your hand to it (p. 92)

One detail is particularly revealing; Caddy, ever practical, asks if Quentin will be able to cut his own throat. Quentin's reply involves an apparent non sequitur: "yes the blades long enough Benjys in bed by now." Several elements are involved: Quentin invokes his resentment of Benjy, who slept with Caddy until he was 13; fears of sexual inadequacy, tied up with the innuendo that all idiots are sexual giants; and a glimmer of self-recognition. The evocation of Benjy's howl has been one of Quentin's customary ways of voicing his own confusion, and that all-obscuring noise is now silent. The knife, like the howl, is a substitute. Like the howl, the knife falls away.

dont cry poor Quentin
 but I couldn't stop she held my head against her damp hard breast I could hear
 her heart going firm and slow now not hammering and the water gurgling
 among the willows in the dark and waves of honeysuckle coming up the air
 my arm and shoulder were twisted under me
 what is it what are you doing
 her muscles gathered I sat up
 its my knife I dropped it
 she sat up
 what time is it
 I dont know
 she rose to her feet I fumbled along the ground (pp. 92-3)

Lulled by Caddy's firm, slow heart, Quentin rests. The startling disjunction between the smell of honeysuckle and a cramped arm can be simply explained as an interval of sleep; Caddy's sudden "what time is it" may indicate an interrupted stillness. I propose that Quentin's sexual response energizes this scene, that sleep relieves him of guilt and restores his potency, and that he wakes with an erection. Caddy [reacts] in a way that balances between objection and response:

what are you doing
 her muscles gathered

The line-break could be understood conventionally, as marking a division between speech and action; however, a passage that conspicuously omits the marks whereby such divisions are negotiated – marks of punctuation and capital letters – may well foreground the spacing of the text, causing readers to make meanings from textual items (such as spaces) that are not otherwise particularly meaningful. In which case, this break could be read as signaling a significant pause, during which Caddy's body adjusts to changes in Quentin's body – it appears that she is not gathering herself to sit or stand, since Quentin rises first. "I sat up" is at once an embarrassed male reaction and an attempt to disguise an erection. The duplicity is contained in the knife play. Sleep renders the symbol unnecessary, so he "dropped it" and woke to discover the absolute redundancy of the substitute. However, the symbol is easier than the reality of standing straight and of his sister's gathering muscles; consequently, Quentin fumbles. As they walk away Caddy seems sexually stimulated: "she walked into me . . . she walked into me again" (p. 93). Her arousal probably derives from an intermingling of thoughts about her lover and brother. What is clear is that Caddy (aged 17) departs to meet Dalton Ames in the woods, and that her 18-year-old brother goes with her. Whether she wants him there or thereabouts depends on how "sat up" and "gathered" are disposed: she may bump into him because he blocks her path to the woods, or because she is flirting with him – both readings are possible and may even be simultaneous. To stress a mutual and confused arousal, as I do, is to appreciate that the physical actions and reactions of the brother and sister constitute an erotics that both find troubling yet exciting.

The details cumulatively prompt a simple question: why, with all controls down, does an erection command faulty encryption within a knife-play and a line-break? I have time only to sketch an abbreviated answer, which in the first instance must return to Benjy's performance of a similar entry on a similar occasion: confronting Caddy, back from a liaison at the branch, Benjy bellows:

Caddy came to the door and stood there. . . . I went toward her, crying, and she shrank against the wall and I saw her eyes and I cried louder and pulled at her dress. She put her hands out but I pulled at her dress. Her eyes ran.

Versb said, Your name Benjamin now. You know how come your name Benjamin now. They making a bluegum out of you. Mammy say in old time your granpaw changed nigger's name, and he turn preacher, and when they look at him he bluegum too. Didn't use to be bluegum, neither. And when family woman look him in the eye in the full of the moon, child born bluegum.
(pp. 42–3)

