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In a 1957 interview, William Faulkner remembers the light in August that had inspired the title of his sixth novel as a period of “lambent suspension” in the Mississippi summer, “when suddenly there’s a foretaste of fall, it’s cool, there’s a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times.”¹ In the novel itself the “luminous quality” is not so serene or nostalgic as this comment implies. Whatever illumination this suspended moment may have is generated from scenes of great violence, from a burning house and a gushing wound between a man’s legs. It is the fire of sacrifice that provides the unforgiving light of *August*.

Lying at the heart of the Vedic and Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious traditions, sacrifice is meant to restore human community to peaceful internal relations and to intimacy with the divine. In itself an act of gratuitous violence, the sacrificial ritual aims to bypass the ever-increasing violence of retribution by

deflecting it onto an arbitrarily selected victim. In other words, sacrifice responds to human transgression of the divine order not by inflicting punishment on the individual who has transgressed, but by acknowledging the complicity of the entire community, selecting a pure and unblemished animal victim whose blood may atone for the community's transgression precisely because this victim is blameless. Modern (sometimes called postreligious) societies ostensibly have replaced this ritual with a system of justice that seeks to restore peace by maintaining the principle of retribution in an orderly, lawful manner—establishing and protecting the innocence of the community at large by punishing the individual transgressor.

Light in August explores the results of combining the transcendent aims and ritualistic methods of sacrifice with the secular aims of the judicial system. At a time when religion's power to foment violence is painfully apparent and its durability in modernity is clear, we cannot simply dismiss sacrifice as an old story that has lost its ability to signify. In this essay I will be drawing on the work of René Girard and Georges Bataille to help interpret the religious language of sacrifice and confront the very real and enduring pattern of violence and retribution that Faulkner's novel portrays.

Joe Christmas, the central character in *Light in August*, is a scapegoat caught up in the competing aims of the sacrificial mode and the judicial system. Employing an array of unmistakable signposts—including the name Joe Christmas, the mystery surrounding Christmas's birth, and Christmas's death and castration at the hands of racist vigilantes—the narrative seems to set Christmas in the role of a modern-day sacrificial figure. But Christmas is far from Christlike, and his death is not purely sacrificial. His deliberate progression toward the altar of *sacrifice*, concurrent with a movement on behalf of the white hegemonic community to bring him to *justice*, captures him in a moment evacuated of all meaning, filled only with unsignifying blood, which nonetheless becomes the defining moment of the narrative, its empty apotheosis. That the moment of suspension

so characteristic of sacrifice—detached from past and future and offering a glimpse of eternity—should be evacuated of meaning rather than permeated with sanctifying significance is the central tragedy of the novel. Faulkner depicts a society thirsty for private vengeance, recklessly appropriating scraps of both the sacrificial and judicial traditions, and hence unable to realize the peace-restoring aims of either tradition.

Many readers have noticed the exceptional unity of *Light in August* among Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels. Its major characters and plotlines are self-contained; there is a sense of inexorable progression in the story of Joe Christmas that is only gently disrupted by narrative shifts forward and backward in time; it employs somewhat more traditional linear narrative technique than *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom! Absalom!* Yet the dominating mood is that of suspension, as indicated by Faulkner's discussion of the title. Despite the violence of the plotline, Faulkner conveys that sense of "lambent suspension" by dangling Christmas's story between two diverging temporal movements: Gail Hightower's regression into the past and Lena Grove's progression toward the future. As we shall see, sacrifice belongs precisely in this space between. It is, as Bataille writes, "concerned only with the moment."² Whereas justice addresses the sins of the past with an eye toward the future, sacrifice brings the backward-looking action of retribution into conflagration with the forward-looking determination of repentance, making irrelevant all but the present moment wherein sin and salvation are one and the same.

The novel began as a short story entitled "Dark House," about the Reverend Gail Hightower, the ineffectual preacher whose ability to minister to his parish is stunted by his preoccupation with his own family history. He is trapped in the past, in that "single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed ... in the lambent suspension of August into which night is about to fully come."³ Continually reliving the moment of his Confederate grandfather's death in the Civil War, Hightower's

“progress now is still progress, yet it is now indistinguishable from the recent past like the already traversed inches of sand which cling to the turning wheel: (490). Hightower seems to vacillate between impugning and valorizing the battle heroics of his grandfather, and his ambivalence is what keeps him stuck in a form of progress indistinguishable from regress.

