

## BURYING THE REGIONAL MOTHER: FAULKNER'S ROAD TO RACE THROUGH THE VISUAL ARTS

We did not know his legendary head  
in which the eyeballs ripened. But  
his torso still glows like a candelabrum  
in which his gaze, only turned low

holds and gleams. Else could not the curve  
of the breast blind you, nor in the slight turn  
of the loins could a smile be running  
to that middle which carried procreation.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" (179-80)

### Faulkner Sounding the Misogynist Mainstream: Wharton and Cather

American literature in the early decades of the twentieth century seems obsessed with defining the nation by burying or revealing the burial of some troubling past.<sup>1</sup> In this recurring family romance, the narrative of the nation has become a story of art that insists on the burial of a woman: a failed, infertile, or dead mother. As men collaborate, broken and feminized bodies—smashed and severed—litter the scene of art. In these works, ruptured bodies are the source of art, often bearing broken heads that evoke and provoke speech. "Chapping"—Anse's spoken word for procreation that Addie recalls in *As I Lay Dying*—links the "splitting" of bodies in birth to the production of chapters, a process that calls attention to this spate of highly embodied books, generated by works that insist on the presence of books within books. A paradigm of death and preservation reigns in these narratives in which male narrators eviscerate and bury the furniture of female interiority (emptying houses like wombs as well as wombs from houses) in order to pursue a masculine identity found in the carving out of a man-made art. This is a head game, and it takes two men—the character of the narrator and the character he is creating—to play.

<sup>1</sup>This project began as talks for the Yoknapatawpha Conference on "Faulkner in America" in 1998 and for the Society for the Study of Southern Literature in 2004. Versions of this essay in progress (part of a manuscript called "Mating with the Maternal Muse: William Faulkner's Parables of Art") have been read by Donald Kartiganer, Joseph Urgo, Clare Colquitt, Martin Kreiswirth, Michael Zeitlin, Brigitte Peucker, Julia Ehrhardt, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Elliott Butler-Evans, Christy A. Cannariato, Paulo da-Luz-Moreira, Katie Berry Frye, Jennifer Greeson, Carly Andrews, and Dan Pecchenino.

As William Faulkner began to publish novels in the United States during the mid-1920s, the ambitious young writer from Mississippi was faced with the specter of a female-dominated literature headed by women whose writings were obsessed with their own mortuarial and matricidal version of anxiety of influence. This scene of a burial was important to the William Faulkner of 1930 who, with his genius for excess, devoted an entire novel to the burial of the effulgently rotting body of the mother. In 1929, the year of the publication of Faulkner's *Sartoris* and *The Sound and the Fury*—the year critics would claim as the birth of the Southern Literary Renaissance—Edith Wharton and Willa Cather were unanimously recognized as the most distinguished living American authors.<sup>2</sup> As Faulkner waded into this stream whose headwaters were dominated by women, he surveyed a literary landscape that was obsessed with the problem that the female body—the aging and demanding maternal body—posed for art and for the increasingly vulnerable head of the male artist.

What was at stake for Wharton and Cather was the laying away of the matrifocal tradition of “local color,” the burial of the powerful late-nineteenth-century tradition of the regional mother who ruled the hearth in fictions authored by powerful cultural mothers. In many ways, because of the violent history of Southern nationalism, Faulkner was born into a cultural milieu in which regional sensibility and literary proclivities batted on poverty itself. As Faulkner lifted his head to breathe in the backwaters of *fin-de-siecle* Mississippi, he was awash in the voices that were too fecund in memory and too burdened with intelligences overripe from illiteracy. As the record suggests, Faulkner kept his mouth shut (except to drink) and watched and wrote. Faulkner, like Wharton and Cather, inherited the legacy of an increasingly entrapping binary that gendered aesthetics. Here, at this unforgiving juncture, in Susan Donaldson's words, “the male artist's own incarceration [took place] within the shrinking definitions of masculinity forever bound to definitions of femininity” and all were circumscribed “within a regional art largely defined by women” (53).

In *A Backward Glance*, the writers Wharton named as her “predecessors”—Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman—were known for their fictions that valorized older women: independent spinsters, childless widows, and undying mothers who hold sway over childless elderly children. This was not just the fiction, it was the world of Miss Rosas and Aunt Jennys—the wide spectrum of white women who were known as the type of the “Civil War Aunt” that formed the matriarchy of the South that William Faulkner inherited. At the turn into the twentieth century, the larger than life sibyl, the childless herbalist mother of Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* along the sea coast in Maine,

<sup>2</sup>Ammons argues with force that Fitzgerald and Hemingway were “the most famous—who found people like Wharton and Cather, and Stein, far more than any other literary ‘father’ of Harold Bloom's imagination, the real giants against whom they needed to define themselves.” She goes on to make the important point that Faulkner along with Alain Locke joined these male writers in their “fear of female dominance” (viii). Ammons cites the survey of some two-hundred literary critics in 1929 in which the respondents placed Wharton and Cather at the top of their lists. See Greeson for a relevant analysis of the local color movement's discovery of the American South as a project of racially defined conquest that was literally connected to the imperialist travelogues of Stanley in search of Livingstone in Africa.

is echoed in Winslow Homer's paintings of seemingly larger than life women along the shore. This sibylline power, with its quality of type and stereotype as a force of nature, is found in the dominating figures of Dilsey of *The Sound and the Fury* and Clytie of *Absalom, Absalom!* Forces of culture, Faulkner's icons of black maternal authority fill passageways and, like the mythical Cerberus, control and watch houses. Both New England and the South were depicted as feminized in the stasis and demise of their power both during and after the War. Faulkner's fiction abounds in narcissistic child-mothers and strong (sometimes angry or mad) white Southern women who fit the regionalized and only slightly revised type of the Yankee school marm (Addie Bundren of *As I Lay Dying* and Joanna Burden of *Light in August*) as well as the strong and unhusbanded social arbiters, widows or spinsters (Aunt Jenny of *Sartoris*, Miss Rosa of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Miss Habersham of *The Unvanquished* and *Intruder in the Dust*). All of these white characters who are strong, even the seemingly least likely woman on this list, Addie Bundren, are intimately linked to people of color and the story of black bodies.

Noting the power of "the traditional position of women in Southern art and literature," Donaldson, quoting Faulkner, writes "that art in the South 'was really no manly business'" (74). As father's (Mr. Compson's) narration indicates in *Absalom, Absalom!* the world lost in the "lost cause" was for some men seen as the loss of a desired elegance of sybaritic style, a masculinity that approached the feminine through the birthright conferred by a cultured aristocracy. Through his nuanced creation of the figure of Charles Bon, Quentin's father acknowledges that a man born to silk could also be seductively feminine in his masculinity, suggesting that manly desire is not limited to the homosocial bonds native to the condition and practice of hypermasculinity. Arguably, the frontier-edged and, in many ways, faux aristocratic South had become a functioning matriarchy because of the vested interest of elite white women in the control of male violence. These stalwart "ladies" used the stability of the patriarchy and the tradition of a defined class of sexually exploited women to maintain a rigidly preserved hierarchy that held fathers and brothers in place. Quick to scent insult and quick to kill, men who played starring roles in the "tottering stage-fictions of . . . a chivalrous South" (Wharton, "Great" 648) were expected to perform the courtesies that passed as social graces. White men, who were and were not part of the aristocracy, practiced the dominant culture of protection and predation. Following the Civil War, the female and feminized identity of the settled regions, New England and the South, was enunciated by and established through what was widely acknowledged as the "feminine note in fiction."<sup>3</sup>

Kate Chopin, in her 1899 *The Awakening*, created a protagonist that Cather herself reviewed as a "Creole Bovary."<sup>4</sup> As the reference to Flaubert suggests, Chopin was participating in a critique of bourgeois experience that went well

<sup>3</sup>This phrase has been drawn from W. L. Courtney's *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (1904), which assesses the gendered state of U.S. fiction.

<sup>4</sup>Cather's review begins, "A Creole Bovary is this little novel of Miss Chopin's" (697).

beyond the borders of the United States. But Chopin's novel also underlined the political potential of local color by demonstrating the dangers of fictions of maternity and sexual passion that had the power to destroy men as well as women and art. While Wharton and Cather were not the first to expose the animality inherent in femaleness, they were unwavering in their revelation of the danger that a seductively sentimental and floral aesthetic posed to the heroic and intrinsically homoerotic ethos which insists on men making men. Faulkner was, and to this day remains, the reader who was most aware that his prominent female predecessors, Wharton and Cather, had written influential novels about art that were masterpieces—clearly overdetermined masterworks—of misogyny.

If Faulkner was looking for himself in *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), his "lost generation" novel that placed him in Fitzgerald and Hemingway's downstream, he found himself as he began writing under the influence of this female-dominated mainstream. Faulkner, cold sober, was drunk with words. From the cloyingly confessional "Elmer" and "Portrait of Elmer" (unpublished in his lifetime) that paint the portrait of the artist as a young man, to the tale of the imprisoned hack writer Wilbourne, who has been seduced into sculpting the pregnant female body with a knife in *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner's life story is the story of art. A river—not just a branch—of Faulkner's strongest fictions narrates the story of the artist (female as well as male) as a failed man. This failed man is defined, regardless of morphology, by a desire for masculine authority that leaves him dead or mad, mad or dead, convicted of having murdered a living woman into art. Faulkner found himself and the story of his art in compellingly didactic novels by Wharton and Cather,<sup>5</sup> in which male protagonists grieve over literally threatened, wounded, and feminized heads: signs (not just symbols) of the imminent castration of male narrators and writers. Wharton's unnamed narrator of *Ethan Frome* and Cather's Godfrey St. Peter of *The Professor's House* tell and write tales, respectively, that compel them to focus on the lives of sacrificial men. Their failed heroes are protagonists of the story housed within the story, the tales of the protagonists' protagonists. Finally, both *Ethan Frome* and *The Professor's House* tell the archetypal story of men who cannot escape the reproduction of death.

Marriage, in the well-known theatrical convention, brings down the curtain on a comedy. Pregnancy, in the traditional ballad of the United States, from Appalachia to the banks of the Ohio, leads to the murder of the unmarried woman whose body has begun to tell its tale. A melodramatic counter to the comic, this is the iconic story that Theodore Dreiser addressed in his masterpiece *An American Tragedy* (1925). In the novels of William Faulkner, a pregnancy may be a prelude to comedy, to tragedy, or to both. Pregnancy often precipitates acts of suicide or some other form of death, such as life imprison-

<sup>5</sup>Cather had never heard of Faulkner when she invented a character that appears to mirror the type of character that Faulkner was performing on his return to post-World War I Oxford, Mississippi. There is a short, drunken, woman-driven air pilot with a strong component of Faulknerian cynicism and humor (and an English accent) in Cather's 1922 war novel *One of Ours*.

ment, for the failed male artist. A pregnant woman returns at the close of Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917), the sequel to *Ethan Frome*, and a letter announcing the return of the pregnant daughter and her mother, the professor's wife, constitutes the return of the repressed at the close of Cather's *The Professor's House*.

Survival trumps romance, as the male local color artist from the city—an historical preservationist who sketches houses—impregnates and abandons the rural girl who does not like to read in Wharton's *Summer*. Impregnated by the kindly Jewish climber, the florally named professor's daughter ushers in a more negative aspect as Cather's *The Professor's House* closes under the shadow of a feminized future in which female materialism will triumph over masculinity and the possibility of art. Faulkner's Dewey Dell, unable to find the abortion that her literary antecedent has decided against in *Summer*, is clearly part of this reigning paradigm of art. Indeed, the pregnant Dewey Dell does not represent hope. Like the pregnant Rosamond of *The Professor's House*, Dewey Dell embodies the emptiness of materialism in the penultimate section of the novel. Aside from framing references to the disputed money, the final "Dewey Dell" section takes place entirely in the spoken word. This dialogue between the increasingly triumphant father and the downcast daughter reveals the viscerally pregnant Dewey Dell as a figure of emptiness: she has been emptied entirely of the interiority that has made her a complex figure in her three earlier sections.

Dismissing what she called the "New England of fiction" in her 1922 "Introduction" to *Ethan Frome* (1911), Wharton castigated the New England local colorists for their "rose-coloured" visions that obscured what she saw as "still grim places, morally and physically" rife with "insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation . . . hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts" (*Backward* 294).<sup>6</sup> Both the stalwart Wharton and her formidable (albeit younger) contemporary Cather appear to have feared that their success would be defined by what they perceived (their sentimental attachments to Sarah Orne Jewett aside)<sup>7</sup> as part of the feminine legacy of nineteenth-century local color. Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Cather's *The Professor's House* are strongly gendered parables of art that articulate their authors' fears about the feminization of American literature.<sup>8</sup>

If Faulkner never mentioned Wharton in his lists of influential American authors (his acknowledgements, notably spare, named few men, fewer women and no authors of color), he may have excluded Wharton because he placed her with Hawthorne and James, whom he classified as "not truly American writ-

<sup>6</sup>For an extensive discussion of Wharton's anxious relationship to femininity and to the work of the female local colorists, particularly Mary Wilkins Freeman, see chap. 3 of Waid, *Edith*.

<sup>7</sup>Cather was close friends with Jewett and Jewett's partner in life, Annie Ticknor Fields. Cather famously placed Jewett's story-cycle novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, with *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as the three American works most likely to have a lasting impact. Edith Wharton and Henry James, in a pilgrimage of sorts, stopped by at Jewett's home in South Berwick, Maine, to discover that the elderly author was not home.

<sup>8</sup>See Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, which argues that ministers and women had gained political control of American culture, feminizing national policy by insisting on the centrality of moral concerns.

ers. Their tradition was from Europe. . . . They were not true Americans." To Faulkner, Twain and Whitman were the "indigenous American writers who were produced, nurtured by a culture" which was "completely American" (LG 167-68). As she wrote an article criticizing her own first novel, Cather blamed the mistakes of young American writers on their misguided efforts to become followers of James and Wharton.<sup>9</sup> This generation had been misled by the idea that novels had to be about intelligent, witty people in drawing rooms. Cather did not acknowledge the fact that her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* of 1912, was actually a recasting of Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, published just a year earlier. Cather would rewrite *Ethan Frome* again and more generatively (particularly from the perspective of Faulkner's experimentally acute imagination) in *The Professor's House* of 1925. In *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather had composed a prosaic version of *Ethan Frome* that like its predecessor focused on the trials of a cultured engineer as he literally fails to bridge a gap between two women (a New England Brahmin wife and an Irish actress mistress) and two countries (the U.S. and Canada). Faced with the enigma posed by Wharton's complexly framed and highly experimental *Ethan Frome*, the story that Cather heard and repeated in *Alexander's Bridge* is the tale that Wharton's engineer-narrator has projected onto the silent Ethan. Stranded in snowbound mountains, Wharton's urbane narrator is obsessed with the fragments of tales that fail to explain Ethan Frome, an emasculated man wounded in a suicide *manqué* that has left him limping and trapped in a living death plagued by two crones: his elderly wife and the paralytically broken and witch-like figure of Ethan Frome's former beloved.

Nearly four years before anyone could have cared, Faulkner dismissed Willa Cather in an admiring letter to Anita Loos dated "Febry [sic] Something 1926." Addressing the celebrated author of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), Faulkner baldly asserted: "I am still rather Victorian in my prejudice regarding the intelligence of women, despite Elinor Wylie and Willa Cather and all the balance of them" (qtd. in Blotner 32). Five years before his death, Faulkner responded relatively expansively to a question about the significance of women writers to his work. His list, characteristically short, included "Brontë, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow," but he framed these names by a sweeping gesture to "any number of them . . . any number." Faulkner's Brontë, like Wharton's Brontë, was the Emily who wrote *Wuthering Heights*, the novel that spawns a line of descent that leads to *Ethan Frome* and *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>10</sup> Two years before this pronouncement, Faulkner (repeatedly pressed for names of his antecedents during his Nobel Prize tour of 1955) listed Mark Twain, Herman Melville, and Theodore

<sup>9</sup>Fryer cites Cather's own critique of her first novel, published in 1912, *Alexander's Bridge* (204). Cather's essay "My First Novels (There Were Two)" offers a frank account of a young writer's quandaries in relation to established authors. For her part, Cather openly coupled Wharton with James, locating both of these figures as leaders of an elite, past, and class-based tradition that had limited the realm of fiction for their less interesting and less talented followers.

<sup>10</sup>See Wittenberg for an early and detailed accounting of evidence that Faulkner read and drew from fiction by relatively obscure as well as prominent women writers. Wharton is rarely acknowledged as having any serious relation to Faulkner's work (see Waid and Colquitt; and Waid, *Edith*). Seldom glimpsed as a modernist herself, Wharton, in terms of the formal as well as the thematic, is one of Faulkner's most influential, modernist precursors.

Dreiser as significant nineteenth-century figures before confessing that he had been also been "influenced" by "one a woman, Willa Cather<sup>11</sup>—I think she is known in Japan." Wharton, who had much to say about many, says a great deal by never mentioning Cather (LG 167-68).<sup>12</sup> Yet, Edith Wharton did privately admit a taste for Faulkner. Calling his work "masterful," Wharton complimented Faulkner's fiction as she panned another young writer's "trite" treatment of the theme of incest: Faulkner (coupled here with Celine) was praised for doing "it nastier" (qtd. in Lewis 589).<sup>13</sup>

The connections between Faulkner and Cather are evident and legion. Merrill Maguire Skaggs, struck by the specificity of the echoes found in Faulkner's early and bad novel about aesthetics, has concluded, "The list of Catherian items reappearing in Faulkner's *Mosquitoes* reads like a catalogue of stolen articles in a police report" (120). Yet, arguably on the deepest level, the Faulkner who was inspired to borrow or steal from Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, was most moved by the Cather who had chosen this very novel to place herself in profound dialogue with Edith Wharton. Cather's Wharton was, and to some extent always would be, the Wharton who wrote *Ethan Frome*. Cather's *The Professor's House*, her own gendered narrative about aesthetics, constitutes an inspired conversation with Wharton at her most experimental. By 1925, Cather was alive to the experimentalism—the form rather than just the story—that Wharton had defensively explained in her newly theorized "Introduction" to the recently republished *Ethan Frome* (1911, 1922).

Faulkner was profoundly influenced by Edith Wharton despite the fact that he appears never to have spoken her name. This gifted literary mother, the sworn enemy of cubism, modernism, and what she understood as their context, the cacophony of post-World War I culture, can be said to have established the terms for the creation of William Faulkner. Indeed, Edith Wharton provoked his most radical experiment: the novel he repeatedly referred to as his "most splendid failure." In 1925 as he was preparing his first novel for publication, Faulkner was not only reading Wharton's fiction, he was reading her literary criticism. The most significant consequence of Wharton's only volume of literary criticism, *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), is a narrative sally that appears in one of her diatribes against modernism.<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare provided the inspiring metaphor, but Wharton was clearly the narrative provocateur, as she threw down the gauntlet that provoked *The*

<sup>11</sup>Faulkner may have been in the same room with Cather in New York in 1931. According to Blotner, the crime novelist Dashiell Hammett and Faulkner had finagled an invitation to a Knopf dinner through Bennett Cerf. Inebriated beyond the likelihood of conversation, Faulkner was at least present part of the time.

