

**DO YOU LOVE NATURE IF YOU FEAR HER  
BODY?**

**STYLE, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE, AND  
THE SOUTHERN WILDERNESS IN  
FAULKNER'S "THE BEAR"**

**Fredrik Chr. Brøgger  
University of Tromsø**

In the title above, the question and its reference to "her" are willfully ambiguous and pertain to the equivocations of Ike McCaslin, the main character in the story: How can he profess to love nature when partaking in its destruction at the same time? And how can he love and cherish nature if he fears and despises that most natural part of us, namely the body – and in particular, his wife's body? In either case, with a lover like that, who needs enemies?

Such questions become particularly insistent at the end of Part IV of "The Bear" when Ike's wife uses her naked body and his lust to wring from him a promise to keep his farm – a promise that he does not keep and perhaps does not intend to keep even as he utters it. The more I have tried to come to terms with this copulation scene, the more its function in the story disturbs me – a story which is traditionally seen as Faulkner's eulogy to the vanishing American wilderness, presented in terms of the hunt for the last big bear in northern Mississippi. Particularly because of its fourth section, Faulkner's novella of course turns into much more than a hunting tale. It becomes at the same time the story of white men's greed and lust, their exploitation of both nature and black slaves, symbolized by past miscegenation and incest. The abuse of land and people, literally or figuratively, is seen to thwart the minds and bodies of people in the South, in the present as well as the past. The problem with the bedroom scene of Ike and his wife, however, is that this corruption seems to taint Ike as pervasively as anybody else in the story.

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

Of course the copulation scene provides us with ample reasons to cast Ike's wife in the role of temptress. Her seduction of him demonstrates that the idea of ownership, of possession, invades even the most intimate context of people's relations, turning sexuality into a commodity and dehumanizing people in the process. Her initiative, however, does not exempt him from complicity, nor does it make his own dehumanization any less disturbing. On closer scrutiny the bedroom scene has Ike playing a role not unrelated to that of his predecessors. He manages to make love to his wife and misogynically to repudiate her in his mind at one and the same time. Thus this copulation scene may be seen to point backwards to events in the past when Ike's grandfather's lust drove him not only to having intercourse with Eunice, one of his black slaves, but also in due time to bedding her daughter Tomasina, his own flesh and blood. The bedroom scene also points forward to the scene of the story "Delta Autumn" when Ike, having become an old man close to eighty, proves unable to accept the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim and her baby by Roth Edmonds, another instance of misogyny, miscegenation, and racism. Viewing Ike as a decent, well-meaning, and meditative man, critics have usually regarded him as the protagonist of "The Bear" and thus as the main spokesman for what they see as the story's love of the wilderness. Nonetheless these and other scenes make the reader wonder whether Ike should be regarded as the story's mouthpiece at all.

The bedroom scene in particular testifies to an emotional poverty and a sexual animosity not only in Ike's wife but in Ike himself, which makes it directly painful to read. There is a strong thrust of both misogyny and manhating in the passage, and their sexual intercourse, which to Ike becomes "like nothing he had ever dreamed, let alone heard in mere man-talking" (300), ends with his wife disengaging herself from him and laughing her head off, saying "'And that's all. That's all from me. If this dont get you that son you talk about, it wont be mine:' lying on her side, her back to the empty rented room, laughing and laughing" (300-01). As she ends up with her back turned to him and their "empty rented room," the entire copulation scene has become indicative of the deep failure

of their relationship – including the fact that it leaves Ike "spent on the insatiate immemorial beach" (300) of post-coital satisfaction.

It is of course not exceptional to have a man reach an incomparable and immemorial climax with a woman whose flesh he fears and despises. The crucial issue is whether we, as readers of the story, would be prone to trust the interpretations of such a man, be his comments concerned with women or wilderness. It is hard to read this scene as being anything but ironic, particularly since Ike's repudiation of his farm, his grandfather's legacy, rests on his awareness of the way in which its ownership has perverted passion. How can Ike experience the sexual intercourse with his wife as something immemorial and miraculous when he is wholly aware that she uses sex for gain and deliberately seduces him for reasons of land ownership and possession? In fact the copulation scene underscores what the reader has long surmised, namely that the fundamental mode of Faulkner's entire tale may be not that of pastoral, but that of irony. It affirms the reader's suspicion that Ike's lofty sentiments on other occasions are at the same time being discredited and deconstructed, including the nostalgic rhetoric of his eulogy to the wilderness of the past. Indeed, what I am trying to show in this essay on Faulkner's story, is not only that its ethos of love is constantly undermined by a discourse of fear and distrust, but that its rapturous visions of nature's limitlessness, permanence, and unity with man are repeatedly deconstructed by discourses of limitation, transience, and otherness.