Late in the summer of 1909, Caddy lost her virginity, and Benjy intuits that loss. (His intuition need not be considered mysterious. He does not stare at eyes because he has insight but because, like fire and glass, the eye moves and reflects light, and at this moment Caddy's eyes are probably moving far too fast.) Benjy's recollection goes back almost nine years to November 1900, when his name was changed. The shift appears

to have no mechanical trigger, yet there is evidence of a narrow imagination producing partially conscious comparisons. Caddy's sexual change is associated with Benjy's name change, in an essentially cultural analogy likening loss of virginity to loss of a first or maiden name. Prior to recognition of his retardation, Benjy had been named Maury for his mother's brother. In effect, Benjy counters his disturbing insight by recalling a particular story about multiple names. A Mississippi bluegum is a black conjuror with a fatal bite. Versh's bluegum has the additional gift of magic eyes. Simply by being looked upon at a certain time, the bluegum preacher can make his congregation all, even the pregnant women's unborn children, bluegum too. According to Benjy's analogical use of Versh's story, he, care of a black body, is the surrogate father of Caddy's child. I beg a lot of questions about Benjy's cognitive capacity for analogy: they must remain begged (see Godden 1997: 9–21 for an argument attributing a limited temporal sense and a capacity for association to Benjy). Instead, I am reminded that for Quentin any and all of Caddy's suitors were "blackguards." The epithet is carefully chosen and much repeated: meaning "scoundrel," "blackguard" or "black guard" contains the implication that those who would take Caddy's virginity are the guardians of what they take. In 1933, in an introduction to the novel which he did not see published, Faulkner tries to characterize the "ecstasy," "nebulous" yet "physical" (*bis* terms in Faulkner 1987: 219), that writing the Benjy section gave him. He likens the manuscript to "unmarred sheet[s] beneath my hand inviolate and unfailing" (Faulkner 1987: 219) – a complex innuendo forms in which paper turns into the white space of a bed (Benjy's pristine consciousness), while language (so black) "mar[s]" that original purity by "marrying" it. Since in 1956, Faulkner was famously to claim, "it began with a mental picture . . . of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers" (Faulkner 1987: 240), writing "it" – *The Sound and the Fury* – becomes densely synonymous with a barely traceable act of miscegenous entry into a sister ("bluegum," "blackguard", "marred") – almost without trace because the paper appears to absorb the black marks of the carressive script. Unpicking puns from linked similes may strain credibility, but remains necessary in order to establish a submerged affinity between Benjy (as "bluegum"), Quentin (erect at the branch), and Faulkner in "physical . . . ecstasy . . . waiting for release" as he wrote the manuscript (Faulkner 1987: 219).³

It would I think be a mistake to cast these black marks ("bluegum," "blackguard," "marred") simply as stains generated by racial anxiety, though a cultural case might be made in the following terms. During the Radical era (1890–1915), the era of both Faulkner and the Compson boys' childhoods, the South "capitulated to racism" (McMillen 1989: 7). As McMillen stresses, the years between 1889 and 1915 saw the most repressive Jim Crow activity in Mississippi's history: that activity was designed to keep a low-wage labor force in place. High among its forms was the sexual threat stemming from a forged link between the white hymen and the black phallus. In the antebellum South, white males of the owning class idealized white womanhood, building pedestals to lift the female gentry above the reality of interracial sex between slave women and slave owners. As the color line was crisscrossed in the quarters, so the pedestals soared at the plantation house. In the words of Cash, the white woman became:

“the South’s Palladium . . . – the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard of its rallying. . . . She was the lily-pure maid of Astolat. . . . And – she was the pitiful mother of God” (Cash 1971: 89). By means of her propriety, husbands, fathers, and sons whitewashed their property and its sustaining institutions. However, the cult of Southern Womanhood raised the standard of the unbreachable hymen precisely because miscegenation breached the color line throughout the prewar South. Plainly, if the iconic item was to withstand the iconoclastic force of the evidence, it needed support that white males found in the incest dream. Where the hymen quarantines the family “blood,” protecting it from risk of contamination through crossing, incest ensures that where crossing has occurred it shall be between like “bloods.”

Emancipation changed the obsessional map; freeing the slaves blocked automatic white entry to the quarters, while, in the mind of the planters, because the “freed” man would necessarily seek the white women earlier denied him, he must be restrained. Within this pervasive fantasy, white men, having impeded their own intimacy with white women (cast as the hymen), project onto the black male extravagant and guilt-free versions of the sexual behavior whose ordinary forms they were declaring guilty and denying to themselves. Ergo, the cultural hymen – at once a color line and a device for keeping labor in its place – depends for its coercive vitality on the presence of that which threatens it: since all rhetorical appeals to purity needs must anxiously elicit a threat to that purity, the hymen is necessarily shadowed by the black.