<sup>12</sup>See Woodress for Cather's views on modern art and its relationship to trends in U.S. culture. While Cather (unlike Wharton) did not devote full-blown essays to her own disparaging view of social and literary modernism, as Woodress writes, the Cather who "deplored Prohibition, the Jazz Age, the flapper, the relaxation of moral standards, the deterioration of taste, the scramble for money" did not "like cubism" nor could she "take Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound seriously" (476).

<sup>13</sup>From a letter to Bernard Berenson dated August 14, 1935. The Italian novelist, Alberto Moravia, was being put in his place by Wharton, who was competitive in relation to this particular topic, adding that she "had an incest donnee up [her] sleeve that wd make them all look like nursery-rhymes." Actually, she did. See Wharton's "Beatrice Palmatto Fragment."

<sup>14</sup>See Wegener.

*Sound and the Fury*. Condemning modernism, she chastised this literary fad for its fealty to a "pathological world where the action, taking place between people of abnormal psychology and not keeping with our normal human rhythms, becomes an idiot's tale, signifying nothing" (Wharton, *Writing* 27-28).<sup>15</sup>

Faulkner, like Cather, clearly felt the reverberations of Wharton's critical intelligence as she articulated the narrative theory behind *Ethan Frome*. In her 1922 "Introduction," Wharton defended her realism in this 1911 novella by articulating a narrative theory based on the sculptural power of voice. Trying "to draw" characters known for their "deep-rooted reticence and inarticulateness," Wharton insisted that "the effect of 'roundness' (in the plastic sense) [could be] produced by letting their case be seen through eyes" and voices of different informants (vii, ix). Using sculptural language to insist on the spatial dimensions of narrative, Wharton proposed a carving of the story that would gain dimensionality through the narrator's incorporation of the voices of multiple observers. A reprise of the multiperspectival theory of realism that Hamlin Garland had named "veritism,"<sup>16</sup> Wharton's "Introduction" to *Ethan Frome* can be read as a formal template for Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and his other masterpieces of voice-based experimentalism. Featuring an elitist defense of her "sophisticated" narrator, Wharton's "Introduction" contains an unacknowledged assault on a positivism that cannot fulfill its own ultimately elitist claims for that narrator's superiority as the synthesizer of a single truth.<sup>17</sup> As Wharton's unnamed engineer initiates the novel's narrative, his perspective is positively Faulknerian: "I had the story bit by bit [and] . . . each time it was a different story" (3). Beneath the rural informant's facts, the engineer intuits "that the deeper story . . . was in the gaps" (7). In *As I Lay Dying*, fifteen named characters occupy the position of the first person narrator, and each of these figures is threatened with the objectification of a progressive death as they "lay dying." Two-thirds of the way through the novel, in the single section that bears her name, the dead and rotting mother rails against the need to fill silence. Addie Bundren's unspoken assertion that words are "just a shape to fill a lack" argues for the active power of being and doing over the inadequacy of saying and, by implication, writing. Addie Bundren distinguishes between "the words [that] are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in people's lacks. . . ." In *As I Lay Dying* the deeper story, like Jewel, who constitutes the word made act, appears in "the gap" (174).

<sup>15</sup>As both a Wharton and a Faulkner scholar, I have long cited this comment. The weight of textual evidence that links Faulkner to Wharton is too heavy to doubt the role of her work in sparking his fiction, or that this comment provoked the young Faulkner to make his experimental breakthrough. In his analysis of Wharton's notorious antimodernism, Wegener quotes the same evocative passage to argue that "Wharton almost seems to envision the celebrated experiment of a writer like Faulkner . . ." (124). Wegener accepts Wharton as a woman of her word as he presents her as an antimodernist. This argument does not dispute Wegener's claims; rather, as I argue, Wharton was a modernist *malgré lui*. See chap. 2, 3 and 4 of Waid, *Edith*.

<sup>16</sup>See Bowron 279.

<sup>17</sup>For an excellent discussion of veritism and the varieties of realism, see Bowron. Also see Broughton, who sees *As I Lay Dying* as a whole like a cubist painting: the "quintessential cubist novel" (93).

Through the fifty-nine sections comprised of the spoken and unspoken thoughts, Faulkner's novel uses voice, audible and inaudible, to create a sculptural form in which words come up against things. Language in *As I Lay Dying* articulates the physical world through presence and absence, picturing sounds as literally substantive as they abrupt against inanimate objects and animate beings, sculpting absence as well as presence. Describing the place where her virginity used to be, Addie Bundren pictures a word-shaped blank space. She can signify "nothing" only through the concept of negative space, as this absence ("the deeper story [that lays] in the gaps" [Wharton, *Ethan* 7]) is both defined by and articulated through the inked-in presence of the surrounding words.

Articulating the matricidal urge that is fundamental to this parable of modernism, Wharton's and Cather's novels are forceful replacement-narratives that are master-minded by the desires of narrating and writing men who are obsessed with exhuming and burying the body of the mother. Harbingers of Addie Bundren, these darkly promiscuous mountain mothers—the animal-like mother of Wharton's *Summer* (1917), said to be "like a dead dog in a ditch" and part of a "promiscuous herd," and Cather's Indian mother, whose murder for promiscuity makes her the traditional sign of an annihilated race—are explicitly buried or boxed in novels that insist on the triumph of men. Those who undertake this act of burial, Wharton's and Cather's engineers, lawmakers, professors, and would-be anthropologists, are driven by their passions for heroic epics, scientific exploits, and other cerebral narratives of masculine desire. In many ways, the old and often gendered struggle that pits the mind against the body is explicitly replayed as Wharton's and Cather's heroes are threatened with death (creative and/or literal) and the related derailing of masculine pursuits by female materialists. *Ethan Frome* (republished with Wharton's prefatory defense of its form in 1922) and *The Professor's House* (1923) are not just writers' books; these works—appearing after their authors had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921 and 1923 respectively—are clearly manifestoes about the making of art, intoned by women who had gained significant authority. Finally, it is no accident that *Ethan Frome* and *The Professor's House* are highly embodied books that with shocking directness address what it means for male narrators, as creators of accounts, to replace the mother's body with a book.

While Wharton's unnamed narrator fills the vacuum in his knowledge with a book-shaped "vision" (complete with numbered chapters) that constitutes a projection of his own psyche, the isolated men of Cather's novel commune with past epics: Professor Godfrey St. Peter writes prize-winning historical volumes on the Spanish conquistadors, and Tom Outland reads Virgil's *Aeneid*. Cather's men of words literally position themselves in work spaces atop eviscerated domestic interiors, emptied of furniture and females. The most explicit version of the parable is narrated by Tom Outland who later invents a device that in its very name offers a diagnosis and etiology of what is wrong with post-World War I America: the cultural emptiness within—"the Outland Vacuum." Excavating an Indian ruin that he sees as a "sculpture," Outland

discovers three elderly bodies, a man and two women, formally sealed away behind the wall where they occupy a fallen platform, literally a story that has crashed into another story. In formal and thematic terms, this detail in Cather is a direct, jokingly acute, reference to *Ethan Frome's* interior story. The psychic vision of Wharton's unnamed engineer that is projected to form the novel within the novel is an embedded and an embodied book that calls attention to itself by shifting to third-person narration that purports to tell the story of three people: an elderly man and two aged women essentially buried alive in a snowbound house. In a tripartite reversal of *Ethan Frome*, Cather's *The Professor's House* embeds the spoken tale of a first-person narrator in a center that is entitled: "Tom Outland's Story." This character's autobiographical tale is surrounded by the story of the professor, which is told in traditional omniscient narration. Tom Outland is a dead man when he speaks, or more precisely (as Faulkner realized), he is already a dead man when he is heard.

In a precise inversion of *Ethan Frome*, Cather's *The Professor's House* has an oral narrative in the middle, but this oral narrative is itself a site of buried books. The narrator's book-shaped vision of *Ethan Frome* is found here in reference to form as well as content in Tom Outland's discovery of the bodies behind the wall. However, there is another more troubling body, the female "mummy" (this pun is as old as the word) discovered by Tom Outland and his collaborator. Not self-made, this dried Indian woman lays unburied, the mummified archetype of an originary man-made art, biblically identified by the rib that has violated her leathern skin. Dubbed "Mother Eve" by the priest who insists on her promiscuous past, this primal mountain-mother is linked by her violated head to the feminized men of Wharton's and Cather's novels, as well to her literary descendent, the adulterous mother, Addie Bundren. Cather's hero, Tom Outland, has replaced this dried mother with a book, a narrative that he has written in an account book that, among other things, contains the story of the discovery and removal of "Mother Eve." Tom Outland's book that catalogues the discovery of objects, among them the prized and murdered mummy, is preserved by being given a ritualized, if temporary burial, before being unearthed by the professor. This replacement narrative could not have been executed with more clarity as the hero chooses to seal his account behind the wall of the very room where the unburied "Mother Eve" had lain drying for hundreds of years.

As these works embody stories within stories to foreground the experimental possibilities posed by first-person narration, *Ethan Frome*, *The Professor's House*, and *As I Lay Dying* are joined by their focus on the sculptural qualities of the threatened male head. Like Wharton's milked-out caretaker, Ethan Frome, who bears the feminizing mark of a "red gash" on his "forehead" (4), Cather's representative of a decorative and domestic aesthetic, Henry, is repeatedly said to be in danger of losing his head. When Henry is brought to the camp, the cattle boss warns the two cowboys: "he's got no head" (*Professor's* 176), and later as Tom Outland's partner Roddy Blake advises Henry about the dangers of swimming across the river: "You have to keep your head" (184).

Clearly marked as a sacrificial figure, Henry does not lose his head in the water, but rather after a snake has "struck him square in the forehead" as he is literally standing on the shoulders of the masculine hero Tom Outland.

In this Edenic tragedy, Henry's forehead has been struck by a snake as he tries to ascend to the aerie distinguished for having once housed "Mother Eve." This phallicized madman with his engorged and purple head has to be restrained from diving head first into the ravine, a desire that anticipates the fate of "Mother Eve" who escapes her berth in a German museum by falling to the bottom of the canyon. These feminized and wounded figures, female as well as male, embody warnings. Although they may not always preserve the lives of the narrating men who collaborate in the burial of mothers, these totemic women echo the protagonists' feared fate through their damaged heads. In terms of plot alone, the description in Cather's *The Professor's House* of bringing the desiccated "mummy," "Mother Eve," down from the mountainous mesa suggests that the connection between Cather's and Faulkner's novels is one of direct lineage. There is no doubt that Cather's Mother Eve, whose "box [has been made] extra wide" and who drags a mule named Jenny<sup>18</sup> to her death in her fall "to the bottom of Black Canyon" (221), is a direct antecedent of Faulkner's Addie Bundren and her precipitous descent in her own mule-killing and man-destroying box.

Wharton's and Cather's family romances of American literature, parables of art and the fate of the nation, brought William Faulkner face to face with the body of the cultural mother. These same works offered paeans to the sculptural qualities of the male head. In Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, the narrator pursues the eponymous hero, who, with his "red gash[ed]" head and truncated leg, provokes the narrator's vision of a feminizing region that entraps once virile men, while allowing the urban narrator to identify himself with "the smart ones [who] get away" (6). In the opening frame of *Ethan Frome*, as the narrator introduces his picturesque hero as "the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man" (3), the silent Frome seems struck from a sculptural mold: "his brown seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap . . . like the bronze image of a hero" (14). To Cather's figure of the female artist who fails because she can only succeed in painting her own father's head, "the best thing" about the professor is "the modeling between the top of his head and the crown." "[H]igh, polished, hard as bronze," "[t]he mould of his head . . . was so individual and definite . . . that it was more like a statue than a man's" (*Professor's* 5). Her husband, the failed writer who makes a living penning jingles for the newspaper, seems moved to a lyrical phallicism as he describes his father-in-law's head. Seen as he swims with "his head and shoulders . . . out of the water," the professor wears a "vermillion" "rubber visor" that is said to be "like a continuation of his flesh. . . . The visor was picturesque—his head

<sup>18</sup>This may have been a private joke on Faulkner's part as he mused on the fate of Cather's Mother Eve and her penchant for diving into ravines through his creation two years later of his lesbian poet Eva Wiseman of *Mosquitoes* (1927) who has designs in that work on a girl named "Jenny." Willa Cather was one of the most well-known, if intensely private, lesbian artists of her time.

looked sheathed and small and intensely alive, like the heads of warriors in their tight archaic helmets" (7). In *As I Lay Dying*, this mongrel image is worn but nevertheless recognizable as Darl, the head-obsessed artist figure, describes his own silent and hypermasculine brother Jewel as looking "through [his broken hat] like through the visor of a helmet" (94). Faulkner had already punctured Cather's adulatory image of this man's red "rubber" "sheathed" head by linking his rather distinctive sport's accessory to male loss. Long before the appearance of the toothless Anse Bundren with his quest for masculinity objectified in the pursuit of "them teeth," Faulkner's fiction had mocked the professor's valorized head by insisting on the feminized character of Mr. Talliaferro in *Mosquitoes* whose "red . . . bathing suit . . . giv[es] him a bizarre desiccated look, like a recently extracted tooth. He wore also a red rubber cap . . ." (MOS 80).

Trying to make sense of the literary scene in the decades following the Great War, Wharton increasingly described an American literature rendered unstable by its focus on a localized past; and, as she looked forward, Wharton envisioned a literary landscape threatened by the assault of a similarly limited and (from her perspective) cacophonous modernism. Discouraged by what she saw as a downward turn in the nation's narrative pursuits, a literary compulsion gravitating toward the lower regions in more ways than one, Wharton argued that American literature was being taken over by writers who were obsessed with "the man with the dinner-pail" (*Backward* 21) and the mistaken sense of a "real America," "as though the chief intellectual and moral resources of the country lay among the poor whites of the Appalachians" ("Tendencies" 173).<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, as the author of *Ethan Frome*—an antiregional work that was by definition regional—Wharton herself was the author of a well known work that in geographical terms was about "the poor whites of the Appalachians." Indeed, Wharton's *Fromes* inhabit the Berkshire hills, the northern-most ridges of the very range whose southern-most reaches would spew Faulkner's Bundrens down from their hill, putting them on the road to race in *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

Race is at the core of Faulkner's revision of this tradition of burying the regional mother, and Faulkner's knowledge of race is fundamental to his understanding of ritualized violence that separates him and his work from that of his foremothers. This begins with Faulkner's racial revision of Wharton's and Cather's related parables of art. From the beginning, in his early composition of the "Father Abraham" stories, race was central to Faulkner's representation of class. Like the children of the Mississippi Abraham, the upland Bundrens are locally colored, and in their descent the Bundrens foreground an aesthetic crossroads that acknowledges the attraction of death in the valleys, bodied forth in the seductive and prophetic embrace of a maternal muse. At the same time, *As I Lay Dying* understands the ritual necessity of this burial of the procreative body to the mystery of masculine conception.

<sup>19</sup>Both *A Backward Glance* and "Tendencies in Modern Fiction" (1934), reflect Wharton's critique of the rising fortunes of the proletarian novel and of the seemingly lurid obsession with rural poverty. The "poor whites" that have risen to such literary prominence are the backwoods and rural peoples depicted in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), and *Light in August* (1932), and in the more scandalous portrayals of Erskine Caldwell's *Bastard* (1929), *Damn Fool* (1930), *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933).

## Carving Out a Man-Made Art

**A**s *I Lay Dying* articulates the gendered drama between a regional culture and a national aesthetic with striking clarity. As Faulkner devotes an entire novel to the collaborative project of burying the mother, the elements he has reconfigured from the parables formulated by Wharton and Cather retain their archetypal power. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* both reads and revises Wharton's and Cather's parables of art by reveling in the excesses of parody. Comic and macabre, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* is feminist in its revision of the paradigms of art laid out in what I have called Wharton's and Cather's writer's books. While Wharton's and Cather's novels critique the threat that domesticity poses to epic heroes, Faulkner's novel focusing on the delayed burial of a rotting mother dramatizes the fear of embodiment and ultimately the terror of the loss of embodiment itself. Darl Bundren, a direct descendent of Quentin Compson, is the primary artist figure of *As I Lay Dying*. Like Wharton's Ethan Frome, Cather's Godfrey St. Peter, and Faulkner's Quentin, Darl dwells in the paradox of male creation as he experiments with what it means to be or not to be, a state that is mediated through the presence and absence of the maternal body.

In *As I Lay Dying*, the motherless son is the madman artist who uses his sculptural vision to carve a masculine work of art. Darl's vision in itself emerges as a creative act of seeing in which the practical vocabulary of aesthetics results in his ability to create paintings out of wood chips, sculptures from living heads, allowing him to use the act of description like an artist's knife: to thicken paintings and to carve his silent double, Jewel. From the novel's opening words, the silent Jewel emerges as a work of art being methodically carved into existence through Darl's sculpturally repetitive and thickening language. Darl's focus on Jewel's head emerges as an obsession in the opening paragraph of *As I Lay Dying*: Darl, walking "fifteen foot ahead of him," insists, "anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own" (3). Moving from the circle, a worn path made by "feet in fading precision" (3), Jewel steps into this "square [through] the window," exiting the same way "in a single stride through the opposite window" (4). Imagined by Darl in this series of wooden frames, Jewel with his "full head" "ahead" is defined through the wooden quality of his face and eyes.

In this novel that insists on Darl's omniscient vision, the absent Darl details his carpenter brother's progress: "Cash bevels the edge . . . with the tedious and minute care of a jeweler" (79). If Cash is the figure Darl associates most often with painting and the painted, Darl, himself, through his relentlessly sculptural vision is the most obsessed "jeweler" of the work. Darl creates or, more precisely, shapes the multifaceted form of the near-silent Jewel. Lacking the clear boundaries of phallic masculinity, Darl is tutored in his vague bodily knowledge by Cash's faltering explanation of Jewel's sexuality. The inexperienced Darl has intuited the existence of a masculinity that is not unlike Vardaman's longed for object, the shiny red train; this neophyte fantasy of masculine desire is for "something . . . new and

hard and bright" (132). Darl repeatedly refers to Jewel solely by the word "he," a practice that becomes visible in Darl's sections, particularly in those where Jewel's name is withheld and he (Jewel) is revealed as the novel's iconic "he."