The twin discourses of love and fear are interweaved in complex ways in Faulkner's tale. In the copulation scene Ike fearfully senses that his wife's body becomes "composite of all woman-flesh since man that ever of its own will reclined on its back and opened" (300). This is the very moment when she asks him whisperingly to keep the farm, followed by a series of refusals from him and the following passage:

and still the hand and he said, for the last time, he tried to speak clearly and he knew it was still gently and he thought, *She already knows more than I with all the man-listening in camps where there was nothing to read ever even heard of. They are born already bored with what a boy approaches only*

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

*at fourteen and fifteen with blundering and aghast trembling:  
'I cant. Not ever. Remember:' and still the steady and invincible  
hand and he said Yes and he thought, She is lost, She was born  
lost. We were all born lost (300)*

We can only imagine what her hand is doing at this time, and we can consequently sympathize, even, with Ike's predicament of no, no, no, wont, cant, never, and – finally – yes. Nonetheless there is an unmistakable undercurrent of dislike of women in Ike's thoughts at this very instant that they are born "*bored with what a boy approaches . . . aghast trembling.*" The reader, however, may interpret his wife's strangely impersonal behavior as an expression of fear, too; she and Ike may in fact both be seen as victims of the same culture. Ike's long description of the bed scene with his wife is clearly pervaded by his own insecurity, illustrated by his near paralysis when faced with her purposeful sexual initiative. Despite his declaration that he would have liked to see her naked, Ike appears to be, if not trembling, certainly aghast at her behavior, fearful of that other body and of his own body, both of which betray you and make you lost, make us "*all born lost.*"

The "all born lost" has of course associations of Original Sin and the Fall, of which there are other instances in the story, but in this context the all-too-human physical and sexual implications take precedence: the body with which the male individual is born, that which binds him most immediately to nature, to the wilderness, and to women, is to Ike that which makes you forever lost and betrayed. So I repeat my question again in a slightly altered form: Do you love the wilderness if you distrust that which is of the body?

Several motifs and formulations in Ike's reaction to his wife are inscribed in Ike's responses to nature as well. Thus the copulation scene between Ike and his wife is connected with the wilderness theme in the story in complex and contradictory ways. One example is precisely the feeling of fear – the fear that Ike seems to have of women, and the fear that he experiences in connection with the bear. The fear that woman evokes in Ike is viewed as analogous to the fear which the bear first evokes in Ike as a ten-year old boy:

Because he recognised now what he had smelled in the huddled dogs and tasted in his own saliva, recognised fear as a boy, a youth, recognizes the existence of love and passion and experience which is his heritage but not yet his patrimony, from entering by chance the presence or perhaps even merely the bedroom of a woman who has loved and been loved by many men. *So I will have to see him*, he thought, without dread or even hope. *I will have to look at him.* (195-96)

The analogy here is as disturbing as the description of the copulation scene between Ike and his wife. The suggestion that the presence of a sexually experienced woman or merely her bedroom (!) may inspire a fear in a boy comparable to that evoked by a wild bear is an indication of the intensity of the anxiety vis-a-vis women which surfaces several times in the story. This anxiety is hardly surprising, perhaps, in a boy like Ike who was raised mainly in a male environment by Cass McCaslin, his second cousin and an orphan, too.

It is in the story "Delta Autumn," the sequel to "The Bear," however, that these themes of sexuality and hunting become most explicitly pursued. These interconnected motifs are first raised by a man named Legate, speaking of Roth Edmonds' pursuit during last year's hunt of a "light-colored" doe on two legs (321). The hunting trip in this story assumes a double resonance, where the subjects of women and does become curiously intertwined, linked to issues of misogyny and racism. In the course of the story old Uncle Ike, a man near eighty now, even idealizes the *physical* union between man and woman, declaring his belief that "every man and woman, at the instant when it dont even matter whether they marry or not, I think that whether they marry then or afterward or dont never, at that instant the two of them together were God," to which Roth Edmonds replies with disdain: "Then there are some Gods in this world I wouldn't want to touch, and with a damn long stick . . . And that includes myself, if that's what you want to know" (332). Somehow Edmonds' direct declarations of misogyny, misanthropy, and self-contempt seem preferable to old Ike's impotent

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

lamentation at the end of the story, when Roth Edmonds on his morning hunt has shot a doe.