Simply to apply such a model to these textual instances would be to ignore the degree to which “bluegum,” “blackguard,” “marred” contain an amatory as well as an anxious imperative. In exploring their secrets, in order to establish the foundation of Quentin’s covert erection, I am reminded of Malcolm Bull’s account of hiddenness: “If something is hidden, it is not because the truth has eluded you and is unobtainable, but because the truth is flirting with you, simultaneously offering and withholding” (Bull 2000: 19–20). Behind the knife and in the gap, an erection of questionable color “flirts”: like “blackguard,” “bluegum,” “marred,” that member, coming into hiding on the white space of the page, is released as a whispered semantic valency by motions within the body of Southern labor, from which body, the body of the owning class takes its very particular substance.

“Shadows” typically darken the branch, gathering with intensity around Ames, so that Caddy, Ames, and Quentin eventually unite as “one shadow” (p. 94), and Caddy, “her shadow high against his shadow” (p. 94), will lean down from Ames’s “shadow” to kiss Quentin, who “drew back,” retreating into the “gray light” among the “dark willows” (p. 95): Quentin literally becomes the dark body that in economic terms he already is. Consequently, his flirtatious hard-on (now you glimpse it, now you don’t), spotted among the “shadows,” stands as an exact (and exact hidden) class essence. In effect, Quentin all but takes the increasingly archaic and anxious emblem of his class (the hymen as color line and labor-control device); furthermore, he all but takes it from within a darkening and amatory body (the black within the white), which, as it emerges toward the emergency of recognition, embodies the true form and substance of his class.

Phase II: Secretion

In 1929, recognition remains covert, a matter largely of the subsemantic. Not until the agricultural revolution initiated by the New Deal and renewed tenant displacement will the profile of black labor rise more overtly through the whiteface of Faulkner's planters, their children, and their grandchildren. Even in 1936, after the first phase of the Great Migration and the structural transformation initiated by the Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933), the whiteness of Sutpen's very white Hundred (despite its designation as "A Dark House" in Faulkner's working title) retains its intimations of contested entitlement beneath the semantic surfaces of its representation. Those surfaces exhibit a semantic and political leeway which in effect secretes (as in "secretion") that which they make secret. Witness the capacity of a single and central pun to operate as the novel's displaced key, a key lying hidden in plain sight within Bon's name.

Quentin, citing his father and his father's father, notes: "Father said he probably named him himself. Charles Bon. Charles Good. . . . Grandfather believed, just as he named them all – the Charles Goods and the Clytemnestras" (pp. 213–14). Bon: Good: Goods . . . the pun is cruelly obvious and apt within a tradition whose authority over labor extended to the naming of new slaves, whether new by birth or purchase. Planters were entitled to declare their title or property within a slave by naming that slave as they wished, and in so doing they deadened the slave's right by birth to human connection. Orlando Patterson describes this renaming as "natal death" (Patterson 1982: 8). Sutpen does not deny his son his patronym, since Eulalia does not give birth to a "son" but to "goods," and in naming him as such Sutpen declares Bon dead and himself an "owner," not a "father." In effect, the choice of name seeks to contain the central and debilitating contradiction of slave production, that the master's body is made by the slave's work: a fact that casts ethnic interdependency as white dependency, ensuring that from the planter's white body black "goods" must come. It should be stressed that in the antebellum South sexual production literally resembled cotton production, insofar as both yielded a crop that could be taken to market. The banning of the overseas trade in slaves (1808) transformed miscegenation into another way in which slaves made goods for masters. By setting his first ("Spanish") wife aside, Sutpen effectively ascribes Bon's "natal death" to her, on the grounds that she and her father lied to him in the matter of "Spanish blood" (p. 203), presuming on his innocence as to the euphemism whereby "Spanish" contains in displaced form "black." Nonetheless, "Bon," while proprietorial in purpose, may be thought to allude residually, and within a secretive complexity, to that structure of feeling within which the planter both recognizes and denies that his own "good" (that which makes him and his class what they are) resides exactly in what he must not be – the body of African American labor. A non-proprietorial trajectory for the pun might be described as – Bon: Good: Bonheur.