Indeed, the almost singular focus which Darl keeps on Jewel would threaten to replace the coffin itself for Darl, if Jewel himself were not so concerned with preserving what is repeatedly referred to as the "box."<sup>20</sup> Taunting Jewel about the mystery of his paternity (Jewel has been fathered by a potent evangelist whose name "Whitfield"<sup>21</sup> recalls that of the most powerful preacher in colonial America), Darl through his insistently sculptural vision is not only a brother, but a carver in words. Here, in the absence of a legitimate father, Darl attempts to establish himself as Jewel's narrator, his aesthetic creator. Describing Jewel as "no less than the signboard," Darl sees him repeatedly as "wooden-faced" and "wooden-backed" (94, 95, 108, 209) with his "wooden face," "wooden look" (181), "his pale eyes like wood set into his wooden face" (4), "his eyes like pale wooden eyes" (18), "eyes like pale wood in his high-blooded . . . face" (17), "the pale rigidity of his eyes" (128), and later "[h]is eyes . . . pale as two bleached chips" (145). Like the paleness of Jewel's chip-like eyes, Darl's description of Jewel as "wooden-faced" and "wooden-backed" becomes part of a staidly obsessive and only gradually transformed sculptural portrait. In a vision pointedly excluding his brother's legs, Darl sees Jewel and his horse as "like two figures carved for a tableau savage in the sun" (12).

To Darl's eyes, the "wooden-backed, wooden-faced," Jewel assumes classical dimensions as "he looks through [his broken hat] like through the visor of a helmet" (94). Recalling the truncated sculpture of the female torso of *Mosquitoes*, a statue that is based directly on the black cotton dress form that serves as the Godfrey St. Peter's muse in *The Professor's House*, Darl has a vision of divided men. As Jewel is joined by their neighbor Tull in the flood-swollen river, Darl concludes, "they do not appear to violate the surface at all; it is as though it had severed them both at a single blow, the two torsos moving with infinitesimal and ludicrous care upon the surface" (163).

Here, Jewel, who is most associated with a carved and masculine shape, is divided as he looks for his brother's lost tools. This scene, which insists on Cash's loss of masculine prowess, suggests that his loss of the tools of production has consequences for the tools of reproduction. Having broken his leg in the uncontrollable flood, Cash is maimed as he loses his tools in his failed effort to hold onto the man-destroying female box. Although the hypermasculine Jewel remains the focal figure of Darl's sculptural vision, Darl's artist's eye also

<sup>20</sup>Garret notes Faulkner's removal of the word "coffin," which was sometimes replaced by the cruder and more suggestive word "box" (414-17). See Bleikasten for a more detailed account of Faulkner's attention on the level of the word in this novel.

<sup>21</sup>The Rev. George Whitefield is recognized as the most famous revivalist of the eighteenth century. A figure known for his oratorical power, Whitefield inspired the scientific and personal interest of Benjamin Franklin who actually tried to calculate the range of this famed minister's voice as a way of estimating whether he could have spoken to crowds as large as his supporters claimed. Mentioned in Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative, this same figure is important to the history of African American poetry because the first poem published by the slave poet Phyllis Wheatley was "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770." Ultimately, the name "Whitefield" would have provided too much of a racial marker in *As I Lay Dying*.

notes the inferior shaping of his own father. Pa (Anse) is said to look "like a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist" (163); and it is significant that Pa (whom the neighbor Tull describes as looking as if he is wearing Jewel's clothes) draws Darl's attention when he (Pa) is actually wearing Jewel's rain coat. In Darl's aesthetic critique, Pa in his roughly hewn form is seen as an explicit caricature of the family's Jewel, the manly man who is not Anse Bundren's son. To Darl, Pa's "face [appears] streaming slowly . . . as though upon a face carved by a savage caricaturist [a face where] a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement flowed" (78). Just as he has earlier described Pa's shoes as looking "as though they had been hacked with a blunt ax out of pig-iron" (11), Darl's similes describing Anse Bundren suggest that his father has been made with bad tools from base materials. In this scene as Anse (a piece of failed art) cross-dresses as a man, Cash, already dragging his leg from a previous fall, seems confirmed in his feminized fate by "wearing Mrs. Tull's raincoat" (78).

### "Pale Paint on a Black Canvas": Framing the Mother

While the increasingly feminized and mad Darl Bundren loses his head at the close of the novel—arguably because the female body is finally buried—the only children whom Addie Bundren claims in her last count, her sons Cash and Jewel, are pictured as wounded and transformed by their efforts to preserve the body of the mother. Indeed, these loyal sons are implicated in the most explicitly pictorial scenes of *As I Lay Dying*. In Darl's pictorial visions, Addie Bundren is framed at the center of pictures that confirm the place of the mother flanked by sacrificial sons as the crucial tableaux in Faulkner's complexly gendered and, finally, racially-coded family romance of art.

From Darl's perspective, as Cash brings together boards for Addie's coffin,

He [Cash] looks up at the gaunt face framed by the window in the twilight. It is a composite picture of all time since he was a child. He drops the saw and lifts the board for her to see, watching the window in which the face has not moved. . . . For a while still she looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure nor approbation. Then the face disappears. (48)

Here, Cash's act of making a container for the mother is described in the language of giving birth. Seeing his mother, Cash is said to be "laboring on toward darkness," "it [is] as though the [stroke] of the saw"—"the stroke" of the verb "to see" in the past tense—"illuminated its own motion, board and saw engendered" (48). Although Addie Bundren dying appears "like a casting of fading bronze" (51), it is Cash's completion of the box that marks the "final juxtaposition" (37) of the son's art of preservation that requires the death of the mother. After gazing from the window where she is framed at the center of what Darl twice calls the "composite picture," Addie Bundren's "face disappears" (48). In this "picture" described omnisciently by the absent Darl, Addie's youngest child appears to have a "pale face fading into the dusk

like a piece of paper pasted onto a failing wall" (49); and, as the oldest son Cash focuses for a final time on his dead mother's face, he sees "a rigid face fading into the dusk as though darkness were a precursor of the ultimate earth, until at last the face seems to float detached upon it, lightly as the reflection of a dead leaf" (50). These fading faces of the final progeny and the soon to be dead mother are both associated with "pasted . . . paper," paper from the past. The detached face or head of the mother is likened to "the reflection of a dead leaf," a dead page in which characters who have generated other characters threaten to reveal their origins by returning to their elemental forms as dead and receding paper. While the dying Addie is framed as the "composite picture of all time," Cash seems to be making a painting "on a black canvas" as he builds a maternal box specifically designed to contain the "[a]nimal magnetism" (83) of the mother. Trying to tear materiality out of "the flat darkness," Cash's labor produces "[u]pon the dark ground the chips [that] look like random smears of soft pale paint on a black canvas. The boards look like long smooth tatters torn from the flat darkness and turned backside out" (75).

Later, in Darl's aesthetically structured view, Jewel assumes the position of Cash in the earlier scene. Here, Jewel himself becomes framed along with the maternal box at the center of what appears to be an excessively framed geometric picture:

Against the dark doorway he [Jewel] seems to materialise out of darkness, lean as a race horse . . . in the beginning of the glare. . . . He has seen me without turning his head or his eyes in which the glare swims like two small torches. . . . [H]e runs silver in the silver moonlight, then he springs out like a flat figure cut leanly from tin against an abrupt and soundless explosion. . . . The front, the conical façade with the square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief. (218-19)

To fulfill his role as the modern artist, Darl must try to burn this picture that insists on the mother's centrality to the scene of art. The coffin mounted on sawhorses appears (in the most infamous simile of the novel) "like a cubistic bug." As the barn begins to burn, Jewel (in Darl's words) springs "out like a flat figure cut leanly from tin [while] the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief" (218-19). As the coffin threatens to emerge from the deceptive illusion of its pictorial flatness, this centerpiece is likened to the exoskeleton of an insect, which like the cubist shapes of modern art, suggests that the dead and the flat may molt from exteriority back into life. Recalling Cash's struggle to transform the "flat darkness," Jewel (again from Darl's aesthetically driven view) emerges from flatness to roundness as he confronts the "stark naked" owner of the barn. To Darl's eye, Jewel and Gillespie are "like two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare" (221).

Darl uses the language of theater as he stands with the other spectators: "We watch through the dissolving proscenium of the doorway" that frames Jewel in a fiery curtain "like a portiere of flaming beads" (221, 222). The coffin, said to "loom . . . unbelievably tall, hiding him," becomes the vertical frame that obscures Jewel before he is joined to the "upend[ed]" maternal box "gaining momentum" as it "crashes slowly forward and through the curtain." "[E]nclosed in a thin nimbus of fire" (222), the body of Jewel himself recalls the stroke that Darl has earlier ascribed to Cash's extravagantly phallic tool, the saw illumined by the "thin thread of fire" that repeatedly penetrates the paternal "silhouette":

He saws again . . . a thin thread of fire running along the edge of the saw, lost and recovered at the top and bottom of each stroke in unbroken elongation, so that the saw appears to be six feet long, into and out of pa's shabby and aimless silhouette. . . . [Cash] sweep[s] pa away with the long swinging gleam of the balanced board. (76)

"[T]he balanced board" with its "long swinging gleam" bears the light of Cash's still incomplete creation as this elongated beam seems to sweep away the father himself who has already been diminished to a flattened outline, a "shabby and aimless silhouette." Amid the Zeus-like fecundity of a shower of gold, the connection between Jewel and Addie's box maintains its generative power: "sparks rain on it [the upright coffin] as though they engendered other sparks from the contact," "revealing Jewel and the sparks raining on him too in engendering gusts" (222). Backlit by the "red glare" of a barn burning rather than the illuminating nationalism of "the rocket's red glare," Jewel with his "thin smell of scorching meat" (222) is significantly blackened as he becomes a descendent of Melville's Ishmael.<sup>22</sup> Ishmael, the most distinguished illegitimate son of the Old Testament (the rejected son of Abraham exiled into the desert with his foreign mother, Hagar) becomes a patriarch, the founder of a race and religion in his own right, establishing the line that would lead to Mohammed. Never claimed by his blood father (a religious patriarch and "hill-bred Abraham"), Jewel is his mother's son. Like Melville's Ishmael of *Moby Dick*, Jewel (literally mounted astride the maternal box) rides a coffin to safety in a scene of grotesque rebirth (221-22).

In *As I Lay Dying*, as Jewel is burned in fire and Cash is crushed in the flood, these wounded men are marked as the novel's sacrificial sons. Dying and dead, Addie Bundren is the focal point in these two passages that comprise the most self-conscious and explicitly pictorial visions of the novel. Faithful to the female force who is seen as the "composite picture of all time," Cash and Jewel are blackened and feminized as a direct result of their efforts to preserve the body of the mother which has been literally framed at the center of the scene of art.

<sup>22</sup>Ishmael, the illegitimate son of Abraham and Hagar, is cast out according to the Bible by his father along with his "foreign" mother into the desert. This is the primal split that, according to the delegitimizing narrative claim of the Old Testament, constitutes the origins of the Muslim people. This biblical narrative recounts the mixing of bloods that is settled by a formal bifurcation of bloods.

**Blackened Sons: Seeing Race in *As I Lay Dying***

Finally, it is the idiot-like child, Vardaman, the figure who sees the world in dissolution as elements are deconstructed (in the old sense of the term) into pieces and parts. It is Vardaman who envisions the world as it dissolves before his eyes in a type of reverse photographic emergence, and it is Vardaman who can see the racial elements in Faulkner's increasingly complex revision of Wharton's and Cather's male-centered paradigms of art. As the rotting mother of *As I Lay Dying* goes through flood and fire, the only sons Addie Bundren ultimately claims are physically blackened after they have been threatened with the loss of legs, a direct result of their futile efforts to preserve their mother's body. To Vardaman's eyes, "Cash's leg and foot turned black. We held the lamp and looked at Cash's foot and leg where it was black" (224). Continuing, Vardaman insists on the racial specificity of his brother's blackened parts: "your foot looks like a nigger's foot Cash" (224); and if Jewel (the iconographic American male who has earlier been described as "having the rigid gravity of a cigar store Indian" [4]) is initially reddened by the fire, race is increasingly at issue as Jewel is painted black by the mother to be. The pregnant Dewey Dell smears Jewel's back with butter and soot, turning "his back . . . black" (224). Color, castration, the female touch, and the man-destroying power of the female box are revealed in Vardaman's description of Addie's sons: "Your back looks like a nigger's back, Jewel' . . . Cash's foot and leg looked like a nigger's. Then they broke it off. Cash's leg bled" (224). In Darl's speech that follows, the maiming power of the maternal box is juxtaposed with the male leg: "We mount the wagon again where Cash lies on the box, the jagged shards of cement cracked about his leg" (227).

In *As I Lay Dying*, both the tool-wielding male sculptor, Cash, and the verbally sculpted and masculine art object, Jewel, have been blackened in terms of their damaged or lost legs—Cash's actual leg and Jewel's legs in the form of his horse. Both of these brothers are increasingly emasculated by their intimate association with the mother. Even before Jewel runs around "through the gap" (221) to save the body of the mother, even before he has been literally blackened, Vardaman positions Jewel not only in relation to Cash, but more specifically in relation to Cash's maimed leg: "Jewel came back. . . . He was walking. Jewel hasn't got a horse anymore. Jewel is my brother. Cash is my brother. Cash has a broken leg. . . . Cash is my brother. Jewel is my brother too, but he hasn't got a broken leg" (210). Finally, it is no accident that just after Jewel has been burned and recognized along with Cash as a racially marked figure, the stinking wagon passes "[t]hree negroes" (229).

While "white-eyed faces" peer from the darkened doorways of this rural settlement, these "negroes" on the road are the only characters of African American descent who make a noticeable appearance in this upcountry novel.<sup>23</sup> Expressing their "shock and instinctive outrage" at the ripe smell of the rotting

<sup>23</sup>Towner offers a brief reading of this rarely noticed passage that notes how quickly Jewel's ire shifts from the "negroes" to the "white man," how "quickly the scene slides out of the racial arena and into conflict between country folk and town fellows" (126).

mother, the "negroes" ask "Great God . . . what they got in that wagon?" And Jewel, "blind[ed]" by his anger, might be said to misfire racially as he turns to shout "son of a bitches" (229). A white man also on the road, who hears this curse as directed at himself—the singular "son" rather than the plural "bitches" that may be read as an insult aimed at the "three negroes"—has heard what were considered fighting words (even in their acronym form, s.o.b.) well into the twentieth century. This curse is an insult blaspheming mothers (bitches in the plural) by linking them to animal reproduction. Described as having become "slackjawed" (229), this white man's response does not suggest slackness or passivity. Rather, to be "slack-jawed"<sup>24</sup> in the Mississippi slang of the early-twentieth century is to assume an aggressive, impertinent expression. This "slack-jawed" (229) man is ready to avenge what he has heard as Jewel's unprovoked insult to his own "the white man[']s" mother. Preparing himself to fight, the whiteness of this man's masculinity is never in question as he is seen "holding the knife low against his flank" (230). According to the grammar of the sentence (although the pronoun retains an element of its classic Faulknerian ambiguity), it is Jewel who "leans above him, his [own] jaw muscles gone white" (230). Jewel with his characteristically "high-blooded face" (17) goes from being racially identified through his "black . . . back" to his "white" face, as he is threatened with an actual carving by this "white man[']s" knife. Yet, as this racially inflected passage suggests, "white" is indeed a color for this hill country son, a man of "high-blooded" color, whose very face has been seen as too dark for his "bleached" eyes. In Darl's earlier vision, Jewel is bicolored and somehow "wrong": "*He had that wooden look on his face again; that bold, surly high-colored<sup>25</sup> rigid look like his face and eyes were two colors of wood, the wrong one pale and the wrong one dark*" (181).

Immediately after the dark-faced Jewel is threatened with the white man's knife, the whitened and horseless Jewel is no longer walking. Instead, he is depicted as he is incorporated into the family's wagon. Even as "ahead . . . the square opens and the monument stands before the courthouse" (231), the blackened Jewel has been replaced as the monumental sculpture whose head "ahead" (3) has been dramatically positioned in wooden squares (most notably in Darl's window-inscribed vision that opens the novel and in Darl's account that frames Jewel with his mother's boxed corpse at the center of the cataclysmic barn-burning scene). Before he arrives at the town square, the burned Jewel becomes a squatting lower body framed by a circle: "he sets his foot on the turning hub of the rear wheel . . . the hub turning smoothly under his sole [as he] squats there, staring straight ahead, motionless, lean, wooden-backed, as though carved squatting out of the lean wood" (231).

<sup>24</sup>Pa is depicted as "slack-jawed" earlier in the novel as he expresses outrage at what he sees as Darl's inappropriate behavior in the presence of the coffin that contains the dead and rotting mother.

<sup>25</sup>Recalling the reference to the hypermasculine hero of Cather's *The Professor's House* whom the pastel defined and florally named mother, Lillian, describes critically as "highly coloured" (38), Faulkner's Jewel is said here to have a look which is "high colored." "[H]igh-colored" (unlike the concept of high-color) is an odd phrase that in the context of the twentieth-century South evokes the chromatics of the color line with its closest hyphenated cognate being the historically familiar term "high-yellow." The mother's insight in Cather's novel is that the dead cowboy hero is a figure who fits into a local color aesthetic, albeit a masculine one.

In his geometric aesthetic, Darl has seen his siblings' mother as an encircling and binding frame rather than as a central figure: "the red road lies like a spoke of which Addie Bundren is the rim" (108). The unwieldy mother (read in terms of the puns which structure so much of the novel) is the "rim" of "spokes," the container of what has been spoken; and this angry mother is the figure whose outrage against language will not be contained, primarily because her diatribe exists outside of the audible, the spoken, word. In the section that bears Addie's name, the quotation marks that demarcate the intrusion of words that to her "fill the gaps in people's lacks" are found framing the conversations with Anse that have led to their marriage and their continued "chapping" (174). Surrounded by so much composition, Addie Bundren has become the activist advocate of an aesthetic of decomposition. Begotten "without the words" (27) or (to use Addie's more sophisticated version) by the "hearing [of] the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds" [174]), the silent Jewel, a man of action, has become the circumscribed figure of the sacrificial son. As he reframes his wounded, blackened, and "wooden-backed" body at the center of Addie's maternal rim, Jewel has reentered the picture on different terms. No longer struggling to escape from flatness to roundness, nor trying to midwife the mother out of the "gap," Jewel has lost his edge to the knife of the "white man" as he becomes the maternally framed and receding sculpture of Darl's shifting vision. Encircled by the maternal rim, Jewel, like the rotting mother, threatens to return to the inanimacy of his origins. The axle turns beneath his static foot as Jewel remains "motionless . . . as though [he has been] carved squatting out of the lean wood" (231).