In contrast to this backward progress into the past, Lena Grove brings into the novel a forward motion. Her pregnancy at the beginning of the novel, her delivery at the climax of the novel's action, and her persistent hitchhiking forward at the novel's end give a deceptively simple form to the work: one of undeviating progress toward a foregone conclusion. But in fact her movement is suspended in an unrealizable future, just as Hightower's is suspended in the shadowy past. She is portrayed as a body that “gets around” rather than as a human agent who moves purposefully toward any destination. She moves, or, more precisely, is moved, “a fur piece” from Alabama, watching “backrolling now behind her a long monotonous succession of peaceful and undeviating changes from day to dark and dark to day again ... like something moving forever and without progress across an urn” (7). Faulkner frequently invoked Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as a mode of transcending, through the beauty of artistic expression, the cruelty of material existence. The paradox of Faulkner's attitude toward the world where one needs to know only that “beauty is truth, truth beauty” is embodied in Lena, who despite her pregnancy out of wedlock retains an air of simplicity, tranquility, “patient and steadfast fidelity” (6). She is that “still unravish'd bride of quietness ... foster-child of silence and slow time”; and this is precisely why, despite all her forward motion, she goes nowhere. To really live, Faulkner suggests, one must engage with, not transcend, the unbeautiful realities of sex and violence. As Addie Bundren says in *As I Lay Dying*, “People to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.”⁴ Lena has no conception of having sinned; she depends on the kindness of strangers with neither fear nor consciousness of being judged. Her simple purity endures to the

end, as she rejects Byron Bunch's amorous advances with a soft assurance—"Why, Mr. Bunch. Ain't you ashamed. You might have woke the baby, too" (503)—for she is saving for the future, saving herself for a husband she will never find.

This saving for the future is a symptom of capitalist production and acquisitiveness, which precludes living in the present moment—living in what Bataille calls "the intimacy of the divine world ... the profound immanence of all that is."⁵ If Lena is guilty of anything, it is her aspirations of bourgeois respectability, exhibited at an early age on her infrequent trips to town when she would ask her father to stop the wagon so that she could put on the shoes she had saved for this moment and walk, "because she believed that the people who saw her and whom she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too" (3-4). As Carolyn Porter has noted, Faulkner understood that even the poor white farmers from the backwoods of the old South harbored "aspirations to rise."⁶ When they emerged from the hills and towns, Faulkner once told Cowley, "it was not to establish themselves as a middle class but to make themselves barons, too."⁷ Lena Grove is certainly no Sutpen, but her incessant forward motion and her saving for the future are closely aligned with a capitalist progression from an agrarian economy to an economy of labor and production. Excessive production, in Bataille's view, is inherent to the world and human nature; the problem is how to *spend* this surplus rather than accumulate and hoard for the future, and this is what Lena cannot or will not do.

To spend extravagantly, not to invest, not to purchase, but to spend everything at once, to completely consume the surplus, is to sacrifice. "Sacrifice is the antithesis of production," Bataille writes, "which is accomplished with a view to the future; [sacrifice] is consumption that is concerned only with the moment."⁸ This exclusive focus on the present moment characterizes Joe Christmas, whose absolute *presence* holds in tension the forward- and backward-thrusting temporal narratives of Lena and Hightower. Upon his first appearance in the novel, Christmas appears to have "something definitely rootless about

him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home" (31). Of course we soon learn that he is not without a complicated personal history, but what is most remarkable about Christmas at first sight is the way his entire history is collapsed in the present moment. His birth, childhood, adolescence, manhood, and death are always immanent, intimately present. Even his name, "which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is," Byron Bunch thinks, seems to be "somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time. ... [I]t was as though there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle" (33). David Jarraway is right to envision Christmas as Janus-faced, with one face "continually turned back upon the maternal, the sphere of loss, separation, abjection," and another face that "looks to the future rather than the past, a side of him that *can* perceive an identity for himself as a kind of reward in heaven for having withstood so many of the torments of hell"⁹—but what I want to emphasize about these two faces is their congruence, their simultaneity, the way they turn to look at each other. Suspended between the mystery of his birth and the certainty of his death, Christmas's task as a character is to negotiate for himself an identity and a place in the social order by taking on the role of the sacrificial victim, a role that is concerned only with the moment. Were the character to actually fulfill such a function he would atone for the violence of miscegenation, which extends both backward and forward in time, as Faulkner conceives it. It is a violence rooted in the history of white male slave owners raping their black female slaves, which in the post-Reconstruction years yields to the fear of imminent retribution in the form of black men raping white women.