Much here depends on whispered paths running through a single albeit central pun. A pun involves speakers or readers hearing their voices buckle, interrupting the pattern

of their speech, to release a second word from a first. Because the second appears to be saying more than the first intended, a semantic excess results, stalling the narrative trajectory of the utterance. Puns are caesural sounds; by breaking a word across an acoustic they produce two words (“good” and “goods” from “Bon”), which sound the same but whose occurrence “one after another . . . lacks connecting words.” Henry Krips follows Freud in linking puns to “an anxiety with no apparently appropriate object” (Krips 1999: 37). He suggests that those who pun, overcome by what has sprung from their mouths (materials appearing to derive from somewhere else, quite other than their intentions), tend to reassess their words: “Speakers are thus transformed into listeners to their ‘own’ alienated utterances, and correspondingly a wedge is driven between the ‘I’ producing speech and the ‘I’ reflexively listening to what is being said” (Krips 1999: 38). If so, Sutpen heard his selfhood split as he chose the name “Bon.” Arguably and contra Krips, since that choice conceals an attempt to declare white black (by designating his son as property, in translation), Sutpen remains, in some sense, aware of the anxious “object” from which he derives the chosen name. In effect, he hears his voice tear on a real contradiction, the contradiction that planters are blacks in whiteface. Indeed, the word “Bon” reminds Sutpen, from beneath the masking sound of a second language, of the actual condition of things and persons under slavery.

The return of the named to the namer is, for Sutpen, the return of his “face” within the “face” of the other. On seeing Bon ride up to the Hundred in 1859, he witnesses his own features on a male slave: “– saw the face and knew . . . and Father said that even then, even though he knew that Bon and Judith had never laid eyes on one another, he must have felt and heard the design – house, position, posterity and all – come down like it had been built out of smoke” (pp. 214–15). The form of the reported encounter directly recalls Sutpen’s childhood experience (circa 1820) of approaching a Virginia planter’s door only to be turned from it by a black butler. The coexistence of the two incidents, along with the tacit invitation that we read the latter through the former, ensures that, seeing as Sutpen saw (in 1859 as in 1820), we see the irrepressible recurrence of an economy’s founding and recurrent impasse, even as that recurrence revises the status and position of the subjects involved. The “child” come again who *is* and *plays* Sutpen is a slave (black goods); the master who *is* and *plays* the “monkey nigger’s” part is, despite his name (Sutpen), black goods. Faced with this, Sutpen has no option – he must turn the boy (and the insight) from the door, or lose the door. To extend the logic of the insight is to appreciate the impossibility either of Sutpen’s acknowledging Bon as his son, or of his living with the insight in undisplaced form: should Bon marry Judith, not only will the Hundred be a materialization of black work but its inheritors will lose the euphemistic patronym (Sutpen), becoming goods (Bon) in name as well as in fact. As a result, the white master’s nominal authority along with his nominal irony (“Bon”) will vanish “like smoke.” Sutpen meets revolutionary recognition with counter-revolutionary violence. Henry will kill Bon at his father’s bidding, but in so doing he will kill that which manufactures mastery. Consequently, Henry vanishes to all intents and purposes as he pulls the trigger. He returns to a diminished Hundred “*to die*” (p. 298), a “wasted yellow face” with “wasted hands” who is “already a corpse”

in 1909, because, as a planter who has killed his own most vital part (labor), he has been a corpse since that act in 1865.

In order to unmask a pun, I have ignored its masked status and effect in the text. Given that Sutpen senses the term's duplicities (else why chose it?), his choice is an act of secretion, in both senses of the verb "to secrete": "to place in concealment, to keep secret" or "to produce by means of secretion" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), where "secretion" involves the "extraction and elaboration of matter from blood or sap" as a prelude to "emission [as] waste" . . . or perhaps, in intertextual terms, as excess. "Bon" secretes, or conceals what it reveals, in a manner which exemplifies the ur-structure of the plantocracy. To reiterate: since black labor constituted the substance of the labor lord, that lord and his class had to retain the black body, while denying the formative centrality of its presence in their own race, skin, sex, land, and language. The contradiction, white is black, had both to be recognized, else what is Southern about the Southern landowner, and to be denied, else how does the Southern landowner "remain me some more"? The means to denied recognition in *Absalom, Absalom!* is, in effect, a poetics of aporia or doubt, through which each of the five narrators who retell Sutpen's story replicate, with variations, the duplicity of Sutpen's pun. Faulkner's aporetics⁴ ensures difficulty, the sheer opacity of which draws into hiding (or secretes) the real contradiction from which the plantocracy takes and retains its particularity. Since each of the five, with the exception of Shreve, is either a planter or the inheritor of plantation lands, to do less would be to jeopardize the integrity of their class.