In *As I Lay Dying*, a major paradigm shift lies in the racial definition of masculinity achieved at the moment of the bodily sacrifice of sons. Amid the Faulknerian excess that defines the house of Addie, the chosen sons, blackened by their association with the mother's box, become visible in Vardaman's sections that flank the novel's dénouement: Darl's cubistic vision of the barn-burning scene. In Vardaman's section that immediately follows, this simple artist, whose rituals (albeit language driven) identify him as a descendent of the wordless artist figure Benjy of *The Sound and the Fury*, sees the "blackness" of his brothers' maimed parts as racial. In stark contrast, Darl, having lost his connection both to the unbounded, because unbirthered, femaleness that has allowed him to get on the inside of others, and his connection to the blackening maternal body that he himself has tried to burn, is depicted as "lying on [top of] her [Addie] . . . cry[ing]" (AILD 225). Vardaman in his section before the barn-burning thinks "we will lie half in the white and half in the black with the moonlight on our legs" (215-16). Speaking to Dewey Dell, he declares, "Look . . . my legs look black. Your legs look black, too" (216). The same moonlight that has allowed Vardaman to see the blackened parts of his brothers and sister reveals only a "dappled" (post-Edenic, already "applied") Darl, unblackened as he lies "crying," "lying on top of her" "under the apple tree." Vardaman, speaking about the barn-burning, says, "And I saw something Dewey Dell told me not to tell nobody. . . . And I saw something Dewey Dell told me not to tell nobody. It is not about pa and it is not about Cash and it is not about Jewel and it is not about

*Dewey Dell and it is not about me . . .* (AILED 215). "Nobody" is the "something" that Vardaman has seen, and "nobody" is the "something" the sight of whom must remain a secret. Vardaman's omission of Darl clearly marks him as the missing man. Except for his memories that include the lifting of his shirt in the night to let the wind blow on his parts and his poignant recollection of animal-like fear as he recalls crouching next to Cash, Darl is disembodied. Darl speaks out loud, sits in the wagon, and walks up hill, but despite repeated references to those "queer eyes of hisn" (125) his physicality remains almost as fleeting as the barely visible (but omnipresent) fact that Anse holds the reins during the entire journey across the land to Jefferson.<sup>26</sup> Disembodied, the brother that Vardaman calls "*nobody*" loses his ability to see "with those queer eyes of hisn" (125) into the minds and meanings of others. Like Quentin Compson, the motherless Darl Bundren from his very origins is a man of words. "[H]idden within a word like within a paper screen," that Addie feels has "struck [her] in the back," Darl's seminal origins suggest that his surrogate is paternal, and that that paternal surrogate is the maternally maligned "word" (172).<sup>27</sup> The pictorial scenes of *As I Lay Dying* frame the mother at the center of the scene of art to insist on the place of race. If the increasing embodiment has colored Addie's masculine sons, then it is significant that Darl is not "of woman born" (Shakespeare 4.1.80). Darl is neither blackened nor embodied by an association with the maternal body, neither that of Anse nor his sister Dewey Dell—Darl is the only white Bundren.

In the effort to escape the embodied creation of female reproduction, the male artist may be seeking to lose himself in acts of abstraction and deconstructive or, more precisely, reconfigured cubist world views. But ultimately, Quentin, as well as Darl, cannot flee the knowledge that these wounded and, in Faulkner's schema, racialized bodies bear. Marked as sacrificial figures, these bodies (female as well as male) reveal the presence of race through their dark parts, becoming increasingly real through their capacity for death.

In the burial that is accomplished at the close of *As I Lay Dying*, the mother's body is disposed of in the shocking brevity of a prepositional phrase that merely refers to the filling in of a hole, marking the moment of Darl's violent excision from the family: "But when we got it filled and covered and drove out the gate and turned into the lane where them fellows was waiting, when they come out and come on him and he jerked back, it was Dewey Dell that was on him before even Jewel could get at him" (AILED 237). The madman poet has once again been thrown out of the republic (in Mississippi madmen and legislators are sent to Jackson). Having disposed of the artist, the father, continuing his past practice of "slavin" and "aslavin" the once living Addie and her children, has whited-up by filling his black-rimmed gums ("his face, slack-mouthed, the wet black rim of snuff plastered close along the base of his gums" [76]) with "them teeth." In his triumph of consumption that ends

<sup>26</sup>Anse only gives up the reins when the wagon goes from solid earth to the dangerous river crossing.

<sup>27</sup>In Addie's section, Anse strikes, impregnates, violates her with a word. In this same section Addie describes Anse as a vessel into which words are poured to gain solidity. The bodiless Darl enters into the bodily vessels of others, but he, as this argument suggests, often dwells in the bodiless, unspoken yet violating word.

in the acquisition of the new "Mrs. Bundren," Anse has taken the fruits of his children's labors to mastermind what *As I Lay Dying* has located as the masculinist and nationalist narrative of materialism. Money and the reproduction of "Mrs. Bundrens" have come to replace the mystery of life and the mystery of art. As the pregnable woman becomes the mere vessel or rutted ditch of another man's "mire" (132), the mystery of female creation as a direct legacy of slavery—a grotesque through visceral anticipation of the assembly line—has been valued and therefore devalued. Without the pregnant woman as part of the aesthetic paradigm, the artist is condemned to a life regulated by a debased economy that insists on the sameness of men, the sameness of wagons, the sameness of death, and the sameness of exchange based on the grotesque equation of money and the reusable, "chapping" (*AILD* 173) female body.

**"Sad Young [White] Man on a Train"<sup>28</sup> or The United States of Incest**

In his parting section, Darl at last sees Jewel revealed as a man "like any other man," a revelation that revises the moral of Wharton's and Cather's parables of art. *As I Lay Dying* insists on the impotence of this head-obsessed narrative. With their resonant names, Cash and, to some extent, Jewel have come to embody a failure of generation and the failure (at least in the fiduciary sense) of the fiction of nationalism. Darl's nightmare vision of the square no longer focuses on Jewel's head. Instead, he sees "The wagon [that] stands on the square. . . . It looks no different from a hundred other wagons there; Jewel stands beside it . . . looking up the street like any other man. . . ." Yet, to Darl's eye "there is something different, distinctive" (254) in his vision of sameness: the Bundren family, like Darl himself, is poised for departure. While Jewel is framed in the multitude of wooden boxes within "the square," Darl (himself at the opening of his internal multilogue) creates a framed picture of his own head in the window of the departing train. In his final entry, Darl has replaced Jewel as the "he" with whom he (Darl), the self-divided man, is now obsessed. Two men himself, as he speaks to and of himself in the third person, the riven Darl has carried his omniscience to its mad conclusion. As he replaces Jewel as his own double, Darl addresses questions to himself as a separate character who exists in the third person as "him," while being talked about to himself in the second person whom he addresses as "you." When Darl sees himself as a "he" foaming from a "cage," he assumes the pictorial position. Framed by the window, he has already entered the first person plural through the possessive pronoun that includes him at the very moment that the family is excluding him; the unquoted nonitalicized chorus chants in Darl's mind: "Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams" (254).

<sup>28</sup>Marcel Duchamp's "Sad Young Man on a Train," a cubist work painted in 1911-12, could be seen as describing the consciousness of Darl as he literally (in both senses of the word) "departs" for the asylum in a scene of self-division that recalls the anticipated journey of Quentin Compson, his literary antecedent, who will escape madness by taking a trolley to his death in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Excised from the family, Darl in his parting section has finally lost his head. He is a self-divided man who engages himself in a dialogue about the meaning of sameness and difference. Finally, it is Darl's vision of the sameness of the men who are taking him away to the insane asylum, a sameness which he associates with heads—literally the heads and tails of coins—that exposes the incestuous riddle. There is a loss of potency associated with too much sameness. Questioning Darl's hysterical laughter, Darl asks himself whether the humor lies in the grotesqueness of joining, represented by the picture at the end of a spyglass which he himself has brought home from the war in France. This spyglass, which features the beast with two backs (in this instance the back of a woman and the back of a pig), leads with ostensibly mad logic to Darl's other associations of animality and sex: the humor of conjoined coins is stamped onto the nickel with its woman and buffalo. He links this grotesque joining with the government issue heads of the "[t]wo men":

They pulled two seats together so Darl could sit by the window to laugh. One of them sat beside him, the other sat on the seat facing him, riding backward. One of them had to ride backward because the state's money has a face to each backside and a backside to each face, and they are riding on the state's money which is incest. (254)

These identically cut male heads, facing each other with bulging backsides, constitute a madman's riddle, a riddle which returns to the failure of generation associated with male heads, and the "heads and tails" of coins. In Darl's last section, two male heads of state with their obvious and suggestive protuberant guns, face each other as they ride "on the state's money which is incest." Darl's much earlier description of Jewel's head, where he observes, "his neck is trimmed close, with a white line between hair and sunburn like a joint of a white bone" (39), is recognizable in his view of these matched government men: "[t]heir necks were shaved to a hairline, as though recent and simultaneous barbers had had a chalk-line like Cash's" (253). It is no accident that Darl's vision of sameness focuses on the heads of two men whose pockets are "bulging" with "pistols" rather than with money or its genital counterpart—male interest.

There is too much sameness in sanity and nationalism. In this world of men making men, a world where men are obsessed with the heads of other men, Darl concludes in equally mad logic that sameness leads to a soiling insanity, the infertile intimacy of monetary incest. These men, like the debased coinage of the realm emblazoned with the severed heads of state (emblems of decapitation) are "riding on the state's money which is incest." "Incest" in this use of the term refers to a pecuniary concept elaborated in the Middle Ages that critiques usury as an illicit (because too close) relationship between money and money. Monetary incest occurs when money is used to generate money without any recourse to the exogamy of productive work.

Like the leg of Wharton's Ethan Frome, Cash's leg has already been damaged by an accident, a fall; and like Ethan Frome, Cash's truncated leg suggests his impotence. Literally a fallen man, Cash cast in concrete is threatened with

the loss of his leg through his family's crude parody of sculptural art. In this instance, the living male leg has been buried alive in a misguided effort at preservation. Cash's "circulation" has been cut off. This already maimed Bundren may not lose an "arm and a leg" in the stock market (shades of Jason Compson) but an actual limb in this cycle of grotesque exchange that suggests that there is too much intimacy between money and art. There is, as Darl's provocatively mad riddle insists, an explicit economic allegory that must be heard in the fall of a character named Cash, who has the last word in this post-Crash novel. Seeing the horror of a living body made concrete, the farmer Gillespie (immediately after Vardaman has commented that Cash's "foot looks like a nigger's foot") replaces the standard expletive "damnation" (a curse that would have acknowledged Cash's black leg as the sign of a damned nation) with the more racially provocative (if less profane) "tarnation" (224). In the vernacular of the novel, Cash has been damned by being blackened, touched with the tar brush, dammed by the rotting regional mother. Broken and blackened, Cash's leg "lies" dying atop what might be called the "Cash box." This, Cash's third crash, suggests that he will perhaps lose more than his skin; this mother's son is severely maimed, the future of his leg itself has been called into question in his fall from masculine and national power.

As the men discuss Cash's first fall which has resulted in his truncated leg, Cash (in a seeming non sequitur) announces vehemently: "It's them durn women" (90); and later, when his complaint is repeated (although he appears to be angry about the women singing over his mother's dead body), there is the sense that women, even before he has broken his leg the second time in his effort to save the maternal box, have been the "durn," the damned and damming source of threats to the male leg and masculine potency. Loyal to the mother, Cash and Jewel are, in terms of the history of the nation and literary nationalism, the disloyal sons who have been emasculated as a result of their parental preference. These poor whites, colored by their class—classified and classed through their wounds and poverty as pale-blooded relatives of Southern blacks—are among those who caused "the South" to become (in Roosevelt's famous observation): "the nation's economic problem number one." Upland Southerners of color, these hill country men were never quite reconstructed after their collaborative efforts to cut off the head of the father. A race apart, Faulkner's "poor whites," who are described elsewhere as "vermin" descending from their wild and warren hills, had never been incorporated, a fact that makes reincorporation as unlikely as reconstruction. These descendents of the hill country, particularly those whose iconoclastic ties tended toward confederation, had been briefly joined together with yeoman farmers of the Piedmont and the landed elites of the low country through a nationalist war fought for (among other things) the principle of divided states.

## Matricidal Modernism

**A**s *I Lay Dying* is a pivotal work in the transformation of this family romance of American literature. Insisting on the difficulty of burying the past embodied by a matrifocal literature, Faulkner took the measure of his own anxiety about the resilient presence of cultural mothers as he entered into explicit dialogues with the dominating voices of Wharton and Cather to recast their definitions of America that emerged during the contentious and generative decade of the 1920s. Taking the measure of Faulkner's anxiety about his cultural mothers (a maternal ancestry that in its mother-centered writing about the regions includes Sherwood Anderson and Jean Toomer), Faulkner chose to cast his family romance in terms of his own region, a South where questions of a reviled matriarchy had long been associated with the violent scene of failed nationalism, nostalgically narrated as the fall of white men.

Cash and Jewel, with their suggestive names, are sacrificial embodiments of female treasure: the mother's art of making sons and destroying men. Loyal to the centrality of the mother in this regionally resilient parable of art, these men, like the South and Southern art itself, are blackened by the fertilizing richness of West African ethnicity. Colored by class, these sacrificial sons are colored by their devotion to the matrifocal art of regionalism. The salvation of the fecund and rotting body of the regional mother depends on a narrative of masculine sacrifice, a parable of art that insists on Southern difference. Race, in terms of secrets of blood, rising tides of blackness associated with racial knowledge, and the centrality of Black mothers, becomes increasingly important to Faulkner's fiction and to his literary accomplishments throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s.

In *As I Lay Dying*, race emerges as essential to Faulkner's parable of art as the coloring of class and sexuality becomes the generative source—the mother—of Southern discomfort. The blackened Jewel, after avoiding the “white man[s]” knife, literally frames himself in what Darl has named as the maternal “rim.” Indeed, this is the last time Darl sees Jewel as a sculpted figure and what he sees is equivocal: Jewel seems to be emerging carved out of the lean wood, but as he is encircled by the frame of the mother, this is neither a scene of emergent creation or procreation. Following this scene, Jewel, seen by Darl as “like any other man,” is boxed and ready for departure; all the boxes carry the “dying”; and, all the roads (“spokes” and the way of all speaking) lead to death. Cash, with his wounded, broken, and blackened leg is the most explicit figure of a castrated man in *As I Lay Dying*: his is the body that Addie recognizes as having broken the “circle of [her] aloneness.”

Broken and burned in acts of intense embodiment, these racialized sons are not just “obverse reflection[s] of the white people” (SF 55) that surround them—the concept Quentin Compson uses to define race and to explain how, in what might be called the view from the mirror, he has become isolated as a “minstrel[-voiced]” (SF 76) “white fac[t]” under a “microscope” (SF 108). The

blackness of these sacrificial sons, as well as the violent cleaning out of the befouled and once archetypal pregnant daughter, is a cubist cutting, a reconfiguration through abstraction that separates and juxtaposes to expose previously hidden parts of Faulkner's racially inflected and crucially gendered parable of art. This cultural story is more than a mere structural act that attempts to signify meaning through rupture and arrangement; this narrative is a politically savvy, cultural collage that reifies acts of art even as Faulkner's artist protagonists kill themselves in rivers or more slowly through the maddening multiplicity of internalized voices that lead to formal acts of self-division. These madmen artists, the motherless sons of Faulkner's fictions—Quentin as well as Darl—are destroyed by what they lack as they pursue words, seduced by the disembodied aesthetic of a cerebral and ultimately matricidal modernism.

### Coda: Bonfires of the Masculinities— Wharton and Faulkner in the Glare of Poe's Falling House and Whistler's "Falling Rocket"

In his major precept for understanding the founding conditions of the human psyche, Freud speculated on the origins of culture, positing the primal narrative of the son's imperative to kill the father. This myth, older than Zeus's castration of his father Chronos, is rendered unnecessary through the mandate of "totem and taboo" that prohibits incest and otherwise mediates violence by formalizing the exchange of women. Doreen Fowler, in a profound engagement with the meaning of Addie Bundren, has argued (building on the critique advanced by Luce Irigaray) that this primal story of the killing of the father has functioned as an androcentric cover story that has itself concealed (repressed) the "founding myth of Western culture": the murder of the mother (48-49).<sup>29</sup> This murdered mother (or the violated wife or virgin who stands in her place) appears early and often in Faulkner's work. The manuscript of *Sanctuary*, completed and rejected for publication before Faulkner completed *As I Lay Dying*, opens with an incarcerated black artist—"de bes ba'ytone singer in nawth Mississippi" (115). This "negro murderer," the admired baritone who draws a chorus as he continues to sing, awaits his hanging for having "slashed [his wife's] throat with a razor so that, her whole head toss[ed] . . . backward from the bloody regurgitation" (114). This originary scene (buried in chapter 16 of the published *Sanctuary*), in which this dismembered woman is said to have continued to run "up the quiet moonlit lane" (S 114), lacks the smell of gasoline, the metonymic smell for burning flesh, in the seemingly inevitable lynching that awaits the incarcerated black man in Faulkner's overtly political *Intruder in the Dust* (1948). However, as this strange (because seemingly non-essential) side story in *Sanctuary* suggests, from quite early on there had been an explicitly racial directive that links sculpted bodies to Faulkner's parables of

<sup>29</sup>Fowler also builds on the work of Margaret Homans's *Bearing the Word* (1986), suggesting that Faulkner (like the earlier women writers about whom Homans has written) is concerned with the centrality of the female body in works of literary production by women.

art. Race, leaving the concern with skin color aside, is foregrounded in this tale as the male artist, who has killed a woman, is sentenced to a hanging. Applying Fowler's sense of the "founding myth[s]" of Western culture, Faulkner offers a feminist revision as a man will be killed for having killed a woman or, more pointedly, a male artist has been condemned to die because he has sculpted his woman into a headless body. Yet this is not just a feminist retelling of the male art of violence as it gives the lie to Freud's version of Western culture. By telling the story that lies before, the story that has been masked by the replacement narrative, this account of a cutting and a hanging in the 1920s South insists on the elemental parts that join male and female (even if these unnamed characters had been represented as white) to constitute the racialized scene of a ritualized lynching.

As *I Lay Dying* is not only the first novel to mention Yoknapatawpha County, this work holds the status of being Faulkner's first published novel to focus on race. This being said, Faulkner's attentiveness to a race as crucial to his parable of art precedes even the bloody opening gambit composed for *Sanctuary*. The "only real artist" in Faulkner's *Mosquitoes* is the white sculptor who is called "black": an "autogesthemane carved darkly out of pure space," and this same bad novel about aesthetics details the story of yet another white anomaly who may be an artist: a "little black man" met in a bookstore (25, 48). His name is not "Walker," not "Foster," it is "Faulkner" spelled with a *u*. While the Whartonian Faulkner was being catalytically thrust into his wildly controlled experimentalism, he, like the Wharton who wrote *Ethan Frome*, inherited what would remain for both of them the ur-story of abstract art found in the mother of all head games: Edgar Allan Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher."

