

Faulkner and the Problematics of Procreation

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No black character in all of Faulkner's crowded Yoknapatawpha saga receives more sustained attention than Lucas Beauchamp: his willful sense of self-esteem in a predominantly white world arouses and teaches the superficially liberal lawyer Gavin Stevens and his impressionable nephew Chick Mallison in *Intruder in the Dust*. Popularized by the Hollywood film of the novel filmed in Faulkner's hometown of Oxford, on which the fictional Jefferson is based, and along the country roads of Lafayette County that first inspired Yoknapatawpha, *Intruder in the Dust* was, Faulkner admitted, his "civil rights" novel, written in 1948. It tells the story of a white mob's impassioned attempt to lynch a black man and the black man's calm insistence on his innocence and his wily way of proving his innocence by directing his defense from his cell inside the Yoknapatawpha county jail. By turns suspenseful and sentimental, *Intruder in the Dust* is the sort of work that would attract Hollywood but won little critical admiration and perhaps even less attention from Faulkner himself.

Doubtless this is because Lucas Beauchamp had already made stunning and memorable appearances in Faulkner's most ambitious and honestly searching novel about race in the South he knew, *Go Down, Moses*, published in 1942. The book is named for a gospel song that haunts nearly every page of the novel:

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.
We need not always weep and mourn,
Let my people go.
And wear these slav'ry chains forlorn,
Let my people go.

and the spiritual's equally haunting refrain:

Go down, Moses,
 'Way down in Egypt's land.
 Tell ole Pharaoh,
 Let my people go.

The bondage and exploitation of the black man decried in the song is what first troubles Ike McCaslin when, at the age of 21, he attempts to make sense out of his McCaslin family genealogy—his procreation—with his older cousin Cass in the commissary of the plantation that has spawned all of them. He thinks that perhaps they are chosen by God to right the wrongs of slavery:

"Maybe He chose Grandfather out of all of them He might have picked. Maybe He knew that Grandfather himself would not serve His purpose because Grandfather was born too soon too, but that Grandfather would have descendants, the right descendants; maybe He had foreseen already the descendants Grandfather would have, maybe He saw already in Grandfather the seed progenitive of the three generations He saw it would take to set at least some of His lowly people free"—(248)¹

This modern-day Isaac, like his biblical namesake, feels asked to sacrifice his property as a sacred mission, to relinquish the McCaslin plantation and its blood-drenched history of human and natural exploitation. Lucas, the one independent black tenant farmer who remains on the land, is named for Ike's grandfather, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, whose name procreates his cousins Cass and Roth. But Cass will not allow such romanticism. "His lowly people" are for Cass "The sons of Ham"—the blacks: "You who quote the Book: the sons of Ham" (249). Ike's reply, often cited as Faulkner's basic philosophy, may offer hope or may maintain the same willful blindness:

"There are some things He said in the Book, and some things reported of Him that He did not say. And I know what you will say now. That if truth is one thing to me and another thing to you, how will we choose which is truth? You dont need to choose. The heart already knows." (249)

Such inner sense of knowledge for Ike is only solipsism for Cass. Indeed, God's procreation of His lowly people, alias the sons of Ham, seems

insufficient to call forth from Ike such proud assurance of the powers of his heart to understand what the other members of his white family, the McCaslins, seem ignorant of when examining their black slaves, the Beauchamps. But Ike has earned such knowledge and understanding. Eight pages later, we learn that five years earlier, at the age of 16, Ike snuck into that very same commissary: "He got the commissary key from McCaslin's room after midnight while McCaslin was asleep and with the commissary door shut and locked behind him and the forgotten lantern stinking anew the rank dead icy air, he leaned above the yellowed page"—the plantation account becoming, for him, anyway, the family diary—and there his courage to learn paid off: "He knew he was going to find before he found it" (257). Life and death procreate the words he finds and the words procreate the thoughts that establish his own lineage. Earlier he had seen the hand of his father writing of his grandfather, progenitor of their line:

Father dide Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, Callina 1772 Missippy 1837. Dide and burid 27 June 1837