Phase III: Emergency

Yet during the late thirties and early forties, the conceptual habits shared by Sutpen and his narrators incline to redundancy as the transformation of their base and motive – a singular regime of labor – required that a class of labor lords become a class of landlords. With African American labor federally forced from the land onto roads and into cities, landowners no longer found blacks so corporally in their whiteface. In effect, government subsidies, administered by local elites, sponsored the dispossession of rural blacks, and laid the land fallow for capital. Even as black Mississippians were displaced, federal funds restored the state: "As a result of the AAA and other related programs, bank deposits, farm values, and farm incomes all doubled. Between 1933 and 1939, the federal government's direct expenditure in Mississippi totalled \$450 million, while an additional \$260 million entered state banks through ensured loans" (Woods 1998: 143). With blacks less and less in their laboring place, and capital more and more in that place, the substance of plantation land and of its owners is transformed. The historian Jonathan Wiener notes that the influx of federal subsidy checks induced greater transformation than the influx of federal troops (Wiener 1979: 970–1006). And Donald Grubbs continues the trope by describing the Farm Security Administration's 1937 attack on "tenancy[']s . . . version of slavery" as a Second Reconstruction (Grubbs 1971: 135).

Go Down, Moses (1942) as a whole can be read as a response to a moment of acute structural change. I have space only to outline a reading of one element of the novel, “Pantaloon in Black,” a story apt to the argument in its manifest concern for the emergent body of autonomous labor, in the shape of Rider. “Pantaloon in Black,” set in 1941, opens with Rider burying his young wife of six months (Mannie), and closes two days later with his lynching.

For the two days between Mannie’s funeral and his death, Rider is characterized as rogue labor. We first see him filling Mannie’s grave:

Soon he had one of the shovels himself. . . . Another member of his sawmill gang touched his arm and said, “Lemme have hit, Rider.” He didn’t even falter. He released one hand in midstroke and flung it backward, striking the other across the chest, jolting him back a step, and restored the hand to the moving shovel, flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition, not built up from above but thrusting visibly upward out of the earth itself. (Faulkner 1994: 102)

I cannot improve on Michael Toolan’s reading of the passage (Toolan 1990: 119): he notes that Rider is not, syntactically, the stable subject of the verbs “striking,” “jolting,” and “flinging,” the first two of which find their subject in “one hand” and not “He”; while “flinging” displaces the pronoun for “the moving shovel” as subject. Agency, as a result, is ascribed to a body part and a shovel. The grammatical strategy contributes to the conclusion that the mound has an independent will, “thrusting . . . upward out of the earth itself.” I would merely add that, drawn to Mannie in the earth, Rider’s body and the objects of his hand are animate with purposes beyond the purpose of those who customarily hire his manual labor. The “earth,” albeit briefly, has more than one proprietor. Confronted on every side with artifacts no longer singly owned (or available for rent), Rider experiences a form of body loss. His physique, that of a giant, the very type of heroic labor, is temporarily beyond his own and his employer’s control, in the sense that it is doubly occupied or at cross-purpose. Something else, encrypted as Mannie, exerts a pressure.

Faulkner details Rider’s grief as a sequence of labor infractions; he shovels when he should mourn; he goes to work when he should absent himself; having started his shift, “he walks off the job in the middle of the afternoon” (p. 118); he buys too much liquor at an inappropriate time. Rider’s final violation of labor practice is to cut the throat of Birdsong, the night watchman and gambler who, working out of industrial premises, in the boiler shed tool-room (pp. 114, 115), takes back, on a nightly basis, a portion of black earnings. Like the deputy who partially frames the story, Birdsong is what Rider calls him, “boss-man” (p. 115), evidence of the extent of the informal networks of control that constrain black work.