The first images of Christmas, the first impression he makes on Byron Bunch and the other men at the sawmill, offer an early clue as to why he cannot fulfill such a redemptive function.

Scowling contemptuously and constantly smoking, Christmas provokes “a sort of baffled outrage” among his coworkers (32). The foreman wants to obliterate this “insufferable” expression by running Christmas through the planer; but in fact Christmas himself is already presenting the image of his own violent consumption. Tobacco smoking is a type of sacrifice—a consumption stripped of all utility. The smoker consumes without being nourished. In Levi-Strauss’s analysis, tobacco smoking is emblematic of the far end of civilization, or differentiation from nature, for tobacco is not merely cooked but utterly *spent*—actually burned to ashes—in the process of consumption.¹⁰

Like sacrifice, the mere cooking of food is an acknowledgment of a disjunction between human life and the natural world—something short of divine immanence. The repugnance aroused by the flavor, scent, and texture of raw meat reminds us that we can incorporate the flesh of other living creatures only by a process of mediation. By cooking vegetables that we have cultivated in our gardens and farms, we indicate that at times we prefer the process of mediation even when it is not physically necessary. Smoking the cultivated crop of tobacco is an elaborately contrived method of ingesting a foreign substance that is at once repugnant and delectable. Today we know that smoking is a self-destructive act, a consumption of oneself. So when Byron Bunch surmises from Christmas’s oven-baked complexion, his gaunt, dead-colored flesh, and his lack of a lunch-pail that Christmas has not eaten but has “lived on cigarettes for two or three days now” (35), the reader might see Christmas as a burnt offering. Yet rather than fulfilling the sacrificial function of restoring intimacy, restoring what Bataille calls “the profound immanence of all that is,” Christmas’s posturing here is self-alienating. He rejects both human relationships and his place in the material world when he rejects Byron’s graciously offered lunch-pail: “I ain’t hungry. Keep your muck” (35). Christmas habitually refuses food (often in favor of cigarettes), especially when it is offered him with genuine benevolence—notably from Mrs. McEachern and Joanna Burden.

Sharing a meal is perhaps the most common and undemanding of social acts, but Christmas prefers to eat alone or not at all. Moreover, the necessity of eating is one of the most basic facts of bodily existence, but Christmas refuses food even when he is ravenously hungry. He is a character so defined by a sense of opposition as to be incapable of relating in any humane way to other people or to the natural world.

This aspect of the failure of the sacrificial mode is repeated in Ike McCaslin's renunciation of his land inheritance in *Go Down Moses*. Whereas the purpose of sacrifice is to restore the immanence of human, natural, and divine worlds, Ike's "gesture of relinquishment" is really "an attempt to evade both the guilt of his forefathers and his own responsibilities," as Olga Vickery has persuasively argued. "Thus, while his daily life is a humble imitation of Christ's, it also denies the spirit of Christ who did not hesitate to share in the life of men, to accept guilt, and to suffer immolation. In rejecting sin, Isaac also rejects humanity."¹¹ Although Vickery does not use the terminology of sacrifice in her discussion of *Light in August*, she calls attention to the obstruction of sacrifice's unifying efficacy by contrasting Christmas's repeated refusal of food with Lena's eager acceptance of every morsel offered her, an acceptance that "invariably fosters a more personal, human relationship with the giver."¹² If the sacrificial mode fails to foster such relationships and restore the community to intimacy, at least part of the blame must fall on the victim whose offer of himself is a gesture of antisocial masochism. The sacrificial ritual demands precise qualifications from its victim, qualifications that Christmas fails to meet.

As Hubert and Mauss have shown, the sacrificial ritual bears remarkable formal and functional consistencies in the Vedic, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman traditions. The basic scheme of sacrifice shared by all these traditions involves (1) the sanctification of the object of sacrifice before it is slain and offered on the altar, (2) the establishment of identification between the "sacrifier" (the person who slays the victim) and the

sacrificed (hence the sanctification, even the deification, of the sacrificer), and (3) the release of the sanctified spirit from the material world, represented by the immolation of the victim.¹³ Usually a sheep, a goat, or a bull, the sacrifice is to be selected from the flock (not a wild animal), preferably a male, and without blemish. The victim itself is “relatively indifferent,” as René Girard expresses it. Chosen not because it carries the taint of guilt but precisely because it is without blemish, the animal is slaughtered on the altar. In the ancient Judaic sacrifice, the priest (who is not the sacrificer) then takes the blood and the internal organs of the animal and “turn[s] it into smoke” on the altar; the rest of the animal is taken outside and burned on the ash pile. The sacrifices ordained in the Hebrew scriptures are substitutionary sacrifices: they make atonement for (literally, “put a cover over”) the sin of the worshipers (Leviticus 1–7). Their efficacy lies in the victim’s innocence: the violence of retribution is deflected upon this innocent victim, thereby protecting the human community from the spread of measureless, increasing reciprocal violence.

