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# A Study of *Go Down, Moses*

— Ike's Failure and Faulkner's Mind —

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## I

When we divide Faulkner's works into two groups for convenience's sake—the earlier ones and the later ones—, we are usually puzzled to decide into which group to classify *Go Down, Moses*. This work, which was published in 1942 and covers about six generations of the complicated McCaslin family, both white and black, is apparently different from the works written prior or posterior to this. That is, there is a remarkable change that separates the works he published between 1929 and 1940 from those he published after 1948. The differences between the two groups of works are quite clear. The tragic and negative motifs of the earlier works contrast plainly with the religious and affirmative ones in the later works. It may be called a central work in the course of change from the earlier works to the later ones.

At this, what we call, turning point, Faulkner could not help expressing his own ideas about the problem of the South he had been pursuing up to that time by Yoknapatawpha Saga. Therefore, he took up two major themes in this work—"the spirit of the wilderness" and "the problem of the Negro"<sup>1)</sup>—, and by uniting them, he tried to find out the answer to the problem of the South. That is to say, he attempted to solve the problem of the fatal tragedy of the South by "the spirit of the wilderness" which was still innocent from civilization.<sup>2)</sup>

This work, the title of which is said to have been named after the spiritual song of the Negro, contains seven short stories different in length. Needless to say, the central part of this work is "The Bear,"<sup>3)</sup> a symbolical story which covers two fifths of the whole work and which Faulkner himself calls "... the story of not just a boy but any human being to grow, as he grows up, to compete with the earth, the world."<sup>4)</sup> However, if we regard *Go Down, Moses*, not as a collection of short stories but as a complete novel having common themes, and

try to seize the true meaning, we must examine not only "The Bear," "a single segment of the whole,"<sup>5)</sup> but the other stories before or after it. Even if "The Bear" overshadows everything else in this work for most readers, it is doubtless that the connections between the various stories are important.<sup>6)</sup>

The central character in this work is Isaac McCaslin (to be omitted as "Ike" hereafter), who is one of Faulkner's most interesting and touching characters. In this work, Faulkner seems to have expressed his own ideas more than in any other one, and the movement of Ike's mind is thought to be that of Faulkner's. Although Ike appears in only three of the seven stories, "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn," all the stories before or after them may be considered to be essential elements for him. In this paper we select "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn," —the one is thought to unite "the spirit of the wilderness" with "the problem of the Negro" and the other is a story in which Faulkner gives us one last view of Ike—, and examine whether the two major themes are really united in "The Bear" and what the value of this work is if they are not united really.

## II

We shall begin with O'connor's comment. He remarks in his *Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* as follows:

The book most frequently quoted by critics examining Faulkner's attitudes about modern society and, inevitably, about the race question is *Go Down, Moses*.<sup>7)</sup>

And after that, he adds as follows:

This book of related short stories does mark a profound shift in his work. In place of the sense of doom, of tragic inevitabilities, or of an Old Testament harshness, one finds a sense of hopefulness, a promise of salvation.<sup>8)</sup>

*Go Down, Moses* is quite different from the preceding novels in which the fatal tragedy of the South is depicted. Up to that time Faulkner had been seeking the tragedy peculiar to the South by Yoknapatawpha Saga, such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932)

and so on. And in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) he ultimately comes to the conclusion that the cause of the tragedy of the South is due to the result of the guilt of the white people over the Negro. In these novels, however, Faulkner depicts the tragedy of the South as it is and he does not express his ideas about it and how to solve the difficult problem. On the contrary, in *Go Down, Moses* his own answer to the problem he had been seeking is clearly given. Even if the answer is absolutely counter to his readers' expectations, it is noticeable, at any rate, to find out his own solution for the problem. In this answer, however, can we find the prospect of O'Connor's "hopefulness" and "salvation"?