In fact, Ike's lamentation seems close to hypocritical, as he has just spurned the doe on two legs of whom the others previously spoke. On meeting by himself Roth's mistress and her illegitimate baby and finding her to be a mulatto, Ike had declared with "amazement, pity, and outrage": "You're a nigger!" (344). After discovering that she can with some justification call him Uncle Ike, as her great-great grandfather had been Ike's grandfather (and the ancestor also of Roth Edmonds, her lover), Ike cries "in a grieving voice": "Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Cant nobody do nothing for you!" (344). Soon afterwards he cannot help bursting out to her,

" . . . Marry a black man. You are young, handsome, almost white; you could find a black man who would see in you what it was you saw in him, who would ask nothing of you and expect less and get even still less than that, if it's revenge you want. Then you will forget all this, forget it ever happened, that he ever existed - " (346)

This is the same Ike that a few hours earlier had told his younger hunting companions of the god-like characteristics of man and woman melting together in an act of creation. The racism, soullessness, and self-absorption of Ike's outburst come as a shock to the reader, though perhaps not to her. Ike cynically suggests not only that she involved herself with Roth for his white skin only, but that she herself would consider seeking revenge by marrying someone who only craved her for her own "almost white" skin. This is the same Ike who in "The Bear" somehow needed to believe that his grandfather, old Carothers McCaslin, had slept with his female slave, and later with his own slave daughter, out of some form of love, however perverted. In the story "Delta Autumn" Ike loses the last remnants of his moral authority in *Go Down Moses*, if he ever had one in the first place, "sitting there in his huddle of blankets" as she looks quietly down upon him and says, "Old man . . . have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (346).

This anonymous, young mulatto's statement about the role of love, of passion, reverberates ominously back into "The Bear": back into Ike's love-making with his wife, back into his misogyny, back into his distrust of the body, and even back into his nostalgic declarations of love for the wilderness. What sort of love affair with nature is this? Maybe his declarations of love to the woods are as ambiguous and contradictory as his profession of love to his wife? Maybe Faulkner's "The Bear" is not so much a tribute to the wilderness as an extended satire on man's nostalgic affections for the body of some primeval nature – a body he is unable to love except by way of conquest?

Before I tackle these questions in terms of a closer examination of Ike's eulogies to the wilderness, let me first make a small but useful detour by way of some analytical observations on the use of point of view in this story. First of all it is important to keep in mind that Faulkner often takes great liberties with his handling of narrative perspective, particularly with what traditionally has been called third-person limited point of view. In conventional narratological terms, "The Bear" is a story restricted in its focus to the *character* of the young boy and adolescent Ike McCaslin; it employs what Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* calls a third-person "reflector" or "center of consciousness" (153). It is often assumed in older narrative theory that the use of a third-person restricted focus marks – like first-person narration – an exclusively character-oriented, subjective perspective. In parts of Faulkner's fiction, at least, this is not merely a truth in need of modification; it is only half true. The Faulknerian narrator sometimes plays a strikingly active role even in stories reflected through a single, third person's consciousness.

In the analysis of a story like "The Bear" it may therefore be useful instead to employ Gérard Genette's narrative theory and distinguish between *narration* and *focalization*, between *who tells* and *who sees* (*perceives*). "The Bear" may thus be designated a *heterodiegetic* narrative (where the narrator is absent from the story he tells) with *internal focalization* (where things are perceived through a character in the story) (Genette, 244-245, 189). Although the story is Isaac McCaslin's and predominantly filled with his

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

thoughts and feelings, Genette's scheme allows us better to note its interplay of narration and focalization. This is no trifling quarrel over terms. Whereas traditional theory only allows for *one* narrative point of view and thus one privileged view of nature in Faulkner's story, namely that of Ike (or the inseparability of Ike's point of view from that of the narrator), more recent theories of narratology would in this context admit the possibility, at least, of two different perspectives, namely the vision created by the voice of the narrator as well as that created by the focalizer.