Poe's proto-Jungian, pre-Civil War parable of art narrates a return to a denied state of wholeness. Having found the deferred wholeness in their final and fatal embrace, brother and sister, male and female, are swallowed by the black and miasmic tarn that ends art by eradicating the distance that has rendered words necessary. Anticipating Samuel Beckett's postnuclear drama *Endgame*, Edgar Allan Poe chose to set his prophetic story of the origins of abstract art in a human skull—a morphological house with "vacant eye-like windows" and an interior door of "ebony jaws" (217, 237). As my own earlier work and that of many others has recognized, Poe's most famous story, a direct and primary antecedent to Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, is a strong antecedent to Faulkner's fiction, in particular the Gothic realm located in his "Dark House[s]." Faulkner chose this phrase (most famous as the description of the madhouse in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*) as his working title for both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, his most detailed philosophical accounts of the social construction of race. Poe's head game features an unnamed male narrator who is obsessed with the head of an increasingly mad artist figure. The relationship between Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" and its modernist progeny is formal as well as thematic. The "book within the book," the story within the story, is an extemporaneous poem. Sung by its madman creator, "The Haunted Palace" foretells the "fall" of the Usher house and ancestral line in a narrative that is a direct harbinger of the

grotesque fate of Addie Bundren. The final stanza summarizes the way of all flesh. Here, death is depicted as liquefaction, as what was once living pours out of what appears to be a tooth-bared skull: "A hideous throng rush out forever / And laugh—but smile no more" (228).

This poem with its generic sense of the fall of a kingdom and a family that comes down to the human body is finally less moving than another story within the story that takes the form of a painting. The mad Roderick Usher has created a picture of a tunnel-like enclosure, articulated through "a flood of intense rays of light roll[ing] throughout and, bath[ing] the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (225), a painting of terrifyingly liquid light. This painting of trapped light contained in a deep place with no exit pictures the power of abstraction to go beyond representational art. The narrator has already averred: "If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher" (225). This painting of "an idea" said to be "partaking not so much of the rigid spirit of abstraction" anticipates the potency of abstract art to tell a more primal tale. If the light itself signifies life unburdened by flesh, this contained space clearly pictures the suppressed story, the story of suppression that drives Poe's tale. Such art is possible, arguably rendered necessary, because the narrator and the artist have collaborated in the burial of a woman. Indeed, this burial of the woman, the only potential mother in the story, inspires a veritable glut of the production of art. This uncontainable light is the life force of death that radiates outward as the source of Poe's story as well as the wellspring of the grand succession of morphological houses of fiction that have fallen in its wake. If art must be produced to make the burial bearable, to make the "sound of it as though it never had been" (*SF* 112),<sup>30</sup> abstraction depends on getting rid of the mother's body.<sup>31</sup> What is at stake in Poe's sounding of the archetype is the peace that comes from the ultimate erasure of representational art. There is nothing left after the "rushing asunder" as the dark water closes "sullenly and silently over the fragments of 'the house of Usher'" (238). Lit in the glare of exploding "orbs" of light, the "House of Usher" (the place, family, and the quotation-framed title of the story that has headed the work of art) has been swallowed, like art and the need for narrative itself. The "House," whether the morphological structure or the family that the word is said to encompass, is the subject that has folded into the inverted representation. Art, as Lacan intuitively of language, has no reason to exist as both the representation and what has been represented disappear in a return to the primordial womb, a prelingual intimacy that leaves only a dark mirror. Finally, "The House of Usher" may reflect the end of reflection, the peace that covers the fear that the woman may not always return and that a man might learn "at last that the human race doesn't have to even try to produce art" (*WP* 98).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup>"June Second, 1910": Shades of Roderick and Madeline Usher, Quentin imagines his incestuous joining with his sister Caddy, an act of wholeness and horror that would erase the noise of being.

<sup>31</sup>This may be, as the title of Suzan-Lori Parks's send-off of *As I Lay Dying* as an African American comedy (*Getting Mother's Body* [2004]) suggests, what it means to "get," to "understand," racially gendered embodiment.

<sup>32</sup>This statement by Charlotte Rittenmeyer to her lover Harry Wilbourne addresses his unusually happy mood; she does not know he has just made and then burned his painting of a calendar based on her

The most pictorial scenes of *As I Lay Dying* consciously frame a picture of the dying and rotting mother at the center of the scene of art. What is at stake here has become clear in the wounded bodies of Addie Bundren's increasingly feminized sons who have been blackened—the adjective “nigger” is specifically applied to their damaged parts—as they risk their own lives to preserve the mother despite her death. These “pictures” are crucial to the reading of race as it emerges in *As I Lay Dying*, and to the development of Faulkner's regionally revised parable of art. Meanwhile, it is no accident that these same pictorial scenes in *As I Lay Dying* are directly based on highly relevant passages from Edith Wharton's novels, *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and *Twilight Sleep* (1927). As Cash looks up at “the gaunt face framed by the window in twilight,” Darl concludes: “It is [for Cash] a composite picture of all time. . . . [Cash's mother] looks down at him from the composite picture, neither with censure or approbation. Then the face disappears” (48). As Wharton's Newland Archer muses at his “writing table” in the final chapter of *The Age of Innocence*, the narrator explains: “When he thought of Ellen Olenska, it was serenely, abstractly, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all he had missed” (208). This picturing of the renounced love of his life is immediately followed by the story of the death of his wife, the mother who has died saving one of their sons.

Wharton's “abstractly” present “imaginary beloved in a book or picture” juxtaposed with the fact of the dead mother is significant when read in relation to what Faulkner's Darl sees as “the composite picture of all time” in *As I Lay Dying*. Wharton's *Twilight Sleep* (1927), a novel about irresponsible mothers and the sacrifice of daughters, takes its name from an anesthesia developed for amputations in wartime that continued to be used through the 1960s to blunt the pain of childbirth. In *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton's “cubist” decorator “unbosom[s] himself to a devotee [by holding] up a guttering church-candle to a canvas which simulates a window open on a geometrical representation of brick walls, fire escapes and back-yards” (88-89). Wharton's decorator, unable to tolerate the original view from his window because it has been repeatedly seen as a “Whistler nocturne,” has covered this window with a painting of a “simulated . . . window” that opens onto “a geometrical representation” of urban forms. Addie Bundren's eyes, “like two candles when you watch them gutter down into the sockets of iron candle-sticks” (8), form just one of the strokes of her visage as a “composite picture,” a picture that is being composed through Faulkner's portrayal—a portrait of the unmaternal mother who is a reigning figure here and elsewhere in Faulkner's fiction. It is no accident that the painting chosen by Wharton's cubist decorator of *Twilight Sleep* specifically anticipates Darl's “cubist” vision in *As I Lay Dying*. Watson Branch has defined the aesthetic<sup>33</sup> of this obsessively framed scene:

menstrual cycles. Excised, the quotation is pointedly equivocal: either the “human race” has been relieved from the perceived necessity, the unaccountable drive to make art, or art is something that will be generated whether human beings “try” or not.

<sup>33</sup>Branch follows the lead of Panthea Reid Broughton who has recognized the whole of *As I Lay Dying* as “an exercise in pure design,” a “quintessential cubist novel [that is itself] like a cubist painting” (93).

Darl [not only] makes an explicit verbal allusion to Cubism, he also creates a Cubist painting by reducing the three-dimensional barn to geometric shapes—conical and square—flattened to the two-dimensional surface of the façade with the coffin and sawhorses brought up to the plane of the empty doorway. (117)

In this detailed description, Darl's "cubist painting," Jewel's torch-like eyes have replaced Addie's candle-like eyes described earlier as they "gutter down into the sockets," while the light cast by Wharton's Cubist decorator's "guttering church-candle" reveals an actual painting that anticipates Darl's geometrically cubist vision or "painting" of the barn. Darl's painterly configuration in *As I Lay Dying* includes multiple "fire escapes," as Wharton's noun—"fire escape"—gains the action of a verb. Jewel is the son who rides his mother's coffin to escape from (to borrow a key phrase from *Twilight Sleep*) the "geometrical representation[s]" as he preserves the mother by going out in flames. These "geometric shapes," to use the critical term introduced by Branch, frame and reframe the strangest simile in the novel:

Against the dark doorway he [Jewel] seems to materialise out of darkness, lean as a race horse . . . in the beginning of the glare. . . . He has seen me without turning his head or his eyes in which the glare swims like two small torches. . . . The front, the conical façade with the square orifice of doorway broken only by the square squat shape of the coffin on the sawhorses like a cubistic bug, comes into relief. (218-19)

Here, as he replaces Wharton's fiction of a canvas with a painting of his own, Faulkner was sparked by *Twilight Sleep*'s condescending allusion to modern art found in her "cubist decorator[s]" antirealist manifesto that favors adulterous aesthetics:

It [the window] looked out on that stupid old 'night piece' of Brooklyn Bridge and the East River. Everybody who came here said: 'A Whistler Nocturne!' and I got so bored. Besides it was *really there*: and I hate things that are really where you think they are. . . . Everything in art should be false, Everything in life should be art. *Ergo*, everything in life should be false: complexions, teeth, hair, wives . . . specially wives. (89)

In the fiery dénouement of *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner gave his distinguished literary mother, Edith Wharton, an encoded art history lesson. Aware of himself as an innovator, and conscious of the controversies that had marked the advent of aesthetic movements, in painting as well as in literature, the author of *As I Lay Dying* realized the explosive possibilities of what might be meant by Wharton's "cubist decorator[s]" reference to a "Whistler Nocturne." Faulkner's inspired response to this reference in *Twilight Sleep* took Whistler's work from the province of composed mothers and peaceful bridges in twilight to recall Whistler's own explosive nocturne. Whistler's most famous painting remains his *Arrangement in Black and Grey: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, commonly known as "Whistler's Mother." Long before 1934 when Whistler's painting achieved the iconic status of appearing on a U.S. postage stamp dedicated

"To the Memory of the Mothers of America," Whistler's preferred title for the painting of his own mother remained *Arrangement in Black and Gray, No.1*.<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast to the sentimentality attached by generations of viewers to this painting of his mother, Whistler's most infamous painting, his *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*, assured his place in the history of painting as an originator of abstract art. This fiery scene exploding onto the dark canvas in 1875 was, as Whistler would later argue in a libel suit filed against John Ruskin, never meant to be a realistic representation of a fireworks display.

Baiting Whistler in a rebuke aimed at *The Falling Rocket*, John Ruskin complained: "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" (qtd. in Pennell and Pennell 170).<sup>35</sup> Whistler was not just classed as an impudent "Cockney" and a preening "coxcomb," he was a foreign nuisance: an American painter contaminated with French ideas.<sup>36</sup> If aesthetic disputes (in familiar parlance) were not deemed to be "worth a single farthing," the judge in *Whistler v. Ruskin* corrected this view by finding in Whistler's favor, awarding him that proverbial farthing. The libeled Whistler fell into bankruptcy, a financial fall that condemned him to an extended sentence as an engraver. Edith Wharton was sixteen and already the author of a privately published book of verse in 1878 when Massachusetts-born son of a railway engineer—who had long before adopted the pose of a Tidewater gentleman—brought Ruskin to court in what was ultimately a dispute about honor that hinged on the contested status of representational art.

Whistler's "Falling Rocket" [Fig. 1] could serve without alteration as an illustration of Darl's own vision of the barn burning scene in *As I Lay Dying*. Darl's "Cubist painting" is a rewriting of the very passage in Wharton's *Twilight Sleep* that immediately precedes the most racist scene that Edith Wharton ever wrote. I should add that while Wharton's classism (her inherited sense of propriety and privilege that was much more complex than a merely monied sense of elitism) was at times acute; her racism—in the private documents that speak for her life as well as in her extensive literary *oeuvre*—was unexceptional and mundane. Wharton's manuscript versions of *The House of Mirth* (1905) reveal that that work's calculated use of anti-Semitism, along with the increasingly

<sup>34</sup>Like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly* (1851), this commemorative stamp of "Whistler's Mother" was dedicated to those called the "Mothers of America."

<sup>35</sup>*Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket and Nocturne in Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* appear in black and white photographic prints back to back on an unnumbered plate between pages 232 and 233. Whistler, who himself was a pioneer in the processes that allowed color printing in books, saw his own paintings replicated in beautifully colored plates at the beginning of the twentieth century. See T. Martin Wood's *Whistler: Illustrated with Eight Reproductions in Color*, presumed to have been published in 1909.

<sup>36</sup>The rising tensions and disagreement in what was acceptable in terms of subject as well as composition in artists' paintings resulted in the radical break with established views of acceptable art that gave birth to the influential *Salon Des Refuses* in the Paris of 1863. This year marked a revolt against the conservative view that insisted that only paintings in the classical tradition were worthy of being shown in the powerful *Salon*. This nationally authorized exhibit had long been the French venue that determined whether artists would be recognized or even able to sell their works. The infamous *Salon* of 1863 established a place for new art in France. Through his libel suit against Ruskin in 1878, Whistler publicized what had been seen as a largely French dispute over the unseating of the reigning tradition of representational art.



**Fig. 1.** *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, James McNeil Whistler. Courtesy the Detroit Institute of Art

developed storyline of a fallen and uplifted working girl, was a late addition, clearly part of the novel's discernable move toward a more radically inclusive social critique.<sup>37</sup> Based on an examination of her over fifty books—fiction and nonfiction, her extant personal letters, published and unpublished (the largest collection of Wharton's narrative remains)—the racism of this passage from *Twilight Sleep* is unusual.

Referring to the changes in "fads and fetishes and frivolities" (211) and new social movements, Wharton's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Age of Innocence* closes with the *fin-de-siècle* young expressing their desire for the latest scores of Debussy and advising their elders to attend the new plays at *Grand-Guignol* (without mention of or apology for their reputation for edgy sexual violence). The Countess Olenska herself completes the list of the son's proscribed sights as he offers to take the "old-fashioned" Newland into this shockingly modern and modernist-tinged Parisian world. *Twilight Sleep*, Wharton's novel that blames the mother for what has gone wrong in the mores of the United States, trashes new age fads, hobbies, and self-indulgent social missions that have distracted women from their moral and ethical responsibility to sacrifice themselves to preserve family and society. Among the diabolic subplots threatening to seduce the young women who in turn are threatening to seduce older men (including an incestuous bid at a step-father-in-law) is the insinuating beat of a jazz scene presence that includes a club with the unlikely, oxymoronic name, the "Cubist Cabaret." The language of *Twilight Sleep* becomes vicious as Wharton applies popular and racist eugenics, on the rise in the 1920s, to her novel's ugly critique of what is presented as a degenerate and grotesquely mongrelized modern art.

Wharton's rabid (albeit brief) critique of a mongrel Manhattan<sup>38</sup> and a sex-crazed Hollywood in *Twilight Sleep* must have been riveting to the pre-Warner Brothers' Faulkner, as he himself was writing *Mosquitoes*, his own offensive and bad novel about aesthetics published in the same year. Bizarrely almost race free, "race" is a strangely uncolored or rather gender-colored category mentioned directly only once in *Mosquitoes*, and then only in relation to the questioned masculinity of an effete aesthete and failed Lothario. Yet by 1927, the year Faulkner published *Mosquitoes* and Wharton published *Twilight Sleep*, Faulkner had already begun to recast himself as the modernist whose own *oeuvre* was in some profound way destined to be about race, racial miscegenation, emasculation and feminization, and the formal impact of these cultural constructions on the meaning of art through embodiment. Wharton's crude fictional foray in *Twilight Sleep* was clearly one of the visions of violence that Faulkner was responding to in his gendering of art and race. Undoubtedly, Faulkner was aware that these violent fires lit by Wharton and Whistler marked the contested space of modern art. This debate over representation led Faulkner to imagine his own highly pictorial scenes of sacrifice that transform the bodies of sons and daughters and sisters

<sup>37</sup>For a full discussion of the development of the political vectors of *The House of Mirth* and that novel's efforts at mounting a political critique through the adding of a strain of anti-Semitism and a plot line that exposed women's sexual vulnerability in relation to their social class, see Waid, "Building."

<sup>38</sup>See Douglas's *Mongrel Manhattan* for an analysis that exposes the cultural grounds that bred Wharton's own version of a grotesquely animal and miscegenated culture that she links to art in *Twilight Sleep*.

and mothers in *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and in Faulkner's "Evangeline," the long-unpublished seed-story for *Absalom, Absalom!* While *Twilight Sleep* is about failed and irresponsible mothers and daughter sacrifice, the novel moves from droll ridicule to vicious, racist cant in a resurgent strand that posits a bodily or, more precisely, a "blooded" connection between racial degeneracy and degenerate art. The cubist decorator of *Twilight Sleep*, with his "falsetto" voice, his "snaky head and too square shoulders" is likened to "a cross between a Japanese waiter and a full-page advertisement for silk underwear." The "octoroon pianist" (whose last name, Keiler, means "wild boar" in German) "assemble[s] a series of sausage arms and bolster legs" before her "tiny hands like blueish mice dart . . . out at the keyboard from the end of her bludgeon arms" (89, 90).

As this jazz-playing "octoroon" (stuffed mixed meat and furniture limbs) pretends to be mistaken for a "mismaid" wife, it is significant that the husband of this sought-after wife is repeatedly alluded to throughout the novel (shades of Twain) as "the poor boy" and "poor old Jim." Without getting too far into Wharton's wild foray into what might be called regional eugenics, Jim appears to have been tacitly placed as a mixed-blood figure because he has been born out of a union between a father from the elite of Old New York and a mother from the *nouveau riche*, car-manufacturing Midwest, a region that produces people who are grotesquely modern in the cyborgian sense, an amalgamation of man and machine articulated in the telling name, "Manford." The nickname of Jim's elite father, "Exhibit A," emphasizes the fact that Jim's half sister, the younger Nona, born of two Midwestern parents (in Wharton's subtle—one is tempted to say Faulknerian—joke) is literally "Nona": "Non-A." Nonaristocratic.

Here, Harlem remains unnamed. In its stead, New York jazz, embodied by the stuffed octoroon, is linked to the debased cacophony of Hollywood film, embodied by a Jewish film maker aggressively named "Klawhammer." This figure (called "the dirty Jew"<sup>39</sup> by "Exhibit A") is described here as "[a] short man with a deceptively blond head, thick lips under a stubby blond moustache, and eyes like needles behind tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses." Said to have "a voice like melted butter, a few drops of which seemed to trickle down his lips and be licked back at intervals" (89-90), Klawhammer, joining the carpenter's tool to animal claws and ham, suggests that something is not kosher here. The slender, stylized, and orientalized decorator with his high voice—a "falsetto" figure who, by his own declaration, favors female false-ness—is a cavorting stereotype. This mock-up of an effeminate homosexual male, the overly-stuffed, overly-processed, mixed-race, woman of color, and the "deceptively blond" Jew, are tellingly unctuous whether snaky, porcine, or dairy slimed. Details, such as the decorator's squareness of shoulders, the octoroon pianist's "bludgeon arms," and the filmmaker Klawhammer's name

<sup>39</sup>"Exhibit A," Jim's father, the aristocratic and chivalric Arthur, who refers to Klawhammer as "the dirty Jew," adds that he is "the kind we used to horsewhip." This reference to horsewhipping, extremely unusual in relation to Wharton's *oeuvre*, signals Twain's presence again as it recalls Injun Joe's outrage at the judge who has had him "horsewhipped in front of the jail, like a nigger!" (267). Also see Faulkner's "Evangeline," where a newspaper writer is told of the "whup[ping]" of an earlier, similarly prying newspaper reporter.

itself, identify these figures as tools of destruction. Taken together, these characters body forth Wharton's most rabid rant on the cultural consequences of gender crossovers and racial mixing, as her grotesquely amalgamated characters are further defined through their practice of degenerate arts:<sup>40</sup> interior decoration,<sup>41</sup> jazz, and flesh-flashing films.