As already described before, the longest and most successful of the *Go Down, Moses* stories is "The Bear." This concerns the basis for Ike's decision to repudiate his McCaslin inheritance. He learns the extent of his family's racial guilt by studying plantation records; but before he can make his redeeming gesture he must learn to appreciate primitive nature. Being trained in the wilderness, during section I, section II, section III and section V, (section IV and section V are reverse in time) Ike gradually masters "the spirit of the wilderness" by the guidance of Sam Fathers, whose father is a Chickasaw Indian chief, whose mother is a quadroon. For example, when he is twelve years old, Ike, being trained by Sam Fathers, who is now seventy, kills his first buck. Sam marks his face with the blood, teaching him to respect and love what he kills. Seeing the buck lying still in the shape of great speed, Ike thinks humbly but a little proudly as follows:

*I slew you: my bearing must not shame your quitting life. My conduct for ever onward must become your death:*<sup>9)</sup>

With the pure experience in the wilderness, Ike realizes human dignity. He grows up to be a man, who is not directed by the tradition and the code of the South, but is able to judge anything as a human being by the more substantial view of value. In section IV that follows, "a *locus classicus* for an understanding of Faulkner's views on man and society,"<sup>10)</sup> when he gazes at the South with such a pure spirit acquired in the wilderness, Ike comes to know the depth of the guilt of the white people symbolized by the wickedness of his grandfa-

ther, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. He resists not the old virgin forest but the land injured by a human being, that is, old injury and disgrace themselves.

... in repudiation and denial at least of the land and the wrong and shame even if he couldn't cure the wrong and eradicate the shame, who at fourteen when he learned of it had believed he could do both when he became competent and when at twenty one he became competent he knew that he could do neither but at least repudiate the wrong and shame, at least in principle, and at least the land itself in fact, for his son at least: and did, thought he had: ...<sup>11)</sup>

As a result, he comes to repudiate the inheritance of the McCaslin plantation given by his grandfather through his father and his uncle—the symbol of the wickedness founded on the landownership and the slavery—and initiates his life as a carpenter. At this time he ought to have neglected the difference added by the race and the religion.<sup>12)</sup>

### III

Coming to think as mentioned above, we can surely prospect the possibility of “hopefulness” and “salvation” in “The Bear” as O’connor and many other critics point out. The two major themes that *Go Down, Moses* has, seem to be united in section IV of “The Bear” when Ike realizes “the spirit of the wilderness” and repudiates the inheritance. Are they really united? The question naturally comes because we scarcely know what life Ike lives as a carpenter and how he practices “the spirit of the wilderness” after he repudiates to succeed the inheritance. It is not until after fifty years that Ike can be said to have the opportunity to come in contact with the society.

What Ike says to the young men, Roth and Legate, in the earlier part of “Delta Autumn,” the one section of the novel in which the various themes merge and unite, is not very different from what he said to Cass in section IV of “The Bear.” Ike, now in his seventies, talks his ideas which are supported by “the spirit of the wilderness” in his young days and which are not developed nor retroceded—dignity of love, idealistic behavior of a human being, etc. What had Ike been

thinking for fifty years after he had repudiated the inheritance from his grandfather?"<sup>13)</sup> Roth's question "... I suppose the question to ask you is, where havn you been all the time you were dead?"<sup>14)</sup> is exactly our question, too.

The opportunity soon comes, however, when Ike can be said to come in contact with the real society only once. This is the point at which all the sequences of *Go Down, Moses* seem to cross, at which the whole pattern of this work comes out with final and absolute clarity. The Negro woman, who has borne an illegitimate child to Roth, and who is discarded by him, visits his tent to meet him. Finally the time of trial arrives when we wonder whether the union of the two major themes in section IV of "The Bear" is true or not. We observe Ike's behavior in expectation of the two major themes being united. His words to the Negro woman, however, are not those of the man who has realized "the spirit of the wilderness" and consequently selected the way to repudiate the inheritance. If he confronted the real society with "the spirit of the wilderness" and as a result of friction realized something about the race problem in the course of fifty years, his behavior would be permitted. Furthermore, his words to the Negro woman would be a little warmer, and a little truthful. At the very time that we observe the completion of the terrible circle originated by his grandfather, we know that even Ike has failed in cutting off that circle. Staring the pale lips, the dead-looking skin, and the dark, tragic and foreknowing eyes, he thinks such a marriage would be realized "*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America, ... But not now! Not now!*"<sup>15)</sup> and he cries in a voice of amazement, pity, and outrage, "You are a Nigger!" ... "Get out of here! I can do nothing for you! Cant nobody do nothing for you!"<sup>16)</sup>

In these words we cannot find the figure of a man who has realized "the spirit of the wilderness" and lives faithfully but has not strength. These words are very similar to those expressed by Ike to a Negro in section IV of "The Bear."