Roskus. rased by Granfather in Callina Dont know how old. Freed 27 June 1837 Dont want to leave. Dide and Burid 12 Jan 1841

Fibby Roskus Wife. bought by granfather in Callina says Fifty Freed 27 June 1837 Dont want to leave. Dide and burd 1 Aug 1849 (254)

Old Lucius thus founded the McCaslin plantation with slaves he had bought in Carolina long before coming to Yoknapatawpha. And there is perhaps a certain pride as a reason for Ike's father, known as Uncle Buck but named Theophilus, in recording the freedom of these slaves at his father's death, long before the War of Northern Aggression and the Emancipation Proclamation, yet still further pride in their stout refusal to leave the McCaslin home, their apparent desire to remain part of the extended McCaslin family, rewriting, as it were, their own lines of procreation.

But then the entry gets trickier.

Thucydus Roskus @ Fibby Son born in Callina 1779. Refused 10acre peace fathers Will 28 Jun 1837 Refused Cash offer \$200. dollars from A. @ T. McCaslin [that is, Amodeus and Theophilus, Ike's uncle and father] 28 Jun 1837 Wants to stay and work it out (254-55)

Work out what? Why, when the parents of Thucydides, corrupted as Thucydus, were offered simply freedom, is he given, as Ike's father indicates but does not fully reveal, a peace offering of 10 acres of land? Why is he not given freedom but is instead being bought off? Then Ike's uncle records a complete reversal:

3 Nov 1841 By Cash to Thucydus McCaslin \$200. dolars Set Up blaksmith in J. Dec 1841 Dide and burid in J. 17 feb 1854

Eunice Bought by Father in New Orleans 1807 \$650. dolars. Marrid to Thucydus 1809 Drownd in Crick Cristmas Day 1832 (255)

To which his Uncle Buddy writes more precisely,

June 21th 1833 Drownd herself

and Ike's father adds,

23 Jun 1833 Who in hell ever heard of a niger drowning him self

and his uncle, not to be outdone, writes "unhurried, with a complete finality; the two identical entries might have been made with a rubber stamp save for the date: *Aug 13th Drownd herself'*" (256). Now, shrouded in nocturnal secrecy, Ike discovers two more entries that clarify this recorded procreation of the word:

Tomasina called Tomy Daughter of Thucydus @ Eunice Born 1810 dide in Child bed June 1833 and Burd. Yr stars fell

....

Turl Son of Thucydus @ Eunice Tomy born Jun 1833 yr stars fell Fathers will (257)

At first here, the father procreates searching questions reborn in the son: Ike too has never heard of a "niger" drowning herself. But it may be the way for Ike's father of alerting his son and forcing him back over these entries. For he has subtly issued another question: why is a hardworking slave like Thucydus worth \$200 and Eunice worth \$650? Ike first thinks procreatively himself: his grandfather, Lucius Carothers, purchased Eunice as a wife for Thucydus. But he stops himself because stranger and more important than the slaves' marriage was old Carothers' extraordinary trip to New Orleans, which in no way fit his usual pattern of behavior, to secure

that marriage. Why would he suddenly go so far? Why New Orleans? How would he know what he might find there? Apparently, he had never been to New Orleans before, for there is no mention of it elsewhere in the family commissary ledgers. The only possible answer is that Carothers had known Eunice before he bought her.

The entry regarding Carothers' purchase of Eunice in 1807 also notes that she was married to Thucydus in 1809. If Eunice was purchased in New Orleans to be Thucydus' wife, why were they not married until two years later? And why did Eunice commit suicide when her daughter, Tomasina, was pregnant 23 years later? Something about Tomasina—born in 1810, within months of Eunice's marriage to Thucydus—must have been a factor. For Ike, the only way to make sense of these records is to assume that Carothers had impregnated Eunice giving birth to Tomasina and then covered this misdeed by marrying her to Thucydus. To ease his conscience, Carothers left a peace offering of 10 acres of land to Thucydus in his will. But the gesture did not work: Thucydus, who had some dignity of his own, some loyalty to his wife, and perhaps some loyalty to his foster child, refused the property. Both Ike's father and uncle must have known the reasons behind their father's bequest, because when Thucydus rejected it, they offered him a cash settlement instead.