In *Twilight Sleep*, the orientalized spiritual leader the "Mahatma," referred to as "the nigger chap," runs an ashram that is depicted as a type of harem where debutantes trailing translucent veils appear to have been exposed dancing "naked" in newspaper photographs. What is shocking is that the "misaid" wife of Jim believes that she can get a leading role in a film by merely showing Klawhammer this revealing photograph of her body that has been published in a scandal sheet. What otherwise would be a preposterous idea, a still photograph that can suggest the cinematic talent of its subject, is given credence in this same vicious scene that damns the new aesthetic. As Nona (looking for her half-brother Jim's wife) is asked unceremoniously to "take off [her] togs" to audition for the proposed film, "Herodias," it becomes clear that Klawhammer, the "dirty Jew"<sup>42</sup> may be searching for a celluloid Salomé who will dance (at her mother Herodias's request) to exact the price of a man's head on a platter.

Faulkner, who had gone to Europe before his first novel was published, spent the autumn of 1925 in Paris on a street that was close to galleries that were exhibiting paintings by some of the most experimental and influential artists of the twentieth century. Fluent in the terminology of his times, Faulkner wrote to his mother about seeing "paintings [by] the more or less moderns—like Degas, Manet and Chavanne." While Faulkner dutifully reported having seen privately owned paintings by Picasso and Matisse, he was clearly most moved by the art of Cezanne, the painter he described as having "dipped his brush in light" (Lind 138, 139, 141). Wharton, too, was visiting galleries in this Paris, the city that had been her place of permanent residence since 1909. Divided in age and taste as they established positions on opposing sides of the post-war abyss, Wharton and Faulkner in their obsessions with the visual and plastic arts were incorporating the worlds they saw and, to some extent shared, into their fictions. Highly conscious and allusive writers whose fictions were marked by their almost painful visual acuity, Wharton and Faulkner, in the full paradox of their divergent origins, must be seen as complex fish swimming in what by 1927 was the same water. Faulkner would have known that Wharton's reference in *Twilight Sleep* to a cinematic project entitled "Herodias" was to a

<sup>40</sup>I discuss this scene and others in a 1995 paper on incest in Wharton's later novels, linking the chiasmic resolution (a Cavellian comedy of marriage and remarriage) accomplished through daughter sacrifice in *Twilight Sleep* to the conclusion of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*. This reading inspired a paper on eugenics in *Twilight Sleep*, given July 2004 to the International Gothic Society in Paris.

<sup>41</sup>Wharton's first book (coauthored with the architect Ogden Codman) was *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), through which she hoped to rescue the much abused art of interior decoration from the realm of dressmakers and stuffed furniture by applying structural principles associated with architecture.

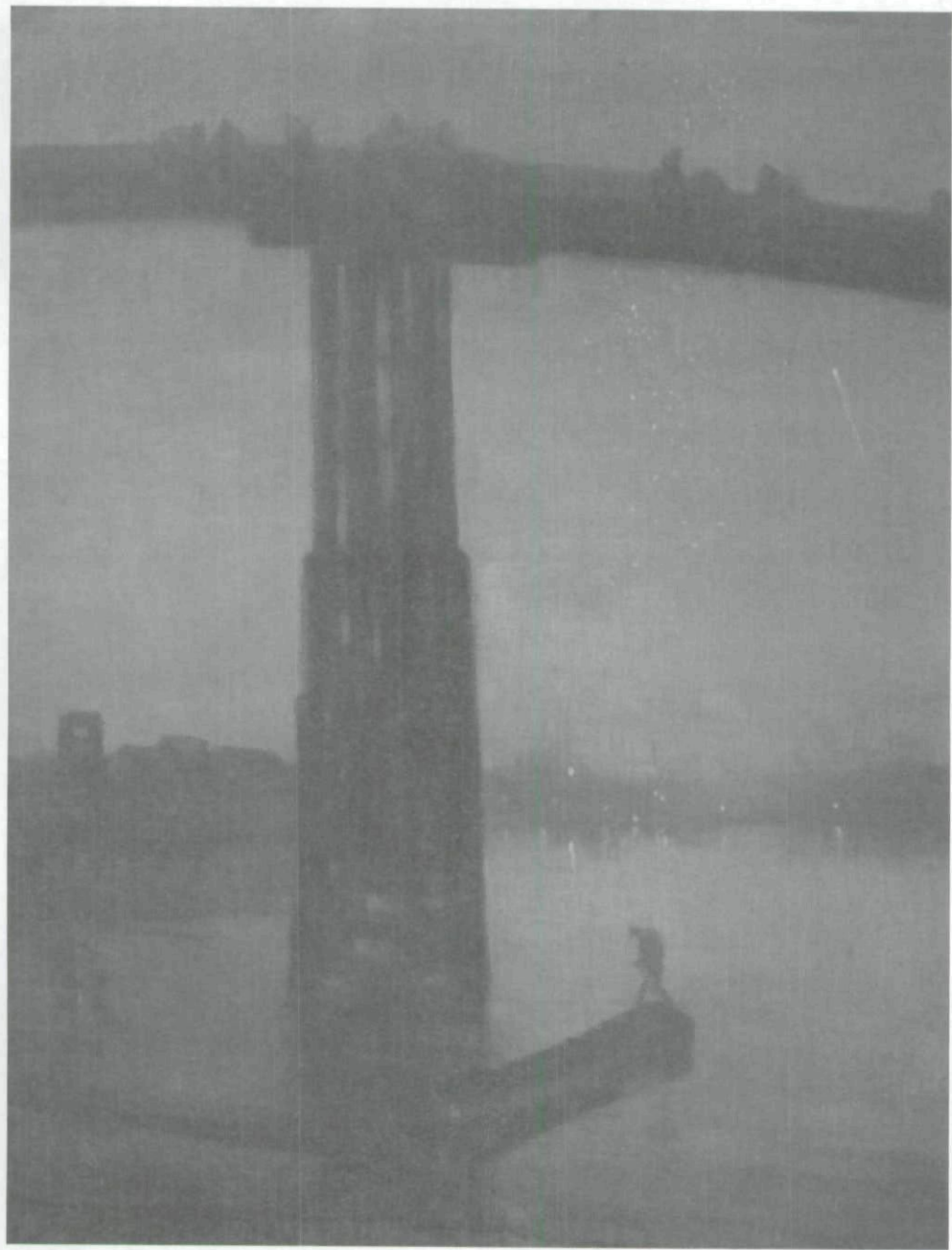
<sup>42</sup>See Waid, "Building," for a discussion of Wharton's manuscript revisions to include a gesture toward anti-Semitism in what is arguably, in the end, a positive portrait of a socially climbing, blonde Jewish man, the roseate Rosedale. Crossing out the descriptive phrase the "new man" (a valorized term in the history and mythos of the U.S.), Wharton replaced it with a phrase alluding to Rosedale as the "little Jew."

particular film: the famed 1923 production of Wilde's *Salomé*, nominally directed by Charles Bryant who is said to have taken his direction from Alla Nazimov (the leading lady who was his openly lesbian wife) and Natacha Rambova (author of the screen play and in charge of art direction and costumes who was Rudolf Valentino's wife). Rumored to have had an all gay cast in homage to Wilde, this silent film features characters who are clearly in drag. Known for its famously stylized and highly artificial sets in black and white, this silent film was clearly staged as an homage to Beardsley's well-known illustrations of Wilde's one act play. Indeed, the words of Wilde's *Salomé* (first composed in French) are much less shocking than Beardsley's engravings. Beardsley's stylized line drawings convey a decadence that is meant to shock conventional viewers. While female navels and nipples (fantastically articulated as eyes) are extraordinary, undraped genitals in the drawings for *Salomé* are male and ordinary. His illustrations may depict characters with breasts, but even in the presence of these breasts, the genitals of all the undraped figures are articulated as male.

The film's star, the well-known political actress Alla Nazimov, celebrated for her starring roles in 1920s films based on Ibsen's feminist plays, would have come to Wharton's attention as early as 1905 when she first arrived in the United States as part of a Russian troupe, playing the lead in "The Chosen People." A widely publicized political event in the New York of 1905 (Emma Goldman attended every performance and her Long Island collective actually took the actors in when they became stranded), "The Chosen People" was written and performed in Russia, London, and the United States in an effort to expose the ongoing anti-Semitism of the pogroms taking place in Russia and along her borders in eastern Europe. While Wharton did not see the film,<sup>43</sup> she, like Faulkner (who owned a copy of the Beardsley illustrated *Salomé*), would have been concerned with the modernist sets of *Salomé*, which were designed in black and white to create the first completely faux world made expressly for filming indoors. Wharton's embellished plot line, introducing a Jewish film mogul scouting for film called "Herodias" (Salomé's mother), points directly to this film as the source for Wharton's idea of the stark cubist interiors designed by a "cubist decorator." Most notably, the *boudoir* of the aspiring Salomé of *Twilight Sleep* is newly decorated in all black. The focal point of this black room is a well-lighted bowl where—in a critique that is far from subtle—fish swim madly toward what is surmised as their sleepless death from constant exposure.

In a characteristically specific reference, Wharton's allusion in *Twilight Sleep* to the "cubist decorator[s]" decision to cover up a window that frames what to him is an unacceptably picturesque sight of the "Brooklyn Bridge and

<sup>43</sup>Wharton, who denied ever having seen a film (she is known to have seen at least one), definitely did not see *Salomé*. However, *Salomé*, an event in the history of avant-garde aesthetics and a cult film even prior to its debut, would have been known by Wharton and, very likely, seen by Faulkner. While this argument does not depend on Faulkner having seen the film, the likelihood that he did is increased exponentially by the film's connection to Beardsley. See Lind for a detailed discussion of Faulkner's obsession with Beardsley, to whom he alludes in three of his novels. It is significant that Faulkner owned a Beardsley illustrated edition of Wilde's *Salomé*, a fact that is clearly visible in Faulkner's early drawings, in particular his hand drawn and lettered play *The Marionettes* (1920).



**Fig. 2.** *Nocturne in Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge*, James McNeil Whistler. © 2007 by the Tate Gallery, London.

the East River," is designed to replace the framed view of the composition recognizable as that of a particular painting: Whistler's much admired, twilight portrayal called *Nocturne in Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* [Fig. 2]. The "cubist decorator[s]" replacement for this offensively painterly actual view, his canvas cum window treatment, is construed through the urban geometry of man-made shapes, albeit those in a painting. This painting on canvas forms a geometric palimpsest meant not just to replace, but also to obscure the scenes of natural beauty that unavoidably border islanded cities such as Manhattan. In its most obvious function, this canvas in *Twilight Sleep* is meant to replace a view that looks like a painting. However, as this art work and its geometric aesthetic are incorporated into Darl's pictorial vision, Wharton's "geometric shape[s]" have been transmogrified into the frames within frames that in their stillness picture the prelude to the dénouement of *As I Lay Dying*: "Darl's cubist painting" (to use Branch's apt term) is still the painting before the painting.

In Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the photographic fixity of "Darl's cubist painting," composed of "geometric representations" (Wharton, *Twilight* 89) within shapes, pictures the scene before this artist's incendiary act, creating a dynamic and moving conflagration. The cinematic barn-burning, where sparks engender other sparks, constitutes a theatrically staged moving picture. Earlier, Darl has seen abstract paintings as the accretion of wood "[u]pon the dark ground [where] the chips look like random smears of soft pale paint on a black canvas" (75). This abstract painting is positioned in direct contrast to the evocatively framed vision of the visage of Addie Bundren, described by the absent Darl as "a composite picture of all time" (48). Going beyond the stasis of color on canvas, Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold* is an action painting with a verbal participle in the second half of its title. "The Falling Rocket" alludes to the dynamically rising gold that depicts movement in this fiery scene across a nocturnal sky, a rising of color that precedes and joins with the "falling." In Darl's vision of the geometrically boxed and darkening shapes that evocatively frame and reframe Addie's coffin, the mother's box atop the wooden "sawhorses" is seen as being "like a cubistic bug." The fire, with its rising and falling sparks, animates the inanimate as the flat planes of the cubist-like canvas stage the animacy of the inanimate. Here, the night's stillness gives way to the curtaining flames that frame the scene of this literally spectacular—theatrical as well as cinematic—disaster.

To his intellectual credit, the author of *As I Lay Dying* realized the explosive possibilities of what might be meant by Wharton's "cubist decorator[s]" condescending reference to "A Whistler nocturne!" As the "red glare" (*AILD* 221) ricochets in from the lyrics of the "Star Spangled Banner" to insist on the presence of "The Falling Rocket," Whistler's infamous painting inspired Faulkner's famous night piece, the barn-burning of *As I Lay Dying*. This fire links *As I Lay Dying* (as well as the obsessive return to culminations in scenes of fire in novels and short stories by William Faulkner) to the incendiary confrontation made public by Whistler and Ruskin, as they took the argument about whether art must be rep-

representational out of the studio and into the courtroom. Faulkner's visiting and revisiting the story of "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (as Walter Benjamin clearly understood in his 1936 essay of the same name) is also a crisis in the aesthetics of a realism that has become diminished by the ostensible accomplishments and claims framed by the terrifying capacity for reproduction found in the mocking mirror, the reflective lens of photography.

As sparks fly up from the central conflagration to light the black night in *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner's youngest Bundren could be describing the visual continuity between the Whistlerian stars that scatter across the painter's more genteel nocturnes, as well as Whistler's painting of rising sparks in "The Falling Rocket." As Vardaman observes, "red went swirling up . . . swirling up in little red pieces, against the sky and the stars so that the stars moved backward" (223). Jewel, who springs out "like a flat figure cut leanly from tin against an abrupt and soundless explosion" (218), enters the tableau of this Whistler painting more fully as he fights with Gillespie "like two figures in a Greek frieze, isolated out of all reality by the red glare" (221). Reversing Wharton's sequence, Darl's vision of the stylized geometrical shapes within shapes both constructs and frames the named "cubist" aesthetic at its center, before being replaced by the wildest of "Whistler nocturne[s]."

What is finally most disturbing about this pointedly ejaculatory scene in *As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner's determination that this will be the sign of a racialized narrative. This fire-marked and explosive scene joins Addie Bundren's illegitimate and blackened son Jewel to the illegitimate and long racially indeterminate (but increasingly blackened) son Joe Christmas of *Light in August* (1932). As Joe Christmas is carved with a knife into a legible body, this scene of sacrifice in diction and theme alludes directly to Whistler's "Falling Rocket." At the same time, this night scene calls attention to the pictorial connection that would link these black-lit scenes of male sacrifice in *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* even if Whistler had never flung his infamous "pot of paint." Joe Christmas is seen as "a rising rocket" in the moment of his castration: "the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (465). Significantly, the opening chapter of *Light in August* closes under the sign of a fire, "a tall yellow column" (30) of smoke that has the stature of a monument. Joe Christmas, "his raised and armed and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts . . . resembled a vengeful and furious god pronouncing a doom" (463), is carved in the kitchen.<sup>44</sup> The reaper named Grimm, who "fling[s] . . . the bloody butcher knife," proclaims, "'Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell'" (464). While Christmas is seen "with his eyes open

<sup>44</sup>Twentieth-century forensics exposes a gendered pattern: women murder with knives in the kitchen and men with guns in the bedroom. While Percy Grimm begins by firing a gun, he ends by assuming the female position by castrating Joe with a knife in a kitchen. Earlier, Joanna who has tried to kill Joe with a gun in the bedroom has tried to assume the male position with a weapon that fails to fire. Instead, Joe kills Joanna with a razor, a racially encoded form of the knife, in the bedroom. See Perkins for an account of murdering with razors as a racially marked act in Faulkner's fiction.

empty of everything save consciousness," his eyes are "peaceful, unfathomable and unbearable," and the "unbearable" is indeed borne as the castration of Joe Christmas leads to an explosive apotheosis:

Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out of the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. (465)

Arguably, the imagery that paints Joe Christmas into racial fixity is not the desperately invoked "rising tide" of blackness—the imagery of the sewer of soiling sexuality defined through a female and black liquidity—but rather the rocketing of his released "black blood" that becomes the scene of seeing that can never be erased. Joined by more than the conflagration of "engender[ing] . . . sparks" (*AILD* 222) and the "glare and glitter" (*LA* 463), "the rush of sparks from a rising [and falling] rocket" (464, 465) that describes Whistler's "Falling Rocket," these ejaculatory dénouements expose the profound connection between the illegitimate and ultimately emasculated sons in *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*. Addie's Jewel and Joanna's Joe are colored by their rocketing rises that result in the physical blackening of flesh and blood (respectively) as they are burned and cut (respectively) to become racialized bodies. In their falls from hypermasculinity, Jewel and Joe become blackened and domesticated—filially mired in the maternal fold.

### Blackened Sons and the Sisterhood of Burning Mothers

Joe, named for the most famous illegitimate father in the New Testament, in his much discussed last name, "Christmas," recalls that father's unbegotten son's birthday. By placing this sacrificial son as Joanna's Joe, I want to call attention to what I see as Joanna Burden's fatal act of maternity in *Light in August*, as she, in the fact and form of her death, finally becomes the mother who births Joe into blackness. The childless Joanna has long served as a matriarch, or community mother, for the obscured black poor who have literally carved paths to her door. If Joe is the razor-wielding midwife who cuts his ties to Joanna Burden's racially and sexually indeterminate body, he has in the same act carved Joanna into a female body that the white community can recognize as a corpse of "Southern [white] womanhood." Before presenting what I will argue is Faulkner's fire-forged crucible of sisterhood that joins Joanna Burden and Addie Bundren to Faulkner's lesser known character of a slave mother, I want to consider the sistering of Joanna and Joe that makes each of their last efforts at parturition understandable as violent and, ultimately, race-defining acts. In their strangely intersecting life-cycles, Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas pass through a "sister stage" that threatens to drown them both in the black liquidity of bodily fusion:

[H]e stayed, watching the two creatures that struggled in the one body like two moon-  
gleamed shapes struggling drowning in alternate throes upon the surface of the thick

black pool. . . . [One] impervious and impregnable . . . the other . . . in furious denial of that impregnability strove to drown in the black abyss of its own creating. . . . Now and then they would come to the black surface, locked like sisters. (260-61)<sup>45</sup>

This violently fluid eroticism places the sexually indeterminate Joanna as a morphological female in relation to Joe as well as to herself. Here, in "the thick black pool . . . the black abyss," "the two creatures" with their "one body . . . come to the black surface," Joe assumes the position of a blackened and tabooed sexual sister to Joanna. Striking erotic attitudes that are likened to a "Beardsley of the time of Petronius," Joanna is like the Medusa "with her wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles."<sup>46</sup> With monstrous *politesse*, she breathes out the repeated word that is meant to color her tabooed passion: "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (260).