'Dont you see?' he cried. 'Dont you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse on to the land: maybe for that

reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. *Then your people's turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet. Dont you see?*<sup>17)</sup> (italics not in the original)

Ike, the old white man, who has knotted, bloodless, thin fingers talks to the young Negro woman who has a fresh body signifying the prosperous future of the Negro.

“That’s right. Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That’s the only salvation for you—for a while yet. Maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man 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—”<sup>18)</sup>

That is to say, as a means to cure the pains injured by the man who is superior racially and socially to her, Ike advises the Negro woman to hurt the Negro inferior racially and socially to her. In the car just before he came here, Ike expressed his ideas about love. With all the fine statements, however, he cannot recognize the dignity of love in the young Negro woman. He admired the Negro. He abhorred his grandfather’s guilt. As a result, he repudiated the inheritance. In spite of his right behavior according to “the spirit of the wilderness” he can only cling to the tradition of the South when the time of trial has come to him. Though he cannot permit the guilt committed by his grandfather, he can permit the guilt of the grandchild of his cousin without hesitation. Referring to this matter Vickery states as follows:

Even in nature and the wilderness man can be corrupted, if only by age and its instinctive conservatism. He denies what he himself called the divinity of love because the man is white and the woman colored.<sup>19)</sup>

Ike cannot get himself out of the prejudice for the Negro and only hides himself in the shade of “the spirit of the wilderness.”

The Negro woman, in whose body only a little black blood is contained, came not to get something from Roth for the compensation of

not going to marriage but to see him. She does love him. However severe the code is in the Southern society, she cannot help doing so. This Negro woman knows about the dignity of love far better than Ike, who talked to the young men about it. Ike is not what he was in section IV of the "The Bear," in which by studying plantation records he finds many guilts committed by his grandfather and deplores:

*So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger ... Even if My son wasn't but just two words. But there must have been love ... Some sort of love. Even what he would have called love: not just an afternoon's or a night's spittoon.<sup>20)</sup>*

And in the long discussion with Cass, Ike remarks:

*'... I am just against the weak because they are niggers being held in bondage by the strong just because they are white ...'<sup>21)</sup>*

'Yes. He didn't want to. He had to. Because they will endure. They are better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped from white men or that white men and bondage have taught them: improvidence and intemperance and evasion—not laziness: evasion: of what white men had set them to, not for their aggrandisement or even comfort but his own—'<sup>22)</sup>

'—whether their own or not or black or not. And more: what they got not only not from white people but not even despite white people because they had it already from the old free fathers a longer time free than us because we have never been free—'<sup>23)</sup>

We cannot find such an indignant youthful figure any more. The Negro woman answers to Ike's advice as follows:

*"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 ?"<sup>24)</sup>*

These words express Ike's failure properly and as Millgate states they are exactly the sentence of "the ultimate failure of his life and his endeavour"<sup>25)</sup> to Ike.

By repudiating the inheritance he does a personal compensation. However, he cannot solve the confiction in the dimension of a social

man in the real society. It is very doubtful whether what he has had since "The Bear" can be said true sincerity. Even if it is sincerity, such sincerity cannot bring any effect to the society. His way of life based on the philosophy of the wilderness is only a life of escape unable to adapt itself to the real society after all. As Volpe states "The social man, the product of his social conditioning, is stronger than the natural man, exposed and nurtured by Sam Fathers."<sup>26)</sup>

The Negro woman goes away, having an old hunting horn, a gift from General Compson and a symbol of the old South, and all is silent in the tent except the noise of rain. With the chillness coming near, he ponders trembling as follows:

*This Delta ... : This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires' mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like niggers and crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares ...<sup>27)</sup>*

How can we admit this monologue as the words full of "hopefulness" and "salvation"? This is exactly the white man's voice lamenting the destruction of the South that he loves most.