The narrative focus of "The Bear" shifts constantly back and forth between what we may call narratorial and actorial perspectives. In Part I of the story we often perceive a scene by way of a *vision with* Ike, but its language is that of the narrator. We are for instance early told about the ten-year old Ike that "It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at . . . through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time . . ." (185). Here we are in the presence not only of Ike's mind but the narrator's as well. Indeed what is striking throughout about the story of "The Bear" is that its uses of narrative perspective turn it into a hybrid form, limited in one sense and quite unlimited in another. The focus of the story is restricted to Ike and hardly ever strays to other characters in the story; it is certainly not an omniscient narrative in the traditional sense. Nonetheless the narrator plays a sovereign, intrusive, and God-like role in the sense that he tells the story with the full knowledge, intermittently revealed, of what later will happen to Ike, to other characters, and indeed to the wilderness itself.

Time and again in "The Bear" we are made aware of the presence of its intrusive narrator. Examples abound. In Part I we are for instance told that the gun Ike got for Christmas "he would own and shoot . . . for almost seventy years" (196). In Part III we are for instance told that "Then in the warm caboose the boy [Ike] slept again while Boon and the conductor and brakeman talked about Lion and Old Ben as people later would talk about Sullivan and Kilrain and, later still, about Dempsey and Tunney" (220). Part IV is



full of similar examples; the narrator observes for instance that "Isaac McCaslin, not yet Uncle Ike, a long time yet before he would be uncle to half a county and still father to none, [was] living in one small cramped fireless rented room" (286-87). Such examples keep reminding the reader that the narrator's and the reflector's visions in the story by no means are unified or one and the same. These are just some of the most direct traces of the all-knowing narrator whose language and vision permeate the entire story.

Thus, if we make use of the scheme that Genette employs with reference to Jean Pouillon's terms, the narrative perspective in "The Bear" is an extended mixture of "vision from behind," in which the narrator says more than the character knows (Narrator > Character) and "vision with," in which the narrator says only what a character knows (Narrator = Character) (Genette, 188-89). Although Genette points out that internal focalization can never be applied "in a totally rigorous way" except in the narrative of interior monologue (192-93), Faulkner's use of internal focalization is so unrigorous, so intertwined with intrusive narratorial comment, that even the mongrel Lion seems pure-bred in comparison. The brooding, prophetic voice of the narrator constantly competes with Isaac's vision for the reader's attention. In Faulkner's story we are all too often unsure of whether reflections presented are those of the character Ike or those of the anonymous narrator, or a fusion of both. We constantly listen to a narrator who cannot help *discoursing* on the impressions of the focalizer of the story. As the narrator for instance notes about the young boy Ike, "the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater" (202). In comments such as these, where an "ungendered progenitor" at the same time is an "alma mater," the contradictions of sexuality and body in this story of wilderness are ironically foregrounded. Unable to restrict himself to the role of mediator, Faulkner's anonymous narrator also assumes the function of interpreter.

In Faulkner's fiction, then, the limitation of the point of view to one character's subjective perspective does not necessarily prevent the narrator from problematizing and satirizing that very

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

perspective. This creates an unusually fertile ground for irony. A typical example is the following from Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, in which Ike Snopes lies waiting for somebody by a creek at sunrise, an early-morning setting clothed in pastoral, lyrical language:

He would lie amid the waking instant of earth's teeming minute life, the motionless fronds of water-heavy grasses stooping in the mist before his face in black, fixed curves, along each parabola of which the marching drops held in minute magnification the dawn's rosy miniatures . . .

The sentence runs on, but here I would like to pause a minute in order to point out the obvious, that the description is beautifully clothed in a particular literary style, that of the pastoral mode. When we read the rest of the sentence, however, this lyrical mode assumes a humorous and inescapably ironic character as we start surmising the identity of the beloved that the focalizer is awaiting with all his senses awake:

. . . smelling and even tasting the rich, slow, warm barn-reek milk-reek, the flowing immemorial female, hearing the slow planting and the plopping suck of each deliberate cloven mud-spreading hoof, invisible still in the mist loud with its hymeneal choristers.

Then he would see her; the bright thin horns of morning, of sun, would blow the mist away and reveal her . . . (165)

The beloved – the literary-pastoral "bright thin horns of morning" notwithstanding – turns out literally to be a cow, and the lover, our third-person focalizer Ike Snopes, a half-wit.

It is my contention that the narrative perspective and indeed the style of "The Bear" work in an analogously ironic manner, but that it takes us a while before we become fully aware of the irony that is an inescapable part of the eulogy. The irony is of course less overt and more hidden and complex in "The Bear"; the narrative focus on Ike McCaslin turns out to be both empathetic and ironic, partaking in Ike's nostalgia for the wilderness and satirizing that nostalgia at the same time.