Ike now realizes that Tomasina's son, Tomey's Turl, is not only his father's and his uncle's own half-brother—that McCaslin blood is intertwined with Beauchamp blood, white blood with black, procreating a miscegenated family— but that Tomey's Turl is also the grandson of his own father, old Lucius Carothers, who sired Tomasina. Knowing that, Ike knows all he wants to know about his family's breeding: "that was all. He would never need look at the ledgers again nor did he" (259). Ike's ancestors—the predecessors who would serve him as models—are whites who invade and impregnate blacks, commit incest with their own children, and try to buy off their guilt and shame, and blacks who struggle in turn to maintain their dignity and, when that fails, repudiate their family, even at the cost of suicide, to preserve the honor of the survivors.

Tomey's Turl courts Tennie Beauchamp—who takes her name, as most slaves did, from the white slaveowners for whom they worked—simultaneously with the courtship of Ike's parents (in an earlier episode

called "Was"; the courtship is witnessed by Cass). Terrel—Tomey's Terrel or Turl—and Tennie have three children: James (born in 1864), Sophonisba (named after Ike's mother, born in 1869), and Lucas, named for the line's progenitor (in 1874). Ike's father and uncle attempt to assuage their guilt over the actions of Ike's grandfather by tripling the \$1000 legacy old Lucius Carothers left for James, Fonsiba, and Lucas, but they do not pay it. Ike attempts to do so, but he at first fails: James has long since left the McCaslin plantation never to be found; Fonsiba married a black Yankee who fought in the War Between the States and moves with him to Arkansas where she denies her inheritance. But Lucas Beauchamp acts otherwise:

one morning Lucas stood suddenly in the doorway of the room where [Ike, now married] was reading the Memphis paper and he looked at the paper's dateline and thought *It's his birthday. He's twenty-one today* and Lucas said: "Whar's the rest of that money old Carothers left? I wants it. All of it." (269)

All of it may mean all of his share—or all of his and James's share—or the shares left to all three grandchildren/children of Lucius Carothers, since Fonsiba has declined to touch McCaslin money. Lucas claims his inheritance as forthrightly as Lucius claimed Eunice; moreover, he will not leave the McCaslin plantation for it is his family's plantation too. He remains as a farmer on a portion of the land. The proud Lucas Beauchamp of *Intruder in the Dust* is the proud Lucas of "The Bear" in *Go Down, Moses*; and as we learn in "The Fire and the Hearth," another chapter of the novel, he stalks into town wearing old Lucius' hat and his gold toothpick on a chain across his waistcoat. Miscegenation creates Lucas Beauchamp, procreates him, as the ledger in the commissary discloses; and his behavior emphasizes both bloodlines.

Lucas Beauchamp is thus introduced into the Yoknapatawpha County in "The Bear" section of *Go Down, Moses* by Ike's philosophy of God's lowly people sent to test and ultimately redeem the white man if only through Ike's relinquishment of the very McCaslin land Lucas hangs on to; and, later, by the facts recounted in the ledger that through two generations, not one, mixes the white and black blood in familial miscegenation. But "The Bear" steadfastly remains Ike's story, not Lucas'. Rather, Lucas' story is in the chapter called "The Fire and the Hearth" which combines "Gold Is Not Always," finished by February 23, 1940, purchased by the *Atlantic*

Monthly in September, and published in November that year, and "A Point of Law," published in *Collier's* on June 22, 1940. In this later work Roth Edmonds (born 1898), the twice-removed cousin of Ike (born 1867) runs the McCaslin plantation by inheritance and by default, since Ike refuses to tarnish himself with the land corrupted by the exploitation of his forebears. For Roth, Lucas Beauchamp is

more like Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and complete, contemptuous, as old Carothers must have been, of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own. (114-15)

But Lucas has earned his toughness, his irreducible strength and stubbornness in a trial by fire. It happened after Lucas began farming McCaslin land, now under the auspices of Roth's father Zack. It began the night Roth was born.