In Girard’s analysis, the real violence that is appeased by sacrifice is an internal violence, the thirst for vengeance generated within the human community, rather than any divine retribution. Girard’s paradoxical project, like Bataille’s, is to take religion seriously and appreciate the efficacy of its rituals for a generation that has removed God from the picture: “*Religion*, in its broadest sense . . . , must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative measures against his own violence.”¹⁴ This humanist analysis of religion makes a case for the vitality of ritual even in an age of radical skepticism. The Christian, New Testament understanding of sacrifice, according to which Christ appeases once and for all the wrath of God upon sinful humanity, needs to be revised only in part: it is not the wrath of God but the wrath of a human community deprived of divine immanence that must be appeased. Christ’s self-sacrifice replaces the repetitious violence of animal sacrifices, for Christ has not just covered over but

actually removed by taking on himself the sins of the world (see Hebrews 9–10). His sacrifice of himself is both foreordained and a voluntary act, a fate necessitated by sin to which he willingly submits. It is to this volitional self-sacrifice of Christ that Joe Christmas's actions must be compared; but the sacrificial mode fails to stem the flood of violence in Christmas's case because the social order that he attempts to restore to intimacy operates within a fatally conflicted matrix of legal-judicial and religious-sacrificial systems. Whereas Girard seeks to rehabilitate religious symbology as a means of stemming (or at least understanding) violence in a postreligious world, Faulkner appears deeply skeptical of any admixture of religion and secular justice.

The judicial system regulates rather than suppresses violence by confining it within an economy of crime and punishment: for every crime there is a punishment, administered by a corps of legal officers who specialize in just such an administration. Girard describes the judicial system as a replacement for sacrifice that is even more dependent than the religious ritual on the principle of concealment. When a judicial system functions most efficiently, no one notices that it involves retribution, for retribution has been "forged into a principle of abstract justice that all men are obliged to uphold and respect."¹⁵ Private vengeance—that process of interminable revenge embodied in gang and tribal warfare—is "the exclusive property of well-policed societies," in Girard's ironic estimation. One need only consider the burgeoning ranks of today's American prison industry, an industry that has more than quadrupled in size over the past twenty years, to see that public vengeance is less a containment than a concealment of violence.¹⁶ In Faulkner's day, the problem of lynching provided ample evidence that the principle of vengeance, no matter how carefully concealed within the judicial system, cannot be contained by any legal structure.

In 1926, Congress passed a bill requiring states to protect citizens from "mobs or riotous assemblages." At the bill's hearing, representative William McKinley pleaded on the bill's behalf, decrying lynching as "a form of incipient and sporadic

insurrection against the forms of law and organized government and civilized methods by which mobs of lawless persons execute the vengeance of death upon anyone who may for any cause incur the mob's displeasure."¹⁷ The problem McKinley identifies is not so much that "the vengeance of death" is executed, but that it is executed in a lawless eruption beyond the bounds of the judicial system. For the judicial system to work properly, the principle of vengeance must remain "the exclusive property" of the court, the police, and the prison. But violence has a way of exceeding legal boundaries, and when in such an eruption civilians seek to perform the function the judicial system reserves for itself, the convergence of ritualistic, private, and public violence is nothing short of grotesque.

Faulkner dramatizes this grotesque convergence in the scenes leading up to and depicting the death of Joe Christmas. When Byron Bunch arrives at the courthouse where the sheriff and the Grand Jury are conferring over the recently captured Joe Christmas, he finds a collection of men milling about on the terrace. The townsmen, "clerks and young lawyers and even merchants ... had a generally identical authoritative air, like policemen in disguise and not especially caring if the disguise hid the policeman or not"; while the countrymen move "with almost the air of monks in a cloister" (416-17). Here are the perfect makings for a lynch mob: townsmen who are at once civilians and police, ready to enact a retribution that is both private vengeance and public justice; and countrymen who are at once civilians and clergy, ready to enact a retribution that is both private vengeance and ritualistic sacrifice. While the progression from religion to judicial system is shown here in alliance with the progression from agrarian to industrialized society, what is common to both town and country is the wish for private vengeance. While none of them has a direct hand in the killing (which is not simply or exactly a lynching), this amorphous group of police-clergy-town-and-country-men contributes to the overdetermination of Christmas's death that makes it both meaningless and profound.