#### IV

It is doubtless that Ike admits the wickedness in the South. However, he does not try to mend the wickedness. He does not try to act the society to mend it. What is the reason of this fact? As Millgate suggests, "what he says is right, but what he does is wrong"<sup>28)</sup> is quite true. It is not because Ike is truthful and helpless, but because he thinks in his inner mind that he does not want to mend the injustice predominating the South.<sup>29)</sup> In "The Bear" Ike is thought to have realized "the spirit of the wilderness" and to have

got rid of the racial discrimination to the Negro. However, it is not so. That is to say, the two major themes of this work which seem to have been united are simply juxtaposed and not united nor solved. In connection with this, O'Connor writes as follows:

... the theme of the wisdom to be derived from the wilderness, even in its great prophet Ike, is merely juxtaposed against the theme of the injustice to the Negro.<sup>30</sup>

Ike cannot permit his grandfather's behavior. He can, nevertheless, admit Roth's behavior, which is the same guilt as his grandfather's. What is the reason of this? His grandfather is a man whom he does not know and who lives in a distant land in time. In other words, he is a man in ideality. He can punish even the white man if he is far from him. However, Roth is a relative living in reality. He cannot make him a guilty man. Things which are wrong in ideality turn out to be right in reality. "The spirit of the wilderness" acquired in "The Bear" and his way of thinking about the Negro are, as it were, the products in the world of idea. Vickery states as follows:

Because it is an escape and a desire to find personal salvation, his gesture of relinquishment is only superficially an atonement for the sin of his forefathers. ... Accordingly, Isaac's withdrawal is in reality an attempt to evade both the guilt of his forefathers and his own responsibilities. Thus, while his daily life is a humble imitation of Christ's, it also denies the spirit of Christ who did not hesitate to share in the life of men, to accept guilt, and to suffer immolation. In rejecting sin, Isaac also rejects humanity. Significantly, he holds himself aloof from close human ties; ...<sup>31</sup>

In the world of "The Bear," Ike closes his eyes to the real society by repudiating the land given by his forefathers and only escapes. Such a behavior as his is after all a self-satisfaction. Therefore, he fails even in the first contact with the real society symbolized by meeting with the Negro woman. The virtue acquired in the wilderness cannot be extended to the behavior that mends the wickedness to the Negro.

As mentioned above, Ike's strife in *Go Down, Moses* is not, as usually said, a struggle between the individual and the society, but

a struggle for his own prejudice to the Negro which he cannot extinguish. Such a prejudice does not appear outside so far as he continues to live in seclusion with the real society.

Thus far, we have been studying the union of two major themes in *Go Down, Moses* in connection with the movement of Ike's mind. As was said at the beginning, this movement of Ike's mind is namely the movement of Faulkner's mind. Accordingly in this work Faulkner may be said to have expressed his own ideas for the complex problem that he had been depicting in the works of the earlier period. The works of the earlier period, however brilliant they might be, are only the proposition of the problem. In other words, it is only a question. Faulkner gave the answer to the question in *Go Down, Moses*. Therefore, Ike's antinomic behavior in this work might be thought to be an appearance of Faulkner's suffering mind. As Ike's failure suggests, Faulkner could not find any solution of the problem which lay in the South after all. This is Faulkner's unchangeable figure to his death. *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), in which Faulkner takes up the Negro problem and shows his position to it, and *A Fable* (1954), in which Christian moral consciousness is prevailing, cannot be said the expression of Faulkner's mind. However shining they might seem, these affirmative works in the later period are only the expression of the moral consciousness. It is only saying that we have a duty to do so. In other words, idea and feeling are not united together in these works of the later period.

When he listed up three types of men to the society, Faulkner did not add Ike in the best of the three because of his nature of escape. In another occasion, in 1955, when there was a revealing interchange in an interview, having learned from the interviewer that Ike was her favorite among his characters, Faulkner is said to have asked her why she admired him:

INT: Because he underwent the baptism in the forest, because he rejected his inheritance.

WF: And do you think it's a good thing for a man to reject an inheritance?

INT: Yes, in McCaslin's case, he wanted to reject a tainted inheritance. You don't think it's a good thing for him to have done so?