In addition Faulkner makes ironic use of the language of the genre of wilderness-and-hunting narratives before him in American literature and culture, although there is no space here to pursue this aspect in depth. There are linguistic as well as topical parallels between for instance Theodore Roosevelt's bear-hunting chapters in his *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches* from the year 1900 and Faulkner's hunting tales in *Go Down Moses*. The type of imagery with which Roosevelt describes the wilderness is reiterated with a twist in Faulkner's story. Roosevelt speaks for instance of "a vast landscape, inconceivably wild and dismal" (81), and of the "sense of sadness and loneliness, the melancholy of the wilderness," its "silence of primeval desolation," and its "gathering gloom" (86). In view of this, some of the language of "The Bear" seems at second glance suddenly a little less Faulknerian and somewhat more intertextual. Faulkner speaks of course of "the gray solitude" of the woods (188), and of Ike as a boy "lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness" (199). In the Roosevelt scene quoted above, the gloom is forgotten when a bear suddenly "stepped out of the bushes and trod across the pine needles with such swift and silent footsteps that its bulk seemed unreal" (86), and in Faulkner's passage the old bear "did not emerge, appear; it was just there," crossing "the glade without haste" and "faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion" (200). Of course the hunting of Old Ben in Faulkner's story is set in the period that Roosevelt also deals with; in Faulkner's retrospective fiction, however, this type of language, precisely because of its nostalgia, assumes an ironic edge as well.

Irony pervades the narration as well as the style of Faulkner's "The Bear." It is everywhere. Both Ike and his wife profess love for each other, but they in fact despise each other's sex, not to mention each other's bodies. Ike's and Sam's love and respect for the bear make them unable to raise their guns to shoot it, but Sam is the one who makes the killing of it possible by taming the dog Lion, and Ike joins the hunt because he feels it is all inevitable. Although the "real" hunters – Ike, Cass, General Compson, de Spain – are all supposed to feel a deep and abiding respect for the wilderness, the leader of them all, Major de Spain, ends up leasing it to a Memphis lumber

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

company to have its trees cut down, its body ravaged. In an early essay Francis Lee Utley holds that the values of the hunt aid Ike "to surmount the flaws of his immediate society" (187); it may instead be argued that the hunt is a direct enactment of these flaws. If there is fatality in the pursuit of old Ben, as Ike insists, it is a fatality very much abetted by men who choose to serve as instruments of such a fate. This concept of fatality becomes particularly discomfoting when linked to the actual abuse of land, women, and slaves. As Eric J. Sundquist observes, "by superimposing the central myth of the South upon the central myth of America, Faulkner extends one of its essential features, the narcissistic relationship between man and Nature, hunter and beast – or, in this case, between master and slave – to a further level that is capable of expressing . . . the entanglement between projected fantasy and repressed violence such myths require" (166).

What Faulkner in fact probes in the most ironic manner in this story, is the paradox that those who profess the deepest love for the Southern wilderness, are precisely those who are complicit in its destruction. That irony is deeply imbedded in the rhetoric of the story and, in particular, its sudden shifts between two different sets of discourses, one of limitlessness, immensity, and permanence, and the other of limitation, depletion, and transience. The discourse of nature's infinitude produces, and is the product of, the nostalgia for the past, as it exists in memory and desire and is embodied in the characterization of Ike. Thus we get a love affair, in terms of a first encounter, between a boy and a bear, a meeting made memorable through the narrator's voice and vocabulary of the "big woods, bigger and older" than man (183), "the tall and endless wall of dense November woods," "sombre, impenetrable" (186, 187), "the timeless woods" (192), the "big old bear" (185) which "loomed and towered" (185), "indomitable and invincible" (185), "epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life" (185), "absolved of mortality" (186) – all this from the first part of Faulkner's story. The combination of focalization and style makes us identify with Ike; it tells us what we want to hear, of the vastness of the woods as experienced by a small boy. The language of memory and nostalgia carries us along; we do not want the bear to be killed, either, and we want the woods to be

there, unmarked and impervious, forever. To some extent Ike even maintains this rhetoric towards the end when he suggests that the woods "did not change, and, timeless, would not, anymore than would the green of summer . . ." (308). Here, however, that discourse has grown pathetic as we know that he never intends to return to that which the timber mill is laying waste. We may be reminded here of McCaslin Edmonds' reference to "Ode to a Grecian Urn" which, as Louise Westling argues, ironically serves to reveal that no pastoral language can bring the devastated wilderness back again, although its romantic formulations "function to aestheticize acts of rapacity that destroy the object of desire" (121).