Percy Grimm takes on the role of both the townsmen and the countrymen as he becomes executioner and sacrificer of Christmas. A captain in the state national guard, Grimm defends the honor of his country and his race with “a sublime and implicit faith,” insisting to the legion commander that “We got to preserve order. ... We must let the law take its course. The law, the nation. It is the right of no civilian to sentence a man to death. And we, the soldiers in Jefferson, are the ones to see to that” (451-52). His keenest desire is to act as a soldier, to kill Christmas for the good of the nation and the law, to give a name to his dimly apprehended violent impulses. “.....[O]rder.....course of justice.....” he stammers (453)—the long ellipses between these words making visible their indeterminacy, the room such concepts leave to be filled by judges, lawyers, vigilantes, and lynch mobs alike. But when both the legion commander and the sheriff forbid Grimm any official function, he becomes not a civilian but an “indefatigable” force, “irresistible and prophetlike” (453). Faulkner seems careful to avoid Christian terminology in describing Grimm as moved by “the Player ... Juggernaut or Fate,” perhaps to heighten the sense that the ritual being acted out is an ancient and universal rite—not merely a repetition of the crucifixion.¹⁸ What is at stake here, as Grimm’s castration of Christmas makes plain, is the purification of sexuality by means of retribution.

Christmas’s death is properly read as a sacrifice because it depends on the “mechanism of reciprocal violence,” which Girard finds at the heart of the sacrificial ritual. As Eric Sundquist has shown, what feeds the rage of the lynch mob is the fear of retribution: specifically, the fear that the violence of rape perpetrated by white masters upon black women during slavery will be returned upon the white community in the postbellum years in the form of black freedmen raping white women. Hence, the miscegenation of the races will be made complete, for black blood will now be patrilineal as well as matrilineal. Joe Christmas is the very embodiment of this fear: in Sundquist’s words, “He is both a reminder (of the amalgamation of white

fathers and black mothers during slavery) and a threat (of the amalgamation of black fathers and white mothers ever since).”¹⁹ Christmas feels the fear as acutely as does Percy Grimm: the two characters meet the ritual requirement for identification between sacrificer and sacrificed in their mutual desire for the purification of sexuality by violent means.

Beginning with his first sexual encounter, when he feels “something in him trying to get out” (156), Christmas moves without deviation toward his own violent apotheosis under Grimm’s knife. What “gets out” in that first encounter is astonishing violence that exceeds the limits implicitly set by Christmas’s four companions. The boys perform a sick parody of orderly behavior in drawing straws to determine their turn in raping a black woman in a barn. But when Christmas’s turn comes, he disrupts all sense of order and expectation, brutally striking and kicking the woman rather than raping her, and overpowering the four boys who try to restrain him. Christmas knows nothing about sex or women at the age of fourteen, but his eruption of violence is no mere expression of impotence (for he later manages to have sexual, and almost always violent, relations with a series of women). He is confronted here by the mystery of his own birth. (We do not learn until later, and Christmas never learns, that his black blood, if indeed he has any, comes not from his mother but from his father; his birth remains a mystery to the end.) Having often been called “nigger” by other children at school, he seems to first understand or believe in the appellation as he is “standing there, smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste” (156). He suffers a vertiginous psychic plunge “down into a black well” as he looks at the woman lying abject on the barn floor in the dark, for she threatens him with both a maternal and a sexual engulfment that affirms his identity as a “nigger.” Sundquist suggests that the “nigger” is precisely that thing inside Christmas that was trying to get out: “‘nigger’ not as blood, as enslaving memory, as the simultaneously feared and needed *other*, but as all of these.”²⁰ But as soon as he smells the black woman, it is no longer

something inside of him trying to get out, but *himself* that is trying to get out of *her*. His violent confrontation with sex has reified what until now has been an abstraction—his black blood, which will indeed eventually “get out.”