WF: Well, I think a man ought to do more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people.<sup>32)</sup>

By these words Faulkner criticizes not only Ike's behavior, but also his own. Vickery's next words:

It is only in his own chosen setting, role, and time that Isaac McCaslin can be considered a hero. Going into the wilderness as a young man was part of the hero's quest; remaining there as an aged hermit betrays a myopic view of that pattern which the "chosen man" must realize in his life.<sup>33)</sup>

are well said to Faulkner as well as Ike.

In conclusion, the two major themes of *Go Down, Moses* does not unite together. Ike is definitely a failure. This, however, does not mean that this work is a failure. As already described before, this is Faulkner's confession of truth not only in the time this work was written, but also all his life. Because Ike is a failure, this work is important. Even if it is said that "It is a kind of neurotic dream—an escape from, rather than an attempt to solve, the present injustice."<sup>34)</sup> or "Ike's life is a failure, primarily because he allows himself to rest in negation, in repudiation, and rejects all opportunities for affirmation,"<sup>35)</sup> this work becomes the more brilliant as Faulkner's confession of truth because of Ike's failure.

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### Notes

- 1) W. V. O'Connor, *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner* (Cordian Press, 1968), p. 132. O'Connor expresses the two major themes of *Go Down, Moses* as "the proper relationship to nature which is to be learned from the wilderness and the injustice to the Negro."  
M. Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (Random House, 1966), p. 204. Millgate states, "The chief and most obvious themes are those which centre upon white-Negro relationships and upon the destruction of the wilderness."

- 2) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 212.  
He states, "Considered in abstract terms, the two major themes of white-Negro relationships and of the destruction of the wilderness are inextricably linked: the wilderness disappears to make way for a system based on physical or economical slavery, and Ike's education in the wilderness fosters a sense of values which prompts him to a repudiation of that system and of the concept of land-ownership upon which it is based."
- 3) "The Bear" added in *Go Down, Moses* is considerably different from the one published on the *Saturday Evening Post* for the first time. The first version of "The Bear" is a very short one which is not divided into section, while the revised version was completely rewritten and divided into five sections. Naturally, "The Bear" in this paper treats the revised one.
- 4) *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. R. A. Jelliffe (Kenkyusha, 1966), p. 92.
- 5) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 202.
- 6) *Ibid.* He remarks, "The story, "The Bear," which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* a few days before the publication of the book, obviously possesses independent existence, as does the earlier story "Lion," from which "The Bear" must be considered to have grown, but Faulkner himself several times made it plain that he considered *Go Down, Moses* to be a novel, and that the five-section version of "The Bear" was essentially "part of the novel, just as a chapter in the novel," to be neither printed nor discussed out of that context: ..."
- 7) W. V. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- 8) *Loc. cit.*
- 9) W. Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 248.
- 10) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
- 11) *Loc. cit.*
- 12) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 208.  
He says, "There is dignity in Ike's position, but it clearly represents a withdrawal from the realities and the difficulties of life not unlike that displayed by Horace Benbow and Quentin Compson."
- 13) O. V. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 133.  
Vickery remarks, "When he is outside the wilderness, Isaac is virtuous but ineffective. His is essentially 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed.' The measure of this lies in the fact that nothing happens to him between his twenty-first and seventieth year."
- 14) *Go Down, Moses*, p. 244.
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 256.

- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 19) O. V. Vickery, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- 20) *Go Down, Moses*, p. 192.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- 23) *Loc. cit.*
- 24) *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 25) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
- 26) E. L. Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (Noonday Press, 1967), p. 250.
- 27) *Go Down, Moses*, pp. 257-258.
- 28) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
- 29) W. V. O'connor, *op. cit.*, p. 134.  
He writes, " ... It does convince us, at the least, of the need for us to contemplate such an ideal world. But Faulkner is not willing, apparently, to allow the implications of the wilderness theme, its power to purify, to work as a leaven inside the subject of injustice to the Negro."
- 30) *Loc. cit.*
- 31) O. W. Vickery, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.
- 32) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
- 33) O. W. Vickery, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- 34) W. V. O'connor, *op. cit.*, p. 134.
- 35) M. Millgate, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.