Yet it would be a mistake to cast Rider as the master of his own infringements. His is a body out of control, mastered neither by himself, nor by his employers. Faulkner scrupulously records how the loss of Mannie takes Rider apart, and to what end. Mannie’s ghost is promiscuous and specific. She makes one appearance and her

instructions are clear. Unable to prevent her fading from the kitchen's threshold, Rider, "talking as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman," asks, "Den lemme go wid you, honey": "But she was going. She was going fast now; he could actually feel between them the insuperable barrier of that very strength which could handle alone a log which would have taken any two other men to handle" (p. 106). If Rider is to attend her as a lover, he must lose not just his body, whose very strength blocks its passage into the earth, but his body defined as an instrument of labor, twice as productive as that of any of his co-workers.

In that Mannie's presence remains tangibly within those objects that she so recently used, external reality, during the days following her death, solicits Rider with her breath, eye, and touch, "his body breasting the air her body had vacated, his eyes touching the objects – post and tree and field and house and hill – her eyes had lost" (p. 103). In effect, Rider experiences his body as a faulty aperture into that which it is not (literally, into Mannie), rather than as an entity or tool. She, who is now quite "other" to him, in her death, exerts a dispossessive power, drawing his perceptions toward self loss. At the risk of gilding the grave, Mannie occupies the earth as an exquisite corpse,⁵ offering herself through the body of the land, as a site of unworkable desire into which Rider must pass. He "breast[s]" her "air" (p. 103), elsewhere "breasting aside the silver solid air which began to flow past him" (p. 112): Rider is subject to that object (the air) which, in that it has passed through her as breath, takes erotic form as a skin whose touch calls his skin into felt existence (breast to breast). At times Rider feels that his spaces are so packed with memories of his six-month marriage that "there was no space left for air to breathe" (p. 105). To inhale such scant air, "solid" and promise-crammed, is to be overcome with desire.

On the day after the funeral, Rider seeks to rejoin Mannie by translating labor into an industrial accident: he lifts a log no one man should lift:

He nudged the log to the edge of the truck-frame and squatted and set his palms against the underside of it. For a time there was no movement at all. It was as if the unrational and inanimate wood had invested, mesmerised the man with some of its own primal inertia. Then a voice said quietly: "He got hit. Hit's off de truck," and they saw the crack and gap of air, watching the infinitesimal straightening of the braced legs until the knees locked, the movement mounting infinitesimally through the belly's insuck, the arch of the chest, the neck cords, lifting the lip from the white clench of teeth in passing, drawing the whole head backward and only the bloodshot fixity of the eyes impervious to it, moving on up the arms and the straightening elbows until the balanced log was higher than his head. "Only he aint gonter turn wid dat un," the same voice said. "And when he try to put hit back on de truck, hit gonter kill him." But none of them moved. Then – there was no gathering of supreme effort – the log seemed to leap suddenly backward over his head of its own volition, spinning, crashing and thundering down the incline. (p. 110)

Faulkner so focuses our attention on the slow lift of the log that "its," in "its own volition," is oddly apt (logs are not volitional), reducing the more likely "his" to an

antonymic inference. Further, by subordinating the personal to the impersonal pronoun, “its” mimes Rider’s desire to move from animacy to inanimacy. Since Mannie is mesmerically latent in most of the objects Rider encounters, her presence complicates the issue of “volition,” allowing “its” to retain “her” (“her volition”) within its redistribution of industrial agency. If Mannie is in the log, lifting that log is an erection. Faulkner engages in erotic writing, offering a segment-by-segment account of Rider’s “straightening” body (“legs,” “belly,” “chest,” “head”). Rider’s “brace,” “lock,” “insuck,” “arch,” and “fix” leave him most erect when most laborful. Straightening until literally a column of muscle, he figures desire and yet remains excessive and unreadable, not least because his body is simultaneously engaged in suicide, gainful labor, an assault on the means of production, and tumescence. Semantic excess results from the clash of two discourses as they vie for possession of the same object. Read through the optic of labor, the lift is either an accident about to happen (“hit gonter kill him”) or a particularly productive use of labor time. However, Rider’s slow-motion straightening is surely intended, in its anatomical transposability, to make plain why he is called Rider – a name understood by Faulkner as a synonym for a sexual athlete.⁶ Neither discursive option ousts the other; instead Rider stands available for a profit or loss *and* for desire, and consequently as a real contradiction beyond our or Faulkner’s semantic control. The variables latent in Rider’s working erection are triggered by Mannie, gone into the ground, but still active therein.

