

Waste Land in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*

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In William Faulkner's "The Bear," Isaac McCaslin's Uncle Hubert Beauchamp intends to bequeath his nephew a silver cup filled with gold coins. But over the years Hubert pilfers from his own bequest, and Ike finally inherits only a bright tin coffeepot containing a handful of coppers muffled in a rat's nest of formal I.O.U.'s. Critics usually compare the silver cup to Keats's Grecian urn, mentioning Ike's empty heritage or alleging his "arrested motion."¹ I would like to see the devalued cup as a grail and Ike as a quester in a traditional waste land.

The waste land legend may be summed up as follows.² Because of the incapacity of the Fisher King, a curse falls on his land which leaves it waste. The grail knight then pursues a double goal: to find the grail and to heal the maimed king. Frequently the knight could heal the king with a simple question, indicating sympathy, such as "Whom does the grail serve?" While the knight is in the Fisher King's castle, the grail, attended by a woman, mysteriously appears. In the form of a platter or cup, the grail in this appearance is usually preceded by various objects: candles, a towel, a bleeding lance. The grail passes around the room and feeds those present each with the meats and drinks he most desires, an occasion which prefigures the restoration of the land. But if the knight fails to ask the question showing his concern, the grail disappears, the knight has to keep searching, and the king and the land have to keep waiting. They wait for fertility and often for rain.

T. S. Eliot, of course, stamped the medieval waste land with a 20th-century mark. Faulkner was influenced by *The Waste Land*.³ Since the endnotes to this work send the reader to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, Faulkner could conceivably have followed up Eliot's advice to find more detailed information on the grail story. In any case, whether he read Weston or not, Faulkner includes definite elements of waste land imagery in *Go Down, Moses*. (I will be focusing mainly on "The Bear.")

Actually, Faulkner sets up the problem of restoring the waste land in conjunction with two other related myths of Western culture: regaining a lost Eden and returning to the promised land. These myths are "typologically identical" (to use Northrop Frye's phrase).⁴ I will touch on the theme of the promised land only as Faulkner relates it inextricably to the waste land.

¹See, for example, Larry Marshall Sams, "Isaac McCaslin and Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" *The Southern Review* 12 (July 1976), 632-39.

²Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor 1920), pp. 12-24, and Raymond M. Oderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), p. 12.

³Cleanth Brooks, *Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), p. 16, writes that Faulkner's "poems around 1921-25 are saturated in Eliot's poetry, and . . . his fiction acknowledges, from *Soldier's Pay* to *Pylon*, the themes and attitudes dramatized in Eliot's *The Waste Land*." See also Warren G. French, ed., *The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1975), pp. 235-48, 269-302.

⁴Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 191ff.

(1) The curse on the land: Faulkner has Ike say explicitly that the land, meaning the South, is cursed.⁵ The reasons for the curse are blunt: (a) injustice to blacks and (b) private ownership. Hubert Beauchamp, harmless as he seems, exemplifies those who called down a blight. He can stake Tennie Beauchamp in a poker game, as chattel. His name "Beauchamp" means literally "beautiful field," and it is precisely because of his (and others') participation in slavery and private greed that the beautiful field—the communally owned wilderness and the community of races—has been tainted.

(2) The grail: Hubert's private greed is shown in the cup for Ike which he takes back, summing up the bankruptcy of Ike's inheritance from his Southern past. When Hubert wants Ike to appreciate in advance his generosity, the cap, wrapped up in burlap, passes ritually from hand to hand, as the grail passes around the assembled guests at the grail castle. But instead of feeding those assembled—Ike and Tennie and so on—with what they need, Hubert's legacy can only deprive them of pride and rights. Since the dignified tone of Hubert's I.O.U.'s increases as he devalues the gift, his story is essentially comic and pathetic, leaving us with a parodic grail, a tin coffeepot.

Ike follows all the injunctions he received and completes the ritual exactly by waiting years until he turns twenty-one to open the inheritance. Faulkner seems to re-create the elaborate paraphernalia preceding the appearance of the grail. Sir Thomas Malory mentions two candles, a towel, and a bleeding spear which stood upright against the vessel.⁶ In Ike's case, "McCaslin shifted the bright lamp to the center of the cleared dining-room table and set the parcel beside it and laid his open knife beside the parcel and stood back . . ." (p. 306). Faulkner's bright lamp and burlap and open knife correspond to candles and towel and upright spear.