The greatness of Faulkner's rhetoric is precisely that we know from the beginning that the bear is going to die, and that the body of the woods is going to be ravaged, not merely because we know the ending of the story, but because this discourse of immensity is being challenged and deconstructed by another discourse, that of depletion, through which the immortality of that wilderness is constantly exposed as illusory. Already in the beginning of the story, the narrator *also* speaks of "that doomed wilderness" (185), and Ike feels that the hunt for Old Ben is "like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something" (216). If the discourse of immensity nonetheless dominates the first part of "The Bear," the discourse of reduction takes over in its last section, when Major de Spain has sold the timber-rights and Ike turns his back to the new planing mill "and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails" (303), looking toward "the wall of wilderness ahead within which he would be able to hide himself from it once more anyway" (304).

The rhetoric of immensity in Faulkner's story enables us in one way to understand how the destruction of the American wilderness was made possible, since the idea of limitlessness was seen as part of America's identity, part of that which made it different from "the old world's gnawed bones" (247) to quote Ike himself. Immensity was the heritage of America itself. "The Bear" in many ways ironically mimes the rhetoric which made it hard for Americans to perceive the growing destruction and impermanence of their

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

woods. This rhetoric also makes it hard to discern the gradual diminution of nature that takes place in Faulkner's own story. At the same time this rhetoric of immensity makes the woods more mythical than material; the physical body of the woods becomes, like the body of Ike's wife, more archetypal than personal, and thus more easily exploitable.

In addition, there is a considerable amount of projection and displacement going on in this story from its very outset. In Ike's view, the edges of the wilderness were "being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another . . ." (185). But there is no indication anywhere else in the story that the timbermen in particular feel any fear of the forest; they are merely paid to cut it down. In the story itself, it is not the nameless laboring figures of industrial modernity that fear the wilderness; it is instead hunters like young Ike who experiences the fear of the wild as a "taint of brass" in his saliva (194) and in whom the bear generates "a sense of his own fragility and impotence against the timeless woods" (192). The woods, in fact, make man aware of his own, as well as the bear's, mortality.

But the deepest ironies in the story are perhaps found in the clashes between another related set of discourses in "The Bear," a discourse of pantheism, indicative of a close relationship between man and nature, and a discourse of otherness, in which not only women but also animals and their wilderness are seen as the "Other." Pantheism in fact dominates the story "The Old People," which precedes "The Bear" in *Go Down Moses*; and the discourse of otherness seems to prevail in "Delta Autumn," the story which follows. The story "The Bear" itself, however, seems very much a battleground between these two competing ideologies, one in which nature is seen as imbued with spirits closely related to man, and the other in which the primeval woods are seen to embody something non-human and alien.

The discourse of pantheism is best embodied in "The Old People" when Sam greets the spirit of the first deer that Ike shoots with the words "Oleh, Chief . . . Grandfather" (177). But the suggestion of a significant bond between the wilderness and man is

also found several places in "The Bear," not least in its first part, when the ten-year old Ike walks far into the depths of the wilderness to be able to see the bear and indeed to have the bear deliberately show itself to him. The old bear – at which Ike knew he would never fire, "now or ever" (194) – is directly looking at Ike twice in their encounter in the woods when he has left gun, watch, and compass behind. Through its portrayal of the intimate relationship between Ike and his surroundings, "The Bear" gives expression to a profound love of the Southern wilderness. This relationship to nature is perhaps most ideally expressed in Ike's repudiation of his inheritance, when he holds that the land is not to be bought, owned, and sold but instead held "mutual intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood" (246). Thus we also have Ike's belief towards the very end of "The Bear," that

there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: 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: and Old Ben too, Old Ben too; they would give him his paw back even, certainly they would give him his paw back (313)

This is the moment when Ike sees the snake and hails it with Sam's words "Chief . . . Grandfather" (314). The snake, however, has more problematic connotations as well, described in this scene as "the old one, the ancient and accursed about the earth, fatal and solitary and he could smell it now: the thin sick smell of rotting cucumbers and something else which had no name, evocative of all knowledge and an old wariness and of pariah-hood and of death" (314).