His assault of the “womanshenegro,” which simultaneously stops short of and exceeds the violence of rape, may be read as a renunciation of preoedipal union with the mother. As Kristeva defines such a separation, it is always one of abjection. An initial experience of repugnance, for example when the infant tastes rotten food and spits it out, reveals with a shock the radical otherness of the self. The repugnant food is “radically separate, loathsome. Not me”;²¹ it cannot be assimilated into the body without mediation. As Levi-Strauss has shown, the civilized adult learns the processes of mediation, such as cooking and smoking, that make alien substances assimilable. But since the infant in this preoedipal stage is not only incapable of performing such processes but also, more importantly, unable to distinguish between the self and the world outside, he experiences repugnance and spitting out as an expulsion of himself. “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*. ... ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.”²² It is the “power of horror” that pushes the individual out of the semiotic (Kristeva’s term for prelinguistic, preoedipal) and into the symbolic.

Thus Christmas’s moment of horror in the barn is the turning point at which he begins to act overtly as a symbol—as if making a place for himself in the symbolic order by preparing himself for the slaughter. He escapes his four companions and fades into the dusk in his “duskcolored” overalls, “fading, phantomlike,” only to go home and submit serenely to McEachern’s arbitrarily administered punishment. It does not matter that he has not committed “what McEachern would consider the cardinal sin which he could commit”; he takes the blows of the strap against his body like “wood or stone; a post or a tower upon which the sentient part of him mused like a hermit, contemplative and

remote with ecstasy and selfcrucifixion" (159-60). The arbitrariness of the punishment, the punisher's indifference to the guilt of the victim, is crucial in establishing Christmas's suitability as a substitutionary sacrifice rather than merely as an object of judicial vengeance. Recall that in the sacrificial scheme the victim should be without blemish. Christmas is far from sinless, but he may as well be, since his punishment bears no relation to his actual guilt or innocence.

If we are to read Christmas as a sacrifice, we must ask whether the sacrificial mode has any efficacy, whether it fulfills the function sacrifice is meant to serve, which is to contain the spread of internal violence and restore the human community to intimacy. This question points toward the vexed and volatile relationship between religion, justice, and personal and national violence. As Girard has shown, the modern judicial system is evolved from the sacrificial ritual: both have as their purpose the containment of measureless reprisal by means of a religiously sanctified or officially sanctioned totalizing act of violence. But the two systems are radically incompatible. Whereas the judicial system operates on the principle of retribution, sacrifice depends on substitution—on the fact that the victim is *not* the guilty party. In Girard's concise summation, "To make a victim out of the guilty party is to play vengeance's role, to submit to the demands of violence. By killing, not the murderer himself, but someone close to him, an act of reciprocity is avoided and the necessity for revenge by-passed."²³ *Light in August* explores the disastrous consequences of a system that seeks to bring transgressors to the altar as well as to justice. Christmas's willful and undeviating progress from the point of his first sexual encounter toward his own bloody end takes shape as a doomed attempt to meet the demands of both the sacrificial and the judicial systems.

Suspended between the demands of guilt and innocence, the subject vanishes, fades to black. Christmas's sense of disappearing into a black well, his fading into dusk after his assault on the woman in the barn are the first of a number of such images. Self-obliteration is pictured again in the form of

smoking. Christmas acquires the tobacco habit in the process of courting Bobbie, mimicking the habits of the men who circulate in her orbit. He first sees her through a haze of cigarette smoke, surrounded by men at her lunch counter “with inwardleaning heads, smoking steadily, lighting and throwing away their countless cigarettes, and the waitress, the woman not much larger than a child going back and forth to the kitchen with her arms overladen with dishes” (176). Smoking here is representative not simply of absolute expenditure without reward, but also of a cyclical conception of time, of endless repetition. This is the fundamental problem of sacrifice, the problem it shares with justice—the necessity of repetition. Beast after beast must be turned to smoke on the altar in expiation for the sins of the human community. According to Christian theology, only the victim who is conceived without sin (i.e., sex) can appease once and for all the demand for retribution (Hebrews 9:11ff.). Faulkner has already made the connection between sex and sacrifice explicit, with the scene of Christmas killing a sheep and plunging his hands into the warm blood of the dying animal just before beginning his awkward courtship of Bobbie. Smoking is a subtler gesture of sacrificial self-immolation, and a more powerful symbol of the inadequacy of such a gesture.