[Lucas] would never forget it—that night of early spring following ten days of such rain that even the old people remembered nothing to compare it with, and the white man's wife's time upon her and the creek out of banks until the whole valley rose, bled a river choked with down timber and drowned livestock until not even a horse could have crossed it in the darkness to reach a telephone and fetch the doctor back. And Molly [Lucas' wife], a young woman then and nursing their own first child, wakened at midnight by the white man himself and they followed then the white man through the streaming darkness to his house and Lucas waited in the kitchen, keeping the fire going in the stove, and Molly delivered the white child with none to help but Edmonds and then they knew that the doctor had to be fetched. So even before daylight he was in the water and crossed it, how he never knew, and was back by dark with the doctor, emerging from that death (At one time he had believed himself gone, done for, both himself and the mule soon to be two more white-eyed and slack-jawed pieces of flotsam, to be located by the circling of buzzards, swollen and no longer identifiable, a month hence when the water went down.) which he had entered not for his own sake but for that of old Carothers McCaslin who had sired him and Zack Edmonds both, to find the white man's wife dead and his own wife already established in the white man's house. It was as though on that louring and driving day he had crossed and then recrossed a kind of Lethe, emerging, being permitted to escape, buying as the price of life a world outwardly the same yet subtly and irrevocably altered. (45-46)

Lucas goes home; Molly remains with Zack to nurse Roth. But after six months of isolation, he goes once more to Zack's house to demand that his wife return to his home. "I reckon you thought I wouldn't take her back, didn't you? . . . I'm a nigger," Lucas said. 'But I'm a man too. I'm more than just a man. The same thing made my pappy that made your grandmaw. I'm going to take her back. . . . I wants her in my house tonight. You understand?'" (46-47).

But for all his claims of procreation from Lucius Carothers, Lucas, not entitled to his grandfather's name, senses that the black part of his blood heritage makes Molly as vulnerable before Zack as Eunice was before Carothers, and Tomasina after her. So he decides to seek revenge. He will do this fairly; lurking outside Zack's bedroom at night, he waits until dawn before attacking his own cousin (51).

"Put the razor down and I will talk to you," Edmonds said.

"You knowed I wasn't afraid, because you knowed I was a McCaslin too and a man-made one. And you never thought that, because I am a McCaslin too, I wouldn't. You never even thought that, because I am a nigger too, I wouldn't dare. No. You thought that because I am a nigger I wouldn't even mind. I never figured on the razor neither. But I gave you your chance. Maybe I didn't know what I might have done when you walked in my door, but I knowed what I wanted to do, what I believed I was going to do, what Carothers McCaslin would have wanted me to do. But you didn't come. You never even gave me the chance to do what old Carothers would have told me to do. You tried to beat me. And you wont never, not even when I am hanging dead from the limb this time tomorrow with the coal oil still burning, you wont never."

"Put down the razor, Lucas," Edmonds said.

"What razor? Lucas said. He raised his hand and looked at the razor as if he did not know he had it, had never seen it before, and in the same motion flung it toward the open window, the naked blade whirling almost blood-colored into the first copper ray of the sun before it vanished. "I dont need no razor. My nekkid hands will do. Now get the pistol under your pillow. . . . Get your pistol, white man." (52-53)

They arm-wrestle over the bed to get control of the pistol but Lucas' strength prevails.

This is it, the white man thought. . . . "You thought I'd do it quick, quicker than Isaac since it aint any land I would give up. I aint got any fine big McCaslin farm to give up. All I got to give up is McCaslin blood that rightfully aint even mine or at least aint worth much since old Carothers never seemed to miss much what he give to Tomey that night that made my father." (55-56)

But the gun misfires, and Lucas, defeated, returns to plowing his land, making his crops. But his miscegenated bloodline will not leave him alone. "‘How to God,’ [he asks], ‘can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And even if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise he wont?’" (58). Confronting the racial mix, the racial divide, no person in all *Go Down, Moses* asks questions so penetrating, so unanswerable. So Faulkner’s ineradicable poetics of procreation in the American South with its history of enslavement, exploitation, and miscegenation.