I might mention that Weston, in searching for origins of the grail, recounts how some cult women bringing food and drink in golden cups had their cups stolen and were themselves violated.⁷ Ike's cup full of gold is stolen, and Faulkner certainly makes the violation of women—Eunice and Tomey, for example—a prime cause for the curse on Ike's land. If Faulkner did not know this particular story, he did seem to know the grail as chalice, and to know details of its ritual appearance.

(3) Percival: Ike, whose middle name is Beauchamp, is, of course, the main quester who sets out to restore the beautiful land, though he has no illusions that the old wrongs can be completely made right or "amortized" (p. 266). But Faulkner takes pains to share out the primary roles with his black characters. For example, if Ike is the Nazarene, Ike also plays one of the magi to Fonsiba as Christ child (p. 277), and if Ike is grail quester, a minor character named Percival—the name of one of the most successful of the medieval grail knights—is black. It is significant that Percival Brownlee's name begins the ledger entries, even though his story at first seems irrelevant, since reading the ledger will implant Ike's knightly desire to right wrongs.

The medieval Percival was a clown, a rustic and innocent who did not know the rules of chivalry. Brownlee is a grotesque, and it seems even more difficult in the modern waste land than in the medieval one to know one's proper role.

⁵William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), p. 298. Further page numbers from this edition will be noted in parentheses.

⁶Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 603.

⁷Weston, p. 173.

Is Brownlee a bookkeeper? No, he can't read. Is he a ploughman? No, he can't plough. The confusion extends even to his sexual role.⁸ But if Brownlee cannot "attain" to the level of bookkeeper, is that vocation really so high? Buddy and Buck keep their misspelled books mainly to record crimes, injustices which they hardly recognize as such. Buddy and Buck mock Brownlee's calling as a preacher by putting his spiritual shepherding back in terms of literal herding: maybe he can lead the livestock to the creek to drink (p. 264). Ike, like Brownlee, is a Percival in that he turns away from the practical affairs of commissary and farm; they are both more interested in a preacher's or a knight's balance of right and wrong than in the businessman's assets and liabilities. But the ledger's implied cliché that if Brownlee can lead the horse to water, he cannot make it drink, reminds us that Ike, too, as a voice crying in the wilderness can only do so much to awaken consciences: he does not seem to have converted even his kinsman McCaslin away from stereotypes of blacks.

In the sections of "The Bear" on the hunt, Sam, Ike, and Boon are the three most directly involved with the mystical Old Ben, as Galahad, Bors, and Percival form a trio of the most successful grail knights. In Malory, Percival is befriended by a lion, to the extent that "the lyon and he slepte togydirs."⁹ Faulkner seems to be distributing the old Percival's attributes among his modern "knights," as Boon, of course, sleeps with the dog named Lion. In Malory's version, Percival with his lion faces a serpent and a temptation by a woman, elements which also occur, greatly transmuted, in "The Bear."

Just as multiple Percivals appear in the story, a Gawain (French: Gauvain) probably lurks in Gavin Stevens, who in "Go Down, Moses" acquits himself well of the same kind of obligations which Ike feels. At the other end of the whole collection, Buck in the first story, "Was," is a ludicrous and unworthy knight, hunting Tomey's Turl as if he were an animal. Miss Sophonsiba in that story outdoes passive medieval women by making her own catch (a husband; she is, in fact, the only successful hunter there); but she properly mimics these ladies of chivalry to the extent of sending her knight a red ribbon (p. 15).

(4) Restoring the waste land: Faulkner does not leave us with the bleakness of waste land but suggests at least a few meager steps for Ike, plus a larger vision for us. Ike can give back some money; and he makes long overland trips (abortively in the search for James, only partially successfully for Fonsiba) as the old questers made literal journeys. He can actively give up overseeing exploited sharecroppers and take up carpentry instead.