The paradox of Christmas’s apparent quest for self-obliteration is that he doesn’t know who he is in the first place. Faulkner said in a 1957 classroom interview, “I think that was [Christmas’s] tragedy—he didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was.”²⁴ Just as the sacrificial victim must be “rescued from the world of things” (Bataille’s phrase) and brought into the symbolic order before it can be offered on the altar, Christmas must find a place for himself in the symbolic order before he can relinquish that place. This is what motivates his plunging into blackness and living as a “negro.”²⁵ As Christmas flees his home among white folks—his stepparents and prostitute-girlfriend—Mrs. McEachern watches him “vanishing upward from the head down as if he were running

headfirst into something that was obliterating him like a picture in chalk being erased from a blackboard” (208). His fade to black is both a visual disappearance and a surrender to a racializing social order. He spends fifteen years wandering the country, sleeping with prostitutes for the sole apparent purpose of telling them that he is a negro. He shuns white people and lives (albeit in “belligerent, unpredictable, uncommunicative” strife) with negroes, even living for a time as the husband of “a woman who resembled an ebony carving.” As he lies in bed beside her, “trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being” (225-26), he seems to believe that negro identity is an essence that can be absorbed through the olfactory sense, a belief that is no more illogical than the belief that race is transmitted through blood alone. Earlier, Christmas’s adolescent horror at the scent of a negro woman precipitated acts of inhuman violence. It was as he was standing in the barn “smelling the woman smelling the negro all at once” that he had first felt the horror of sacrifice—the consumption and consummation that sex is. Even now he cannot assimilate the odor. As he lies beside his ebony wife, trying to take in blackness and expel whiteness with each deep breath, “all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial” (226). Despite his utmost efforts to purify his “mixed blood,” Christmas’s identity remains divided and inwardly conflicted, like those two faces of Janus turned inward to glare and gnash their teeth at each other. One face turns from the past, the sphere of maternal loss and abjection; the other turns from the future, Christmas’s fatalism and his death march to the altar; and they find themselves focusing with blind rage upon the infinitesimal point between their touching noses—that moment severed from all history in which “identity” is but the odor of smoke and the smudge of ashes.

So it is not enough, when Christmas tries one last time to offer a substitutionary sacrifice, that he shed Joanna Burden's blood: he must set her house on fire as well, in order to collapse time into a "flat pattern" (281)—neither cyclical nor rectilinear but condensed into a single atomic moment. Even before he has killed her, "he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe. He was saying to himself *I had to do it* already in the past tense; *I had to do it. She said so herself*" (280). Even before he has met her he comes to her flowing into her kitchen through an open window like a shadow "returning to ... the allmother of obscurity and darkness" (230). If this northern white "nigger-loving" woman cannot prepare him for the altar, no one can. The negro boy who points Christmas to Joanna's house chants an enigmatic verse as he continues on his way:

Say dont didn't.
Didn't dont who.
Want dat yaller gal's
Pudden dont hide. (228)

In the first two lines, the outer words denoting language ("say") and identity ("who") are all but blown apart by the excess of negation they enclose. A bawdy riddle follows: *What* is it that the "yaller gal's pudden dont hide," and who would *want* it? Joanna is not a "yaller gal" in the sense of being either girlish or a mulatto; but for all practical purposes she is at least as yellow as Christmas is black. Raised by a father who taught her that she labored under the "curse" of the black race—"a race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins" (252)—Joanna is (again, like Christmas) defined by her name: she forever bears the "white man's burden" on her shoulders, forever peers out from beneath a black shadow in the shape of a cross (253). In many ways Joanna is Joe Christmas's mirror image: in her name, in her violent sexuality, in her seclusion from the white hegemony of town, and most of

all in her status as insufficient sacrifice. The Judaic sin offering *atones* for or *covers* the sins of the people. But Joanna's flagrantly offered body has no conciliating effect on (her "pudden don't hide") the violence Christmas carries with him. Christmas demands blood, more blood than Joanna has to offer him alive. After he has killed her he reasons to himself that his outrage began when he learned that she had stopped menstruating and culminated when she tried to pray over him.