Ike’s troubled searching of McCaslin ledgers is the lynchpin of the chapter called "The Bear," and its darkest moment. Lucas’ irresolvable quarrel with Zack is the lynchpin of "The Fire and the Hearth" and its most frightening moment. The rest of "The Bear," framing the scene in the commissary, is about a hunt for the bear called Old Ben and the sorry hunt for squirrels when the lumbering company destroys the woods; it seems, somehow, less urgent, even irrelevant. The rest of "The Fire and the Hearth," set in 1942, the year the novel was published and among its last episodes, tells of Lucas at the age of 70. He too is hunting; and it too seems irrelevant. The elderly Lucas still farms during the day, although it is implied he has slowed down considerably. But this is due in part to the fact that he makes illegal whiskey in a hidden still at night. When young George Wilkins begins to copy him, Lucas fears they will both be discovered, and he tells Roth, now in charge of the plantation, that George is making moonshine. Roth calls the sheriff, but George is cannier than Lucas reckoned, and he is found by the sheriff’s men hauling Lucas’ still from its hiding place and setting it up behind his house: "‘who do you charge?’" the commissioner asks Roth. "‘You went out there to catch George, but all your evidence is against Lucas’" (63). Both turn to Nat, Lucas’ daughter and George’s intended bride. Legally, she is unable to testify against her father, but the shrewd and calculating George has already secretly married Nat to prevent her testifying against him. But he does not tell Lucas. Rather, he agrees to marry Nat and forget his charge if Lucas consents to the marriage and, as Nat’s requirement, improves George’s property, builds him a new back porch, and supplies him with a cook-stove. The foolish George outsmarts Lucas. And Lucas consents:

surrendering to George, taking him as a son-in-law, and playing innocent to the sheriff and his deputy, the once-proud McCaslin heir turning into a shuffling sambo before the law.

This diminution of Lucas is astonishing. But it only gets worse. In taking apart his still and hiding it from the law, he buries it in a hill which is, in reality, a sacred Indian burial mound. There he finds a single gold coin, and is convinced he has located a mound of buried treasure he remembered seeing white men bury years ago. He locates a salesman with a machine that can discover and track buried treasure and rents it from him. He is awed before the instrument.

The divining machine sat on the back seat and Lucas stood in the open door, looking at it—an oblong metal box with a handle for carrying at each end, compact and solid, efficient and business-like and complex with knobs and dials. He didn't touch it. He just leaned in the door and stood over it, blinking, bemused. He spoke to no one. "And I watched it work," he said. "I watched it with my own eyes." (79)

Of course it is fraudulent, and Lucas spends long hours, working through the night, hoping to find a legacy far greater than the McCaslins have left him. It is difficult to determine whether his motivation is to better that legacy; a desire to get a legacy, having been corrupted by the original money given him by Ike; or whether he means to get rich fast and nothing more. When the machine fails him and the cost mounts, he salts an Indian mound and rents the machine back to the salesman. But that divining machine like the hunt for gold rather than bear has become an obsession. Getting no sleep, he has trouble farming by day. And Molly cannot convince him to do otherwise. Moreover, he is able to enslave the salesman, at least temporarily, only by once more playing the dumb nigger.

Even the self-possessed Molly is deeply disturbed and she asks Roth to get her a divorce.

"A divorce" [he says]. "After forty-five years, at your age? What will you do? How will you get along without somebody—"

"I can work. I will. . . . I got to go clean anyway. Because he's crazy. Ever since he got that machine, he's done went crazy. . . . Because God say, 'What's rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware.' And I'm afraid. I got to go. I got to be free of him." (98-99)

Her words resonate slantingly with Ike's; she too would relinquish the land that greed has corrupted. The maligned Lucas has turned predator, maligns the land, his heritage, his family. Then on a Monday morning the hired hand Oscar, still wearing his Sunday clothes, confronts Roth.