The vision of restoring the waste land meshes here with reentering the promised land: let my people go. Ike is named after the biblical Isaac, son of Abraham, not so much as victim, I think, but as younger son of a man who repudiated another son. Abraham rejected his slave woman, Hagar, and his first son, Ishmael, while Ike's grandfather refuses to acknowledge his slave mistress Eunice and his descendants Tomey and Tomey's Turl. This modern Isaac is not going to accept his covenant unless the blacks and the "elder brothers" in the land, the Indians, are given their covenant, too.¹⁰ At the end of *Go Down, Moses*,

⁸Karl F. Knight, "'Spintrius' in Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 12 (Winter 1975), 31-32, suggests that when Brownlee is prevented by the McCaslins from following his vocation as preacher, he is forced to resort to his homosexuality to make his living.

⁹Malory, p. 546.

¹⁰Stanley Sultan, "Call Me Ishmael: The Hagiography of Isaac McCaslin," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 3 (Spring 1961), 61, says Ishmael was not denied by God in being cast out by his father into the wilderness, as he gained thereby a more valuable inheritance. I think Faulkner is talking more about disinheritance and blacks than about inheriting the wilderness in the Ishmael allusion.

the "oldest negro, Isham" (p. 354) combines Abraham and Ishmael in his name, as if the name itself were reasserting the old denied heritage.

As Francis Lee Utley points out, Ike at the conclusion of "The Bear" still has a lesson to learn, which must wait until "Delta Autumn."¹¹ A young mulatto woman reproaches the now aging Ike, "'Old man,' she said, 'have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love'" (p. 363). Ike, by suggesting insensitively that this mother of Roth's child go north to marry a man "in your own race," has again segregated the races which he tried so hard to bring into the same family when he remembered Ishmael. He has suffered a lapse in sympathy: the same failure, in fact, that the knight commits in the grail castle by not asking "whom the grail serves."

It is, moreover, significant that a woman completes Ike's education. While Sam Fathers initiated Ike's new birth in the forest, this recent mother gives the other half of Ike's spiritual inheritance. (She is Tennie's great-granddaughter, as Tennie herself was Ike's literal nurse.) Utley explains, "The values of the Hunt had aided him to surmount the flaws of his immediate society, the South and the wider world of men's greed; the values of Love, learned from a Negro girl, may help him at last to surmount the limits of the cloistered Hunt."¹² But while it is reasonable that a woman complement Ike's male learning from Sam, it is also typical of the grail knight's experience, despite the radically patriarchal coloring that the Middle Ages tried to give to the grail legends. According to Weston, those versions which deny that a woman may go on the grail quest or even ask about the grail "do not appear to be in harmony with the prominent position assigned to women in the Grail ritual, the introduction of a female Grail messenger, or the fact that (with the exception of Merlin in the Borron text) it is invariably a maiden who directs the hero on his road to the Grail castle, or reproaches him for his failure there."¹³ It is, as we have seen, a woman who reproaches Ike for his failure.

Ike gives this new mentor in "Delta Autumn" a silver-mounted hunting horn for her son. Just as Ike inherited his empty coffeepot-grail from Hubert, he inherited the more valued horn from General Compson. The fact that he bequeaths it in turn to the woman and her son does not seem to me just another empty legacy but a recognition at last by the grail knight of "what person was served with the grail." It is this woman with her superior wisdom to whom the grail should pass. Faulkner may be drawing on general associations of horns with fertility; it is apparently a more recent conjecture that the grail may originally have been a drinking horn.¹⁴

Because the grail legends possibly developed out of cultures where women played a larger official role than in either the patriarchal Middle Ages or Faulkner's patriarchal South, it is appropriate, then, that Tomey's Turl advise Cass at the beginning of *Go Down, Moses*: "I gonter tell you something to remember: anytime you wants to git something done, from hoeing out a crop to

¹¹Francis Lee Utley, "Pride and Humility: The Cultural Roots of Ike McCaslin," in *Bear, Man, and God: Seven Approaches to William Faulkner's The Bear*, ed. F. L. Utley, L. Z. Bloom, and A. F. Kinney (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 259.

¹²Utley, p. 260.

¹³Weston, p. 169.