Her body is not consumed in the fire, but survives as a gruesome focus for the town's rage. Like the Hebrew *shelamin*, a sacrifice in which a portion is left over for the priest, Joanna's nearly decapitated body retains some utility. In contrast to the *olah* or *holocaust* (the burnt offering), the *shelamin* is a "communion sacrifice, a sacrifice of thanksgiving, of alliance, of vows."²⁶ In Faulkner's narrative, the sacrifice of Joanna serves this purpose by mending fissures in the white hegemony. Only by being raped and murdered (and then, the townspeople viciously hope, raped again) by a black man can Joanna be reassimilated into the social order of the town "in which she had been born and lived and died a foreigner, and outlander" (289). Deprived of the sight of the actual body, which is officiously whisked away by the sheriff and never seen in the text again, the townspeople shift their attention first to the fire that consumes the house and then quickly to the search for "someone to crucify" (289).

Still, it is as a "tall yellow column" of smoke that Joanna first enters the text: Lena Grove and the man driving her see it as they crest the hill before Jefferson (30). Thus we have the *tick* and the *tock* of the novel, its "humble genesis" and "feeble apocalypse" in Frank Kermode's terms, all in the first chapter. But "*tick-tock*," as Kermode wryly notes, is "not much of a plot." It is the task of the novel "to defeat the tendency of the interval between *tick* and *tock* to empty itself; to maintain within that interval following *tick* a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly following."²⁷ That interval must be filled with meaning, "charged with past and future: what was *chronos* becomes *kairos*. This is

the time of the novelist, a transformation of mere successiveness ...” into a conception of time that infuses every moment with “a meaning derived from its relation to the end.”²⁸ But as we have seen, there is no “end” in the sacrificial scheme; it is a scheme of repetition that has given way in modern times to a judicial system that purports to regulate but in practice fuels the measureless increase of blood revenge.

Thus *Light in August* presents the reader with the difficulty of discovering or assigning meaning to a world without end. Any illusion that Christmas’s death signifies an end to retributive violence is dispelled by the excess of racial hatred that motivates his executioner. Christmas’s gushing blood, for all the transcendent language it generates, also solidifies a permanent memorial to retribution for those who observe it: “Upon that black mast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.” Faulkner parodies the language of mortal reassurance as he writes, “They are not to lose [the memory], in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes” (465). Death is reabsorbed into the meaninglessness of *chronos*, as the narrative continues the way it began. In two anticlimactic final chapters, Faulkner returns first to Hightower’s suspended backward motion into the past and then to Lena’s patient plodding toward an unrealizable future, leaving nothing but impure blood, shed in a malicious act that is neither justice nor sacrifice, to hold time together.

Notes

1. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957–1958* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 199.
2. Georges Bataille, *A Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 50.
3. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1985), 491. All subsequent references to *Light in August* are from this edition.
4. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930; reprint, New York: Vintage International, 1985), 176.
5. Bataille, *A Theory of Religion*, 44.
6. Carolyn Porter, “Faulkner’s America,” in William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 256. First published in *Seeing and Being* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).
7. Quoted in *ibid.*, 256.
8. Bataille, *A Theory of Religion*, 49–50.
9. David R. Jarraway, “The Gothic Import of Faulkner’s ‘Black Son’ in *Light in August*,” in Robert K. Martin & Eric Savoy, eds., *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 62, 63.
10. Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*: 2, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). English translation of *Du Miel aux Cendres*, 1966.
11. Olga Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 133.
12. *Ibid.*, 81.
13. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. W.D. Halls (Chicago: University of

- Chicago Press, 1964). English translation of *Essai Sur La Nature et la Fonction du Sacrifice*, 1898.
14. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 23. English translation of *La Violence et le sacré*, 1972.
 15. Ibid., 21.
 16. In 1982 there were 413,806 adults in federal and state jails and prisons in the United States. At year end 2001 there were 1.96 million incarcerated adults in this country. That's 470 inmates for every 100,000 U.S. residents, up from 139 per 100,000 in 1980. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, accessed at the Department of Justice Web page, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm.
 17. Sixty-ninth Congress, "To Prevent and Punish the Crime of Lynching: Hearing before a Subcommittee on the Judiciary Committee of the United States Senate. Sixty-ninth Congress, First Session ... February 1926," statement of William McKinley, p. 3.
 18. "Juggernaut" deriving from the Hindi *Jagannath*, literally "lord of the world," a title for Vishnu.
 19. Eric Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 71.
 20. Ibid., 79.
 21. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2. English translation of *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 1980.
 22. Ibid., 3.
 23. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 26.
 24. Gwynn and Blotner, *Faulkner in the University*, 72.
 25. I use the terminology of the novel and of the era in order to convey the particularly vexed notion of identity this term implies.
 26. Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, 16.

27. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 45.
28. *Ibid.*, 46-47.