By specifying "the time of Petronius" (Petronius was Nero's *arbiter elegantiae*, the official advisor in matters of style and luxury for the most excessive reign in the history of the Roman Empire), the narrative imagines a stylized sexual aesthetic that would go beyond that of Beardsley's most decadent and genitally-excessive drawings. Indeed, Rambova's script and costume designs for the influential film version drew from an even more shocking Beardsley drawing that might be said to define Greco-Roman decadence rather than the more mannered and eroticized Orientalism of Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's Judeo-Roman drama. The black pygmy-like characters whose headdresses allow them to appear initially as potted plants are modeled on Beardsley's drawing *The Laconian Ambassador*, in which a small man from Sparta sports an exposed penis that competes in size with the rest of his body [Fig. 3].<sup>47</sup> His reference to "Petronius" suggests a wider knowledge of Beardsley, which would have allowed Faulkner of all viewers to parse the visually rendered racial nuances of the film. And, as the theatrical poses of his sexually indeterminate Joanna Burden as the Medusa only begin to suggest, Faulkner drew inspiration from Beardsley's illustrations drawn for Oscar Wilde's one act play *Salomé*. However, Faulkner's depiction of this erotic baptism is deeper and becomes even more racially marked as he incorporated what was for him the most influential drawing in determining the imagery of *Light in August*. This Beardsley drawing showing the snake-like locks of John the Baptist depicts the prophet's head held high by the hair-pocked arm of a figure the stage directions name as "*the Executioner*." Extending upward from a black pool that is named as a "*cistern*,"<sup>48</sup> this "huge black" arm is grotesque because it is a visually ambiguous

<sup>45</sup>For a discussion of the vacillating pronouns that make this a passage not only about Joanna, but also Joe, see Doyle.

<sup>46</sup>See Polk for the most complete account of Faulkner's use of the Medusa figure, which he argues is used most often in relation to older women.

<sup>47</sup>The small man, representing Lacedonia whose dominating city was the bellicose Sparta, negotiates a settlement with the taller Athenians who seek peace in Aristophanes' play because of a successful sex strike mounted by the women of Athens.

<sup>48</sup>Faulkner's image of struggling sisters rising to the surface of a suggestively black pool may allude to Beardsley's illustration of what Wilde's play explicitly calls a "*cistern*" on several levels. Playing on the old and misogynistic pun that connects female bodies to vessels of filth, the homonyms "*cistern*" and "*sistern*" are based on a folk neologism that invents a feminine word that parallels "brethren."

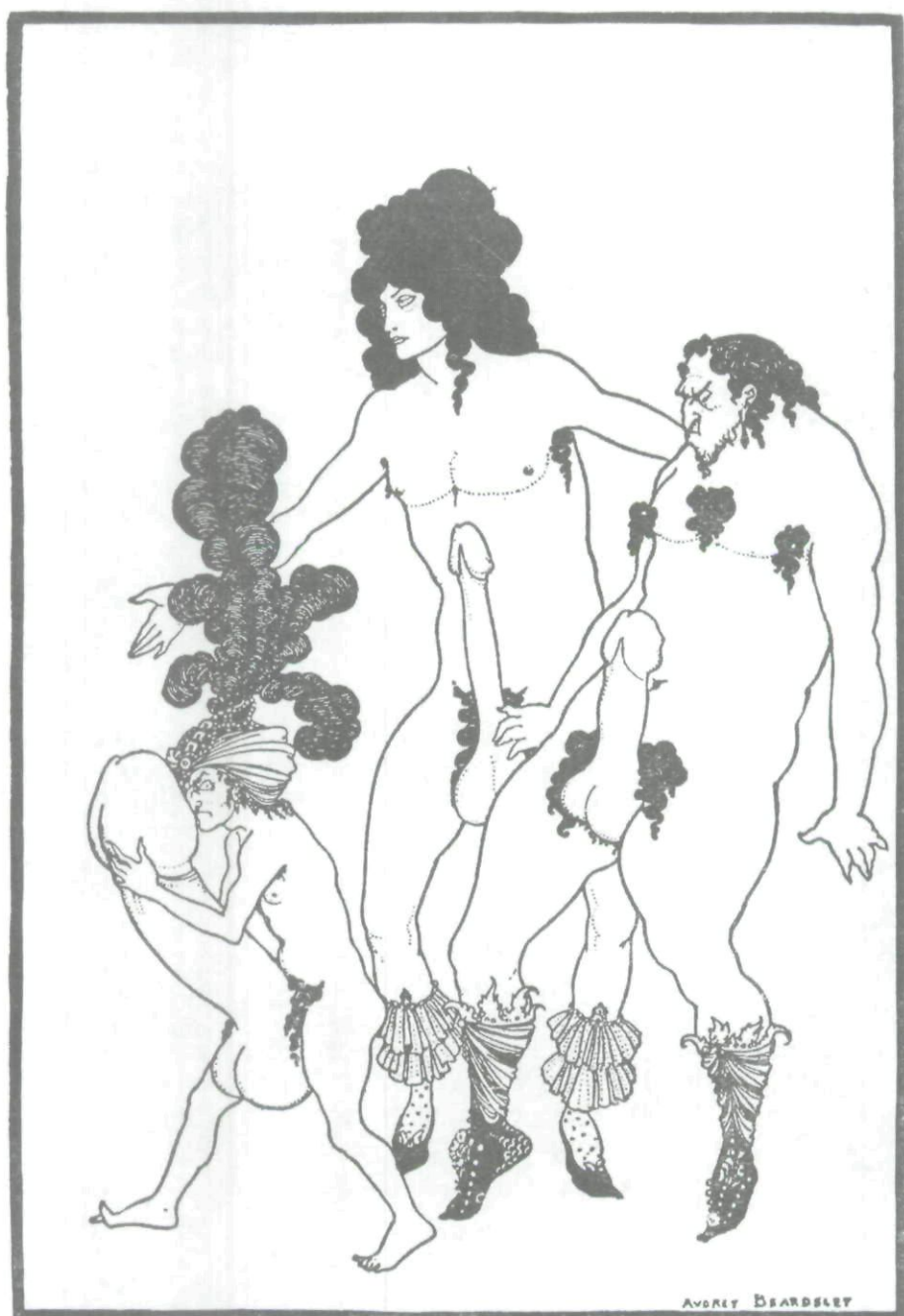
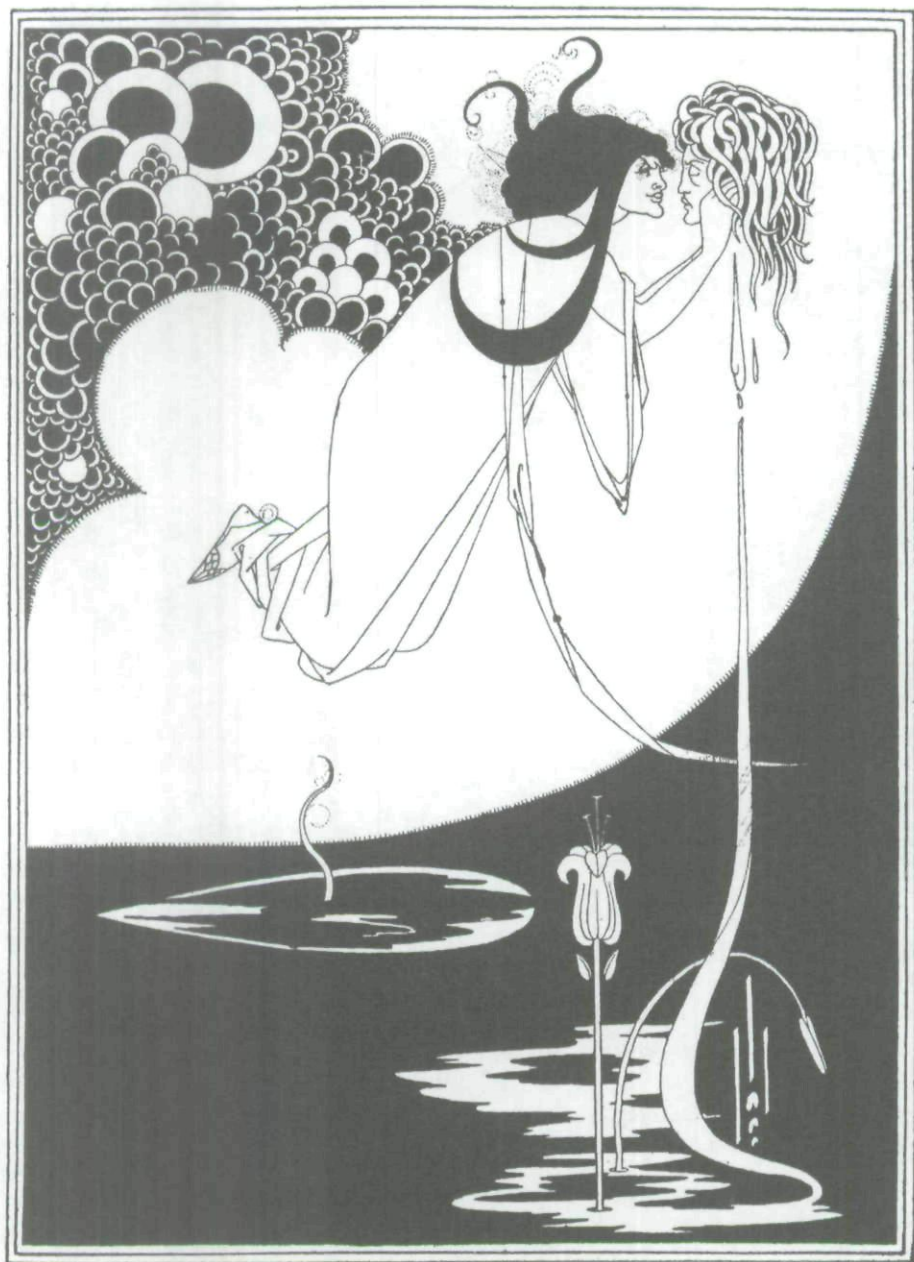


Fig. 3. *The Laconian Ambassador*,  
Aubrey Beardsley. Illustration for Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. Courtesy the Davidson  
Library Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.



Fig. 4. *The Dancer's Reward*,  
Aubrey Beardsley. Illustration for Wilde's *Salomé*. Courtesy the Davidson  
Library Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.



**Fig. 5.** *The Climax*,  
Aubrey Beardsley. Illustration for Wilde's *Salomé*. Courtesy the Davidson  
Library Special Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

haunch that rises from the black liquidity, a visually dismembered body part holding a dismembered part of a body [Fig. 4].<sup>49</sup> In Beardsley's two illustrations that depict the severed head of John the Baptist, the story of the Medusa is told not just in the violent fact of the dismembered head, but also in the serpentine form of this head's wild locks [Fig. 5].<sup>50</sup> Joanna Burden is Faulkner's wild-haired Medusa of *Light in August*, and the "parchmentcoloured" man who kills her by nearly cutting off her head is cast in the role of Wilde's "Executioner." However, what appears to have been most blackening in this narrative of sexual seduction and dismemberment is the reappearing visual element of the cistern: the fecal and fatal liquidity that haunts *Light in August* in the allusions to the racialized "black tide creeping up his [Joe's] legs" (LA 339).

Imagining that she is pregnant when her menstrual periods stop, the menopausal Joanna tries to seize parental authority by another route. As Joanna proposes that Joe become what he calls "a nigger lawyer," Joanna Burden assumes the role of a cultural father who with her "cap-and-ball revolver" speaks for God. Joanna has taken on a position of masculine authority, proposing a design that depends on his [Joe's] public declaration of a racial identity that will position him socially as what was then known as a "race man."<sup>51</sup> Whether one accepts this life-cycle narrative as coming into play or not is less important than the gender and racial ramifications in scenes where misfired and unfired guns give way to razors and knives that inscribe bodies,<sup>52</sup> sculpting them into racial legibility through the very form of their violent deaths. The "yellow" flume of the fire meant to bury the "race mother" and her house (like the burning barn for Jewel and his mother's boxed and rotting body) forges Joe Christmas's identity as a black man. Hope seems to spring eternal as he tears at Joanna's clothes and body, driven by the vain premise that he can violate her into a state of morphological or social womanhood, declaring somewhat futilely on one occasion as he consciously tries to rape a woman who (through her own self-possession) cannot be raped: "At least I have made a woman of her at last" (236). In their final meeting, Joanna Burden stands briefly as the failed and castrated father before she passes into the stage of being a mother. Emasculated by her severed head, she waxes by waning maternal in the feminizing light of what have previously been seen as "moongleamed shapes": Joanna Burden dies as she births Joe into blackness by becoming the socially recognized and iconic figure of the violated white woman. Having ritually lynched (cutting and burning) a figure of indeterminate sex, Joe Christmas has at last turned Joanna Burden into a calculable woman by dividing her

<sup>49</sup>As "[a] huge black arm, the arm of the Executioner, comes forth from the cistern," the head of John the Baptist ("Iokanaan") is served to Salomé on a "silver shield" (Wilde 72).

<sup>50</sup>Salomé holds the head of John the Baptist ("Iokanaan") as she rises above the black cistern.

<sup>51</sup>See DuBois for his proposal of the necessity of the "race man." This idea of racial uplift is pendant on the dedication of an educated elite, the "talented tenth," that could bring the economically and socially depressed African American community up from their lowly positions determined by prejudice and poverty.

<sup>52</sup>Nelson sees Joe and Joanna's sexual relationship in its three stages, noting that the middle one where they meet in bed constitutes a type of marriage. While many have discussed the way that the deaths of Joe and Joanna determine their once indeterminate racial and sexual identities, Nelson makes the point that death itself makes these conversions final.

masculine head from her now sexed and fixedly feminized body, sculpting her into a literalization of the mind/body split.<sup>53</sup> This cleaving of sexual and racial components includes all of the ritual elements of what Wilbur J. Cash, writing in 1941, would identify as the Southern "rape complex."<sup>54</sup> Placed racially by his use of a razor, Joe has positioned himself to be carved into a fixed racial identity by Faulkner's proto-Nazi's<sup>55</sup> knife. This act of castration completes the ritual of lynching as both Joe and Joanna form and perform roles in a formulaic *tableau morte*. This *tableau* fixes Joe Christmas as black and the source of "black blood," while Joanna Burden is put in the position that she has never held in her life as she, dead, becomes the deadly instrument or, more precisely, fatal excuse for violence: the vessel of Southern white womanhood.<sup>56</sup>

Described as inhabiting the center of a wheel as paths "like spokes" converge on her house, Joanna Burden initially appears as a childless Addie Bundren. Yet, despite her biological childlessness, Joanna Burden, who has replaced her now dead father as a dispenser of advice and succor to the blacks that live in the deep woods around her house, occupies a more central position than Addie Bundren: Joanna is the axel while "Addie Bundren is the rim" (*AILD* 108). In his labor-based analysis of the Bundrens, Marc Baldwin has identified Addie Bundren as a "slave mother" (Baldwin 193-214), the mother of those who are born to labor in the fields. When the dead Addie speaks in the single section that bears her name, we learn that she has been a "mistress" in two senses of the term: a school mistress who has beaten her charges and the adulterous mistress of a potent evangelist. Addie Bundren, an activist proponent of decomposition, who narrates a largely unspoken diatribe against words, argues that words like spider's spittle are only necessary for those who have never had the experience. "Mother" is one of the words that Addie Bundren does not need to say, and there are certainly other words that remain unsaid, words such as "mistress," "sadist," and "philosopher." Like her textual sister Joanna, Addie cannot be violated sexually (by her husband "Anse in the nights" [172]), but only by the birthing of her first born son, Cash.

Said by Anse to be "slavin" and "aslavin," Addie labors in more than just the breeding that produces laborers for the family's fields. Addie has gone from being a violent school marm to being an outraged, wildly passionate, as well as coldly philosophical, slave mother. Corporeal punishment continued to be common in the early-twentieth-century South in homes as well as schools. Looking forward to "whip[ping] them," Addie establishes a blood relation to her pupils:

<sup>53</sup>For a related discussion that argues Joe's carving of Joanna as an act of art that literalizes his desire for the order found in what philosophers call the mind/body split, see Waid, "Signifying."

<sup>54</sup>See Cash and Smith. While Cash introduces the term, Smith offers the most complete analysis of the "complex" and its ramifications for Southerners' identifications of themselves as white through their perceived threats to that whiteness.

<sup>55</sup>Referring to this military-styled vigilante, Percy Grimm of *Light in August*, Faulkner stirred controversy by publicly announcing that he had invented a Nazi before Adolph Hitler had. Grimm provides a case study in masculine loss as he enforces the color of masculinity and domination.

<sup>56</sup>See Roberts for an explication of this concept. I offer an extensive reading of the practical and deadly functioning of this race-based cultural narrative in the "The Strange Career of the Black Lady" (unpublished paper).

When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever. (170)

The satisfaction with which Addie Bundren recalls the joys of teaching, as she cuts the tender flesh of children to the blood with switches, is only matched by her more heretically rendered description of sin-inspired trysts in the woods with the man of God. Ralph Ellison, writing about Richard Wright, has persuasively argued that the violence in child-rearing practices (resilient in some sectors of American culture) comes from the blood-whippings that were a legacy of slavery. Addie Bundren's own description of her deeds places her as a sadistic slave mistress, a slave mother or breeder of workers for her idle husband, and a Maenadic, man-devouring and son-destroying female who (like Faulkner's Caddie before her and his Joanna afterwards) prefers the woods. As Quentin rails in memory, "Why must you do like nigger women do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods" (SF 59). Unmaternal mothers with a taste for forbidden men, these strong women—Addie Bundren and Joanna Burden—both of whose corpses have violated heads, are catalysts for dramas that unfold after their deaths. Through their deaths, these thwarted women take their tributes, ultimately birthing their chosen sons into blackness.