The Christian connotations here of the Fall and of Original Sin, however, lead us irrevocably away from the rhetoric of oneness with nature and into the dualist discourse of mind vs. body and man vs. nature – perhaps even the Garden vs. the unkempt wilderness to which humankind was expelled. In this other discourse of "The Bear" nature is seen to represent something

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

"Other," that which is different from man, that which is not "I" and therefore exists to be pursued and invaded (be it animals, woods, women, and/or blacks). This is a motif which actually leads us back where we started, namely with the copulation scene between Ike and his wife. Part of the reason why I find this scene so disturbing, is Ike's aghast foregrounding of what he takes to be her otherness, her instinctual and impersonal behavior, most conspicuously imbedded in a discourse of looking or not looking:

she said, 'Take off your clothes:' her head still turned away, looking at nothing, thinking of nothing, waiting for nothing, not even him, her hand moving as though with volition and vision of its own . . . the hand drawing him and she moved at last, shifted, a movement one single complete inherent not practiced and one time older than man, looking at him now, drawing him still downward . . . and not looking at him now, she didn't need to, the chaste woman, the wife, already looked upon all the men who ever rutted . . . then he stopped thinking and even saying Yes . . . (299-300)

Ike sees his wife's behavior as something sex-determined, biological, almost involuntary, and indeed unhuman. Her hand is moving "with volition and vision of its own," her movement is "not practiced" and "one time older than man," and, although she looks at him once, she seems largely unconcerned with him personally; she is looking "at nothing, thinking of nothing, waiting for nothing, not even him." Here is a conspicuous absence, in the description of the sexual act, of tenderness, (com)passion, and personal engagement. Here, in short, is nature at work; a female that does not need to be looking at males in heat; a body that expresses itself independently of culture; woman as representative, indeed, of something Other.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that the same ideas occur in the description of the wilderness, but it is nonetheless a disturbing discourse because it clashes with pantheistic conception of a close relationship between man and nature. Just as the relationship between Ike and his wife in the act of coitus was an impersonal one, so is the case with some of the descriptions of the relationship



between the wilderness and man. Like the movements of Ike's wife, the primeval woods are described as being "older than any recorded document," "older even than old Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief" (183). On the occasion when Ike sees the bear, he is described as a stranger there, "a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness" (199); at the end of the story, the wilderness is described as unconcerned, as "brooding and inattentive" (305).

The animals that inhabit these woods are characterized by indifference, too. Sam even imbues Old Ben with the same misanthropy that the genocide of his own people has created in himself: "He dont care no more for bears than he does for dogs or men neither" (190). The dog Lion, for instance, "dont care about nothing or nobody" (211) according to Sam and is described by Ike as having "yellow eyes" that were "just cold and sleepy. Then it blinked, and he knew it was not looking at him and never had been, without even bothering to turn its head away" (227, 228). Thus the ideas of otherness, and the motif of looking or not looking at each other, pervades the relationship not only between human beings but between people and the wilderness itself. Indeed Ike leaves behind no children, the part-Indian Sam is the last of his race, and Old Ben, the big bear, is described as "old Priam reft of his old wife and outlived all his sons" (186). This further accentuates the extent to which this wilderness, too, is not one of procreation, connection, and nurture, but of impotence, difference, and otherness.

Although the story is a battleground between a pantheistic discourse and a dualistic one with regard to the relationship between man and nature, it should be noted that the pantheism in "The Bear" is something bequeathed by Sam, not something which is part of the hegemonic, white world of the story. It seems to stop with Ike, and even in Ike it seems to be an impulse conflicting with an insistent dualism. Faulkner's "The Bear" contains very little of the Romantic Transcendentalism that characterized the American literature and culture before the Civil War. Instead of a celebration the close unity and kinship between man and nature, we have the pantheism of a single Indian who dies in the course of the tale. In its insistence on the strangeness and otherness of the wilderness,

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

Faulkner's story seems to reflect the 20th century sense that man stands outside of nature, a nature that is impersonal, inattentive, and oblivious of his existence. Again, this may serve to explain why it becomes so easy to destroy, indeed why de Spain sells it off. It is easier to let something that you feel unrelated to, become abused.