"It's Aunt Molly Beauchamp," Oscar said. "She been missing since yestiddy sometime. We been hunting her all night. We found where she went down to the creek and we been tracking her. Only she so little and light she done hardly make a foot on the ground. Uncle Luke and George and Nat and Dan and some others are still hunting." . . . It was almost noon when they found her, lying on her face in the mud, the once immaculate apron and the clean faded skirts stained and torn, one hand still grasping the handle of the divining-machine as she had fallen with it. (120-21)

Roth helps Molly proceed with the divorce.

Before white law, the black Lucas is helpless. He can only ask Roth to intervene for him, convince him he has changed. For the once-proud Lucas, with the white blood of Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin in his veins, it is a moment of unparalleled humiliation.

"We aint gonter have no contest or no voce either," he said.

"You what?" the Chancellor said. "What's this?" Lucas had not once looked at Edmonds. As far as Edmonds could tell, he was not looking at the Chancellor either. Edmonds thought idiotically how it must have been years since he had seen Lucas uncovered; in fact, he could not remember at all being aware previously that Lucas' hair was gray.

"We dont want no voce," Lucas said. "I done changed my mind" [about continuing to hunt for gold].

"Are you the husband?" the Chancellor said.

"That's right," Lucas said.

"Say sir to the court!" the clerk said. Lucas glanced at the clerk.

"What?" he said. "I dont want no court. I done changed my——"

"Why, you uppity——" the clerk began.

"Wait," the Chancellor said. He looked at Lucas. "You have waited too late. This bill has been presented in due form and order. I am about to pronounce on it."

"Not now," Lucas said. "We dont want no voce. Roth Edmonds knows what I mean." (124)

The dynamic Lucas has learned to give in. He will next learn to give to: "He was not gone long. He returned, unhurried, and got into the car. He was carrying a small sack—obviously candy, a nickel's worth. He put it

into Molly's hand. 'Here,' he said. 'You aint got no teeth left you can still gum it'" (125). And he learns to give up in order to set himself free.

[Roth] was eating when Lucas entered and passed him and set the divining machine on the other end of the table. It was clean of mud now; it looked as though it had been polished, at once compact and complex and efficient-looking with its bright cryptic dials and gleaming knobs. Lucas stood looking down at it for a moment. Then he turned away. Until he left the room he did not once look toward it again. "There it is," he said. "Get rid of it. . . . I dont want to never see it again. Man has got three score and ten years on this earth, the Book says. He can want a heap in that time and a heap of what he can want is due to come to him, if he just starts in soon enough. I done waited too late to start. The money's there. Them two white men that slipped in here that night three years ago and dug up twenty-two thousand dollars and got clean away with it before anybody saw them. I know. I saw the hole where they filled it up again, and the churn it was buried in. But I am near to the end of my three score and ten, and I reckon to find the money aint for me." (126-27)

To give in; to give to; to give up: receding, Lucas disappears from the novel altogether. The proud heir of Carothers has transformed himself into a humbled sambo. "Bound to each other through seven generations that begin and end with miscegenation," Philip M. Weinstein writes of *Go Down, Moses*, "the blacks see in the whites the conditions they cannot escape, the whites see in the blacks the guilt they cannot assuage."² Once procreation involves miscegenation, Faulkner seems to be saying, it is self-defeating—like Eunice, suicidal; like Lucas, abject and totally dominated.

This is a troubling, perhaps tragic outcome. But Faulkner will not let us forget it. The very last chronological event in the novel is the anticipated birth of George and Nat Wilkins' first child. This birth only carries on the miscegenation which Lucas bequeaths them through his own bloodline. In a racist society such as that of Yoknapatawpha, whatever its desires, clear-eyed expectations seem to dictate that when procreation involves miscegenation, it may not be creative at all.

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NOTES

¹All quotations are from William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990).

²Philip M. Weinstein, *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 62.