As *I Lay Dying* and *Light in August* are both (to use Randy Schiff's phrase) "epistemologies of race," and these teaching narratives that call knowledge itself into question, arguably, ignite the series of fictions that lead to Faulkner's epistemology of all epistemologies: *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner wrote a great deal of short fiction during the 1920s and '30s as he was trying to raise income, acts of writing that he described as "whoring" for the magazines. In the 1970s, Faulkner's daughter opened a closet, a door that led to a manuscript that Faulkner appears to have written around 1931. This long unpublished short story, "Evangeline," is a warm-up for *Absalom, Absalom!* that includes a Clytie-figure (a white woman of color) who burns herself alive with the body of her brother—technically her half-brother—Henry Sutpen. In contrast, the Henry Sutpen of "Evangeline" has been hidden in the house for forty years (not the less extravagant four claimed for him in *Absalom, Absalom!*) after killing his virginal sister Judith's husband, Charles Bon. As this Clytie-figure, named Raby, comes to the window of the Sutpen house that she herself has set afire, the mixed-blood Sutpen sister (on the formal level of the sentence as well as through the thematic suggestions of words and images) is a composite portrait of Addie Bundren. Rather than a burning barn, Faulkner's Raby inhabits a falling and lunate house:

Then the whole house seemed to collapse, to fold in upon itself, melting. . . . We stood there and watched the house dissolve and liquefy and rush upward in silent and furious scarlet, licking and leaping among the wild and blazing branches of the cedars, so that, blazing, melting too, against the soft, mildstarred sky of summer they too wildly tossed and swirled. ("Evangeline" 607-08)

Clearly Usher-like, the fall of the house of Sutpen suffers an implosion that is almost identical to that of the castrated body of Joe Christmas: "Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself" (LA 465).

Like Clytie of *Absalom, Absalom!* Raby of Faulkner's "Evangeline" is depicted as rock-firm, long-silent, and seemingly sexless. However, unlike Clytie, Raby is not childless: she herself has been a slave as well as a slave mother. Blood is important in "Evangeline." "Indian," "Sutpen," and "Negroid" become the categories in this story that begins with a local-color painter, who has focused on the heads of people of color, announcing from the outset that there is a difference between the "heads" of "hill niggers" and "those of the lowlands [and] the cities." Raby (said to look as if "she had been nine when God was born") rules a female world of four generations with "[n]ot a man over eleven years old" ("Evangeline" 583).

Emphatically parodic, "Evangeline" displays an obsession with German bloodlines<sup>57</sup> that serves as a prelude to, as well as a critique of, what will become Thomas Sutpen's racially driven obsession to use the last shots in his aging cannon to try to fire or, more precisely, to seed a son in *Absalom, Absalom!*<sup>58</sup> In this "Evangeline," Sutpen's son, the "white" Henry Sutpen is "yellow": his skin is yellow, his waist-length beard is "yellow," his pillow is "yellow," and he is framed, as it were, between "yellow" sheets. This German blood line or breed is so important to the childless Henry that Raby has had to make the final trip in the stead of her invalid brother to acquire what she tells the writer is the "last dog." This series of dogs (seeming to outsiders to proliferate in "Evangeline" "like plums on a bush" [593]) guards the gate to hell or the "closed doors" of secreted Suptens.<sup>59</sup> Springing into the flames, this dog referred to as a "son," along with the "yellow" Henry Sutpen, joins the sexless mother Raby, to become this story's requisite offering of loyal and blackened "son[s]" ("Evangeline" 593) in what the text itself calls a "Holocaust," literally a burnt offering.

Described earlier by the painter as "looking no bigger than one of these half lifesize dolls-of-all-nations in the church bazaar" (585), Raby, seen as a doll by both the painter and the writer, goes through a series of sculptural

<sup>57</sup>This allusion to a "dead dog in a ditch" replicates the exact language used to refer to the animal-like, mountain mother of Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) who is said to be "like a dead dog in a ditch." Faulkner's "Evangeline" is his closest work to Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In fact, many of the Whartonian elements of *Absalom, Absalom!* appear in their most condensed form in "Evangeline." In 1931, the strangeness of having the final pure-bred German dog die only to be immediately and mysteriously replaced by a living dog points to an awareness of a grotesque Aryan-obsession (Sutpen's and Hitler's) mapped onto canine eugenics. This animal genealogy focuses on the whelps of the original German dogs that eventually lead to the last "son" ("Evangeline" 593).

<sup>58</sup>In an act of replication and replacement, the unnamed, but racially determinate German shepherd dog takes the place of the unnamed writer of "Evangeline" (the character based on the door-obsessed narrator of Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and an ironic avatar of the young Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* who has been refused entry at the plantation house). The writer/narrator who has successfully breached the front door may inspire Raby to set the fire. Yet, in this scene of sacrifice, after the loyal animal hurls himself repeatedly against the front door, he circles around, springing (in resonant words that recall "the fall" of "the House of Usher") "into the roaring dissolution of the house" (607).

<sup>59</sup>This sense of the canine gatekeeper has been mapped onto Clytie's role as the watchdog of *Absalom, Absalom!* Called a "Cerberus," Clytie is linked to the the famed hellhound of Hades.

transformations that link her to the works of art worshipped and reviled in the artist-infested world of Faulkner's *Mosquitoes*. The "white" Raby of "Evangeline" has a "torso" that has acquired the flat darkness of a "silhouette" with a face "like a mask in which the eyesockets had been savagely thumbled and the eyes themselves forgotten" (595). Raby is a composite picture of the virginal widow's body whose "mask" face and "thumbled . . . [eye] sockets" are shaped as a clay head by the sculptor, Gordon, (the "only real artist") in *Mosquitoes*. Raby's "hill-country" head, in image after specific image, echoes the framed features of *As I Lay Dying's* Addie Bundren.

Like the famous threshold scenes of *Ethan Frome*, there is the startling appearance of a woman behind a door, or the ghostly face of a woman, whose visage has the power of destruction.<sup>60</sup> In what approaches an exact transcription of the Whartonian formulation that uses the word "Then" in *Ethan Frome* to signal an unexpected barrier (often in Wharton's Gothic tale, the frightening barrier is the face of a woman), Faulkner's unnamed writer of "Evangeline" notes: "Then we saw the woman in the house" (607). After Addie Bundren appears in the window as a "composite picture of all time," we read, "Then the face disappears" (AILED 48). Window after window is consumed in "Evangeline" before Raby, described at times as "white" and also as the color of "pale coffee," specifically said to lack "negroid features," becomes racially fixed as she assumes the pictorial position. Framed as a figure "no bigger than a doll [and] as impervious as an effigy of bronze," Raby is the maternal muse "musing" as she passes through the progenitive stages of art to become "the old negress [in] the window upstairs": "She came through fire and she leaned for a moment in the window, her hands on the burning ledge, looking no bigger than a doll, as impervious as an effigy of bronze, serene, dynamic, musing in the foreground of Holocaust. Then the whole house seemed to collapse, to fold in upon itself" (607). Faulkner's "Evangeline," from the opening frame spoken by the unnamed writer to the series of doors that must be forced open to reveal the interior story, is Faulkner's closest and most detailed rewriting of *Ethan Frome*. This revision, still recognizable in the extravagant narratives that comprise *Absalom, Absalom!* closes with a scene of ashes in which only a metal book, a book-like photograph case that has to have its hinged and locked door forced open, is found:

The picture was intact. . . . Then I came awake, alive. I looked quietly at the face: the smooth, oval, unblemished face, the mouth rich, full, a little loose, the hot, slumbrous, secretive eyes, the inklike hair with its faint but unmistakable wiriness—all the ineradicable and tragic stamp of negro blood. (608)<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>For a discussion of the threshold scenes, see Waid, "Woman." The closest allusion to this repeated motif in *Ethan Frome* of a door whose distant frame is marked by light is in *The Unvanquished* (1938). The boy narrator tripped by a high threshold falls into the dark room to discover the dead body of the elderly Granny. Here, the narrator discovers the beloved maternal figure rather than the feared crone of Wharton's novel.

<sup>61</sup>The passage continues: "The inscription was in French: *A mon mari. Toujours. 12 Aout, 1860*. And I looked again at the doomed passionate face with its thick, surfeit quality of magnolia petals—the face which had unawares destroyed three lives—and I knew now why Charles Bon's guardian had sent him all the way to North Mississippi to attend school, and what to a Henry Sutpen born, created by long time, with what he was and what he believed and thought, would be worse than the marriage and which compounded the bigamy to where the pistol was not only justified, but inescapable" (608-09). This story's melodramatic

Faced with the face that belongs in an old and once highly popular genre, "Evangeline" has introduced Mr. Compson's obsession with the "tragic mulatta" that is so productive because it does not quite obscure the hidden story of race that it is meant to bear and replace in *Absalom, Absalom!* His book buried within the book is central to the paradigm of art that Faulkner inherits from Cather's *The Professor's House* and Wharton's *Ethan Frome*.

Seen once from the window with her hands on the sill as a "composite picture of all time" and once again as she is boxed and hidden in the revised picture of the geometrically framed painting that alludes to "a cubistic bug," the encoffined and multiply framed Addie is the centerpiece of Darl's cubist vision that is being consumed by the "red glare" that lights the dark. The writer in "Evangeline" sees the "redglared pasture" through a nocturnal, Whistler-like vision as the fire "swirling upward like scraps of burning paper, burning out zenithward like inverted shooting stars" ("Evangeline" 607). This view of disaster explicitly recalls Vardaman's astral vision of the barn-burning in *As I Lay Dying* as "the red went swirling up . . . swirling up in little red pieces, against the sky and the stars so that the stars moved backward" (AILD 223).

Analyzing the appearance of the white Sutpen of color, Faulkner's painter "of heads" is obsessed with this unmaternal mother's color. Near the opening of "Evangeline," the painter concludes: "[s]he's pretty near whiter than she is black; a regular empress maybe because she is white." A Sutpen woman with no "negroid features," Raby—the actual slave mother—has become an overseer in "Evangeline;" this white woman of color, referred to as a "negress" in passing, becomes racially fixed in her last portrait where she is, with the authority conferred by the nearness of death, named as a "negress" at the very moment she is pictured "musing in the foreground of Holocaust" ("Evangeline" 607). Whether Raby was conceived before or after Addie Bundren begins rotting in her burdensome liquidity (itself a version of what will be the black pool that threatens to drown Joe and Joanna) cannot be known. And, sequence, in relation to the creation of Addie and Raby as well as with regard to other characters created by Faulkner, is arguably less important than the consequence of connection. These "hill-country" women, Addie and Raby, who are themselves blackened along with their increasingly blackened and racially marked progeny, are textual sisters. Joanna Burden, who bears the weight of her genealogical past and those whom her grandfather has dubbed "black Burden[s]," has been whitened as a result of her color-coded death that births Joe Christmas into blackness. Joined to Addie Bundren through a shared blackening through liquidity and fire, Joanna Burden is also linked to Raby and Addie as all three are forged into blackness by the fires that threaten to or, in the case of Raby, succeed in burning their bodies.

Raby, with her female descendents darkening "like stairs" with each generation, is racially darkened by the fire that burns her father's only son (it remains unknown whether her literally "yellow" and dying brother Henry is

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search for an ending anticipates some of the problems of law and custom, as they are pointedly contorted through the prism of race and the cruel vagaries of love that continue to plague those seeking historically explicable resolutions of the plot in *Absalom, Absalom!*

burned dead or alive), along with the loyal progeny that "Evangeline" identifies specifically as the "son." This "German shepherd," part of a series of parodically pure and certifiably pedigreed sons (shades of the young Thomas Sutpen in the defining episode of his life in *Absalom, Absalom!*), repeatedly flings himself at the blocked front door before leaping into the fire-consumed Sutpen mansion from the back. "Evangeline," composed and rejected for publication in the early 1930s, reveals a racially aware and politically savvy Faulkner. Alongside the casual racist cant in which characters of artists describe the physiognomy of a mixed blood woman as well as the nostalgic and slumberous sexuality seen in the photograph of a "tragic mulatta," "Evangeline" reveals and reviles the racial politics of the rising Reich by offering a canine-based eugenics that reads as a parody of Thomas Sutpen's race-based design. Here, the sacrificial son, denied entry to the front door, is a literal son-of-a-bitch: the pure and pedigreed German shepherd. Indeed, the lesser known Raby of Faulkner's long unpublished "Evangeline" casts heat and light on his novels and the identifiable presence of a dangerous genealogy of maternal muses, all of whom are "musing in the foreground of Holocaust." A harbinger of the sexless and childless "Clytie" of *Absalom, Absalom!* the "negress" Raby of "Evangeline" burns herself alive with Sutpen's son and the fetishized dog who is called a "son." Coloring her dead and fire-shrouded textual sisters, the slave mother of "Evangeline," a muse without mercy, joins Addie Bundren and Joanna Burden to uncover a strong pattern in Faulkner's fiction that pictures burning mothers in tales of art that are framed by blackened sons.

### Dead but Unvanquished: The Idealized Mother of the Locally Colored

The mother of local color in her full deification returned in Faulkner's fiction of the 1930s as he experimented with writing readable prose that was imminently publishable in the magazines. This series, set amid the fire-pocked poverty of the Civil War and told from the perspective of a white boy and his dark (almost) twin, comprises Faulkner's most unabashed foray into the local color tradition: his 1938 story cycle novel, *The Unvanquished*. Addie Bundren is clearly the prototype for this work's murdered community mother, the Granny, who will not, as the preacher's eulogy concludes, "rest in Peace." This white matriarch may be dead, but her work remains undone in a needy and multiracial heaven: "God has already seen to it that there are men women and children, black white yellow or red, waiting for her to tend and worry over" (158). The mother's death has been framed by the sadism of a soiled white masculinity writ large in the murder of this female archetype. Indeed, it is no accident that the "collapsed" body of the mother is framed by messages sent in the sacrificial bodies of "negro men." Burned houses are legion in this work, but the presence of the new and cruel masculinity afoot is introduced by the story of a "negro man" "burned up in his cabin" (149) and confirmed (just before the mother's murder is avenged)

by this same white brigand's grotesque final message whose medium is not just "dirty paper." Here, the boys see "the thing hanging over the road from a limb":

It was an old negro man, with a rim of white hair with his toes pointing down and his head on one side like he was thinking about something quiet. The note was pinned to him. . . . It was a scrap of dirty paper, with big crude printed letters like a child might have made them. . . . (177)

This male writing, men making men through violence (this time a burning and a hanging, which taken together, or even singly, constitute yet another ritualized lynching), contains an added note penned by the mother murderer's even more sadistic artist sidekick. Given Faulkner's developed symbolism of the vaginal eye and watch in *The Sound and the Fury*,<sup>62</sup> this would-be child killer who wears his "pistol on a loop of lace leather . . . stuck down into his pants like a lady's watch" (166) is genitally grotesque. Remembered for his hairy hands, he writes his threats "in a hand [said to be] neat and small and prettier than Granny's" (177).

While both boys are narrators, the black Ringo with Granny's instruction and encouragement emerges as a gifted artist who is able to draw documents and depict signatures that enact what may have been Faulkner's deepest alchemical dream: converting art into mules. In "Vendee," the fifth of the seven stories that comprise *The Unvanquished*, the boys turn from the mother-inspired art of counterfeiting U.S. documents to the new art that must tell the story of the dead mother by dismembering the evil man's hand, performing the writerly castration of the white man who has killed the deified mother and placed her in a frame made of murdered men of color. These boys, who have turned from a government-supported and mother-inspired art to the carving of a man, have learned to write in flesh.

The violent writing of the War is undeniable as the boys are said to unwrap "it from the jagged square of stained faded gray cloth and fasten . . . it to [Granny's grave] board." In addition to "it," the crude "hand" that writes and murders, the boys have left an Old Testament message from Jeremiah that is clear because of what it is missing: the body of "the murdering scoundrel [has been] pegged out on the door . . . like a coon hide, all except the right hand" (184, 186). The returning father has seen the message of his son's manhood inscribed on another man's body, but as the boy avenger of crimes against the "mother" wakens to the return of the patriarch, he comes to himself helplessly from a dream, "trying to say 'Father. Father'" (185). The idiot manchild and figure for the representational artist, Benjy Compson, is castrated for "trying to say" in *The Sound and the Fury* (33). And, "mother," at least trying to say the word "mother" is the struggle that joins Faulkner's madmen artists, Quentin and Darl. Like Darl Bundren of *As I Lay Dying*, the bereft Quentin Compson

<sup>62</sup>For a discussion of Faulkner's incorporation of the pictorial eye and the image of the watch as vaginal representations and objects, see Waid, "Signifying." Among other things, this essay juxtaposes the euphemism for sexual intercourse "being poked in the blind eye" to a gloss of the name "Candace" that defines this moniker as meaning "the one-eyed warrior queen."

of *The Sound and the Fury* rails against absence rather than loss as he imagines more than a word. Speculating on a prior and possibly primordial death, Quentin laments: "If I could say Mother. Mother," later refining his pained supplication: "[I]f I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother" (60, 109).

In the Poe-resonant "collapse" of the house that her body has been, the community mother of *The Unvanquished* is revealed as a female icon who is close kin to Addie Bundren and her Faulknerian descendents of color, in particular the slave mother Raby and the castrated Joe Christmas. Addie Bundren, as she lays dying under the quilt, is "no more than a bundle of rotten sticks," while Granny, seen in the light of "a tallow dip still burning on a wooden box" has collapsed:

[S]he had collapsed, like she had been made out of a lot of thin dry light sticks notched together and braced with cord, and now the cord had broken and all the little sticks had collapsed into a quiet heap on the floor, and someone had spread a clean and faded calico dress over them. (U 153-54)

While her loyal sons (it is not insignificant that both the black and the white boy nurtured at the same black breast call this white matriarch "Granny") seek revenge for the murder of the figure who has been acknowledged as the mother of them all, the white boy becomes a man in the post-War era as he refuses to avenge the murder of his father in the concluding story of *The Unvanquished*. Rejected for publication by the magazines, this last story foregrounds the cryptic advice of the one remaining matriarch, the Civil War Aunt, who convinces the son not to avenge the murder of his war hero father, Colonel Sartoris. Here, Bayard refuses to continue the killing of fathers by refusing to kill the killer of his father.<sup>63</sup> In this act, the son of the South accomplishes cultural closure by refusing the patricidal premise of the Civil War. Instead, during the decade of the 1930s, the white son has chosen to cast his lot with the regional matriarch—dead or alive. Unable to draw, this artist has already carved a man, but his story of art is finally located through the idealized, if not peacefully resting, mother of the earth rather than the blood-soiled<sup>64</sup> and economically wounded ideal of the nation. through the idealized, if not peacefully resting, mother of the earth rather than the blood-soiled and economically wounded ideal of the nation.

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<sup>63</sup>Fowler makes this very point about *The Unvanquished*, expanding outward to include a reading of Faulkner's own family history (*Faulkner* xvi, 25). See Irwin for the most complete discussion of the desire for narrative priority and its complex connections to the killing of the father in Faulkner's fiction. Speculating on *The Unvanquished*, Fowler recalls Faulkner's grandfather's decision not to kill the killer of his father, the model for Colonel Sartoris. By killing the killer of the father, the son is killing the father.

<sup>64</sup>In relation to a novel published in 1938, this phrase also alludes to the German "Blood and Soil" ("Blut und Boden") movement that was fundamental to their racist ideal of a race-based nation.

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