¹⁴Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Origin of the Grail Legends," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 274-94.

getting married, just get the womenfolks to working at it. Then all you needs to do is set down and wait. You member that" (p. 13). Nobody does much remember that lesson in this society, but Faulkner will carefully bear out Turl's advice by allowing Turl's great-granddaughter a voice at the end. In a similar shift to a matriarchal legacy, Faulkner unfavorably contrasts Hubert Beauchamp with the black woman Mollie Worsham Beauchamp. Hubert stands with his silver cup as "lares" next to a "cold unswept hearth" (pp. 301, 304), whereas Mollie appears next to the "brick hearth on which the ancient symbol of human coherence and solidarity smoldered" (p. 380). It is her unconditional love for her grandson that rekindles whatever hope there is for restoring the waste land. Once old "Hub" Beauchamp has abdicated his claim to be the center of the house, the prerogative passes back to the women.

"The Fire and the Hearth" contains another example of a woman reassuming the grail. There, Hubert's metamorphosing silver cup and fifty gold coins materialize in yet another version as Lucas's copper kettle and one gold coin which he "inherits" from a churn or crock buried in an Indian ancestral mound (p. 38). As with Hubert's cup, Lucas's grail—his still or his imagined churnful of gold—only inspires a destructive, if funny, obsession. On the other hand, it is Lucas's faithful and giving wife Mollie who carries the milk pail with a "patina like old silver" (p. 48). The true nourishing grail, as in "Delta Autumn," is in the hands of the woman.

When the old Mollie later refers to her grandson as "Benjamin sold in Egypt" in "Go Down, Moses," she might remind us that the biblical Joseph placed a silver cup in Benjamin's sack to test his brothers (Genesis 44.2). Mollie, like Joseph, would know how to use silver cups or silvered pails—the Genesis text and the medieval grail conflated—to reconcile brothers. But Roth, more like Hubert, will allow personal feelings of superiority to cause him to deny his black brothers.

(5) Releasing the waters: In addition to remaining worthy of the grail, one of the grail quester's tasks was the "freeing of the waters," as Weston says. Ike has explicitly feared that the land will be "derivered" by developers (p. 364), and his whole trip to the delta is a progression toward fertility: "By early afternoon, they were on water" (p. 341). Since the knowledge of love which Tennie's great-granddaughter (as well as Mollie) possesses is the key to the restoration of the waste land, it is appropriate that this granddaughter come to Ike over water and in the rain, wearing "a man's slicker and rubber boots, carrying the blanket-swaddled bundle on one arm and holding the edge of the unbuttoned raincoat over it with the other hand" (p. 357). "Delta Autumn" may end with Ike listening to the "grieving rain" (p. 365), the grief taking account of the present lack of true community—especially when even a generally compassionate Ike can have his blind spots. But if the rain is still grieving, at least it is rain.

(6) Possessing the country: Unlike Roth's compassionate mistress and Mollie, Ike's wife does not know unconditional love: her condition is possession of a farm. She is more like Abraham's wife, Sarah, who, when Abraham had qualms about dismissing Ishmael, urged him to it. But Ike is not so morally feeble as Abraham was, and will not be pressured to own land and take on sharecroppers. It is his wife and not Ike who loses their glimpsed beautiful land, their Eden; she is "born lost" (p. 314) not at all because of her sexual knowledge in that scene where Ike refuses ownership (sexuality in Faulkner's terms helps make the Eden), but because of her desire for private possessions. When she apparently terminates their sexual relations (denying him a son), she reinstates the old curse on the Fisher King, infertility.

Despite the unhappy outcome, there occurs in this one encounter of Ike and his wife Faulkner's most beautiful image of longed-for community, when he puts human intimacy itself in terms of a land: ". . . and they were married, they were married and it was the new country, his heritage too as it was the heritage of all, out of the earth, beyond the earth yet of the earth because his too was of the earth's long chronicle, his too because each must share with another in order to come into it and in the sharing they became one: for that while, one: for that little while at least, one" (p. 311).

Restoring the waste land does mean taking care of the literal land; but if the wilderness shrinks, there is also love to be concerned about, "and it was the new country."