The nature of her activity lies encrypted in her name. Mannie summons Rider into the earth. Through her he enters a conceit which casts the soil as a black vagina containing a black phallus. Entry may be read as signatory: given that Mannie suggests the conjunction of a male term and a first person pronoun, Rider’s death, in admitting him to the ground, admits him to a full identity (Man – I). Since Rider’s reclaimed body will doubtless be laid in Mannie’s grave, their reunion is tacitly proprietorial. The grave, containing the embodiment of independent black work and desire, will be marked by “shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick,” unreadable by whites and “fatal to touch” (p. 102). The space is narrow and the dedication an assemblage of refuse, but encryption declares the place black and privately owned. Furthermore, Faulkner tacitly and intratextually names the grave as the resting place of Moses. *Go Down, Moses* makes only one reference to the patriarch: in the opening story “Was,” dogs pursue a semi-domesticated fox through the McCaslin cabin (circa 1859). Eventually, at the story’s close, the lead dog (“old Moses” [p. 25]), in his keenness to catch the fox, enters its cage head-first, to emerge “wearing most of the crate around its neck” (p. 25). The taking apart of a cage recurs at the close of “Pantaloon in Black,” where old Moses’s collar is revised during Rider’s dismantling of a Jefferson jail cell. Rider, who has been systematically associated with or likened to animals, grabs the “steel barred door,” rips it from the wall and walks from the cell “toting the door over his head like it was a gauze window-screen” (p. 120). Rider, circa 1941, by analogy a *new* Moses, keeps to the letter of the chorus of Faulkner’s titular song (“Let my People Go. A Song of the Contrabands”):

– O go down, Moses
 Away down to Egypt's land,
 And tell King Pharaoh
 To let my people go!

For Egypt, read the South (also a place of bondage); for Pharaoh, read the owning class; for Jews read blacks, and for Exodus read the Great Migration. This much is critical commonplace. Less so, for Moses read Rider, in that he, as the song instructs, “go[es] down” to obtain release and partial recovery of “Egypt’s spoil.”⁷

On which ground (Mannie’s ground), Rider as the Mosaic embodiment of black labor, circa 1941, *is* independent. Yet such autonomy does not gel with the manner of his death, lynched by the Birdsongs. “Hanging from a bell-rope in the Negro schoolhouse” (p. 116), his corpse makes their educative point that “extra legal violence” continues to operate as “an instrument for social discipline” in ways “guaranteed to serve the needs, and particularly the labor needs, of the white caste” (McMillen 1989: 242). Emergent autonomy or dependent archaism – neither option covers Rider’s excessive tumescence in the timber yard. My route to a fuller reading of that image passes again through Rider’s name, directed there by an ambiguity in the story’s title. The term “pantaloon” refers to “a kind of mask on the Italian stage, representing the Venetian” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), for whom Pantalone was a nickname.⁸ But who masks in black? “Pantaloon” might be thought to trip “Rider” into “Writer,” as Faulkner assumes the guise of a black character. Since “pantaloon” refers more generally to “trousers,” the conjunction of terms permits the momentary and curious implication that Faulkner masks himself in Rider’s trousers; curious, that is, until one recognizes the homoerotic potential of Rider’s erection.

As already argued, Rider’s laborious tumescence involves a contradictory meeting of seemingly incompatible worlds: the world of labor in which black work yields white substance, and the world of desire in which a black male tumescs for a “Man,” that is for “Mannie,” as the name is refocused through the optic of the story’s title. Incompatibility, so stated, seems startlingly compatible, since both elements are liable to a single summary, whereby white absorbs black by taking black into itself either as property or as phallus. But, in 1941, and thereafter throughout the forties, white ownership of black bodies grew increasingly redundant. Structurally speaking, whites, at least those raised with habits of mind deriving from an archaic regime of accumulation, had to find alternative modes for retention of the black body, even as they studied its departure. Rider’s phallus figures a fantastical solution: “love,” imaged in the eminently deniable form of homoerotic desire.

Reread, as a figure for the writer’s desire rather than for Rider’s, the focus of the timber-yard scene shifts from the log to he who raises it. The black body as phallus recedes as he who desires Mannie, and emerges as he who is manifestly desirable – the embodiment of Faulkner’s grieving desire. The extent to which a black member draws a white member from hiding (and I would stress that both are merely inferential) is the extent to which Mannie ceases to be a wife and becomes a gender caption, whose second syllable now nominates one who must not speak his name.