In this connection the development of the plot of "The Bear" is important. Its first part, particularly the ten-year old Ike's encounter with Old Ben, functions as an extension of the mood and theme of "The Old People" and expresses a profound love and respect for nature. In the course of "The Bear," however, we seem to move further and further away from this discourse of love between man and nature into a discourse of otherness and separation, which makes the destruction of the wilderness possible. As Anette Kolodny has pointed out, Ike's anthropomorphizing and gendering of nature proceeds from "the mother who had shaped him" to "his mistress and his wife" ("The Bear," 311). The difference of others, it seems, can only be respected if it is supplemented by a sense of relation or relatedness, and this is precisely what is lacking in the story, even in those cases where people are related by blood or joined by marriage. No wonder, then, that the story as a whole ends with Boon at the base of the tree filled with whirling squirrels, desperately hammering on his gun to get it to work and shouting at Ike: "Dont touch a one of them! They're mine!" (315). It is the discourse of otherness, whether those others be squirrels or people, that makes an ideology of ownership, and hence abuse, possible. Thus "The Bear" also becomes the tale – extended through the story of "Delta Autumn" – of the failure of the discourse of love.

In an essay entitled "Landscape and Narrative," Barry Lopez operates with the idea of two landscapes, one exterior and one interior. The exterior landscape he defines as the one we perceive through our senses – its body, as it were: the land with its weather and its geology, its animals and its plants, and above all the interaction between its various physical elements. The interior landscape, however, is the projection of the physical landscape within each of us – ideas and intuitions about the land arranged "according to the thread of one's moral, intellectual, and spiritual development" (65). We find of course both landscapes in Faulkner's

"The Bear," but as his story proceeds, the reader becomes more and more aware of how memory, history, and ideology shape the characters' perceptions of the land. As the narrator observes about Ike, the bear "ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. It loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print . . ." (185). In the course of the story itself it becomes indeed clear that Ike's own perception of the wilderness is torn between different discourses which he has inherited from the culture and the time of which he is part.

Ike's evocations of his surroundings demonstrate that the minute we think or speak or write about a place, we impose meaning on it. This fact does not, however, prevent a writer like Barry Lopez from talking of a landscape's own rhythm in his book *Arctic Dreams*, and to suggest that it is a writer's duty to listen to the land, to converse with it, and hence to come as close as possible to bringing out its indigenous meaning. Lopez even writes of "a rhythm indigenous to this land, not one imposed on it. The imposed view, however innocent, always obscures. . . . To understand why a region is different, to show an initial deference toward its mysteries, is to guard against a kind of provincialism that vitiates the imagination, that stifles the capacity to envision what is different" (158).

These ideas are strangely pertinent for Ike McCaslin's relationship to *his* landscape. As a boy Ike seems to have had the capacity for conversing with the land, for acquiring a deference towards its mysteries, even for relinquishing himself to it, as illustrated in his meeting with the bear. His subsequent relationship to nature and to women seems, however, impaired by an ideology of difference which makes identification increasingly difficult. So, to return to the opening of my essay for the last time, in conclusion: Do you love nature if you hate her body? Or, do you love nature if you hate *her* body? Or, with a double twist, do you love her if you despise her body *and* spurn the color of her skin? And the answer in Faulkner's tale is that, although such an involvement may prove intense, it will inevitably turn out to be a destructive one.

His repudiation of the farm notwithstanding, Ike is himself complicit in the three-fold abuse of nature, of women, and of blacks

## Do You Love Nature If You Fear Her Body?

– those "Others" to be invaded and/or evaded, as exemplified by his relationship to the wilderness, to his wife, and to his nameless mulatto relative of "Delta Autumn." The parties no longer *see* each other; they prove no longer able – in this extended metaphorical sense – to converse. This is the logical end-point of the discourse of difference. Hence the undertone of sadness even in the descriptions of nature in "The Bear"; hence its constant evocation of a sense of loss.

\* \* \*

### Sources Cited

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- Faulkner, William. *God Down Moses*. New York: Random House, 1990, 1940.
- Faulkner, William. *The Hamlet*. New York: Random House, 1964, 1931.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975.
- Lopez, Barry. "Landscape and Narrative." *Crossing Open Ground*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 61-71.
- Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.
- Roosevelt, Theodore. *Hunting the Grisly and Other Sketches: An Account of the Big Game of the United States and its Chase with Horse Hound, and Rifle*. New York: Putnam's, 1900.
- Sundquist, Eric J. "[The True Inheritance of Ike McCaslin]." *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1990. 154-173.
- Utley, Francis Lee. "Pride and Humility: The Cultural Roots of Ike McCaslin." *Bear, Man, and God: Eight Approaches to William Faulkner's "The Bear"*. Ed. Francis Lee Utley et al. Second Edition. New York: Random House, 1971, 1964. 168-187.
- Westling, Louise. *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*. Athens: U of Georgia Press, 1996.